UNDERGRADUATE EFL LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES OF E-LEARNING DURING COVID-19: A CASE STUDY AT QASSIM UNIVERSITY, SAUDI ARABIA[1]

PERSPECTIVAS DE E-LEARNING DE ALUNOS DE GRADUAÇÃO EFL DURANTE A COVID-19: UM ESTUDO DE CASO NA QASSIM UNIVERSITY, ARÁBIA SAUDITA

MOHAMMED MAHIBUR RAHMAN
Department of English Language and Translation, College of Arabic and Social Studies, Qassim University, Qassim, Saudi Arabia
m.rahman@qu.edu.sa
mahib024@gmail.com

Abstract: The teaching-learning activities have witnessed immense challenges due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus globally. Eventually, all the teachers and students were forced to choose an online class over the traditional or face-to-face learning to stop the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, the researchers see it as a challenge instead of taking this opportunity to felicitate the teachers and instructors with the findings of this study, which will help them implement e-learning systems. Therefore, this study aims to determine students' experiences about using e-learning as a pedagogical method for their learning needs amid the Covid-19 situation and further. In this regard, a questionnaire was prepared using constructs from the early studies to measure the user's experience and satisfaction with the e-learning system. The questionnaire consists of 10 close-ended items, randomly distributed among 50 undergraduate EFL students of Qassim University. Based on the learners' valid responses against each item, a quantitative analysis has been done using SPSS 26. This study indicates the students' positive attitudes towards the use of the e-learning system as they claimed that this system had enabled them to attain their learning goals. However, the learners reported mild technical difficulty due to the university learning management system.

Keywords: EFL. e-Learning, Covid-19. Qassim University.

Resumo: As atividades de ensino-aprendizagem têm testemunhado imensos desafios devido ao surto do vírus COVID-19 em todo o mundo. Eventualmente, todos os professores e alunos foram forçados a escolher uma aula online em vez do aprendizado tradicional ou presencial para impedir a propagação do vírus. No entanto, os pesquisadores veem isso como um desafio em vez de aproveitar esta oportunidade para felicitar os professores e instrutores com os resultados deste estudo, que os ajudará a implementar sistemas de e-learning. Portanto, este estudo visa determinar as experiências dos alunos sobre o uso do e-learning como método pedagógico para suas

necessidades de aprendizado em meio à situação do Covid-19 e além. Nesse sentido, foi elaborado um questionário utilizando construtos dos primeiros estudos para medir a experiência e a satisfação do usuário com o sistema de e-learning. O questionário consiste em 10 itens fechados, distribuídos aleatoriamente entre 50 alunos de graduação de EFL da Qassim University. Com base nas respostas válidas dos alunos para cada item, uma análise quantitativa foi feita usando o SPSS 26. Este estudo indica as atitudes positivas dos alunos em relação ao uso do sistema de e-learning, pois eles afirmaram que este sistema lhes permitiu atingir seus objetivos metas de aprendizagem. No entanto, os alunos relataram leve dificuldade técnica devido ao sistema de gerenciamento de aprendizagem da universidade.

Palavras-chave: EFL. e-Learning. Covid-19. Qassim University.

1.   Introduction

The Covid-19 caused unprecedented collateral damage in different life sectors, like business and commerce, education, and tourism worldwide. The field of education has been so severely affected that over "60% of the world's student population" were deprived of it (UNESCO, 2020). In Saudi Arabia alone, more than six million students are attending online classes during this period (SPA, 2020). The kingdom suspended all regular traditional classes since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Naar, 2020).

Although the spread of virtual classes is at the peak due to the novel Covid-19, the sudden shift from the regular traditional classes to online classes put massive challenges among the students and teachers. They have raised several issues like problems in the various online teaching platforms, lack of prior experiences in using these platforms, poor internet connectivity, etc. (Obaid, 2020; Spa, 2020). On the other hand, many students felt online teaching worthwhile during this pandemic since they can save much time in transportation and attend the classes from the comfort of their homes (Obaid, 2020). Furthermore, it offers both flexibility and convenience to the students when and where they need it (Smart and Cappel, 2006).

In recent times, all educational institutions' only aim is to face the pandemic challenges by providing quality education through remote learning. The availability of various educational technology and tools are the significant advantages of imparting quality online education.

Based on the previous studies' results, the present study is carried out to identify the EFL undergraduate students' perspectives towards online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic at Qassim University. The study's findings will put valuable insight to assess various language programs at different educational institutions across the kingdom.

2. Background

Although there is a sudden wave of e-learning around the world due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is not a new teaching concept that started suddenly. Saudi Arabia adopted the online mode of teaching in the late 1990s, and it proliferates with the development of educational technology and the rising of higher education in the kingdom (Al-Masaud and Gawad, 2014). The Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi Arabia, integrated information and communications technology (ICTs) at all levels of education. Since then, online teaching has been applied as an alternative method of teaching and conducting examinations in Saudi Arabia (Khalife, 2020). However, the contagious novel pandemic has led every nation to depend entirely on online education to restrict the disease from spreading. As a result, the researchers have raised several questions on the impact of learning outcomes due to the sudden shift of traditional face to face class on e-learning.

3. Review of Literature

Several researchers have been carried out a large number of critical studies on teaching online during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the majority of the studies revealed the brighter side of online teaching, many researchers did not deny the challenges either (Shahzad et al. 2020; Tanveer et al. 2020; Utama et al. 2020; Moawad, 2020; Bao, 2020; Demuyakor, 2020; Rahman 2020). The sudden shift to online education precipitated quality education crises.

Moawad (2020) investigated the stress of online learning among Saudi university students. The researcher investigated 2271 male and female students at King Saud University and observed that 514 students were afraid of the sudden shift from the traditional face to face classes to online classes. They were afraid of exams, homework, internet connectivity, lecture timing, etc.

Demuyakor (2020) conducted a study on 315 Ghanaian international students studying in different universities of China during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research aimed to investigate the students' perceptions of online classes during these crucial hours. The results produced positive feedback as most of the respondents believed that online

teaching was a great initiative to continue education. However, the participants had faced some difficulties like expensive internet packages and poor internet connectivity.

Utama et al. (2020) performed a study on the medical students' perspectives towards online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. The results showed that although students have positive attitudes towards online classes, there were several challenges like internet connectivity and lack of prior online teaching experiences. Besides, teachers failed to monitor students' engagement due to their large presence in a class. Instead of relying on one online teaching platform, they suggested that other modes of teaching platforms like social media tools to be integrated.

Shahzad et al. (2020) researched 'the impact of virtual teaching on postgraduate ESL learners' attitudes under Covid-19 circumstances in Pakistan'. There were 100 participants, and their responses showed that virtual teaching has positive impact on the students' performances. According to the respondents, "teachers are easily accessible, they can ask questions by voice or text messages, and the teacher replies to them at the spot when online class is being conducted or later in his free time." However, the study also indicated that there were lack of facilities like proper internet connectivity, technology, inexperienced students and teachers, etc.

In a research carried by Tanveer et al. (2020) indicated that more than 67% of the participants were affected by the closing of schools, colleges, and universities. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents were unhappy with the online materials provided by their teachers since they were difficult for self-studies.

Bao (2020) claimed that an online course's success largely depends on the 'elaborate lesson plan design, teaching materials such as audio and video contents, and technical support teams.' The teachers and students have faced several difficulties due to the sudden shifting from traditional classes to online classes. Furthermore, the online platforms showed various connectivity issues for being a large number of students' presence at a time. Therefore, she advised the teachers and educators to prepare plan B or C to overcome such situations.

However, Zakarneh (2018) conducted a study on "Effectiveness of E-learning Mode for Teaching English in Arab Universities" revealed that the participants loved to be taught the English language through e-learning mode. They believed that English language proficiency could be acquired by e-learning mode. He categorized various online language learning tools through the following figure.

Figure 1: Categories of language learning tools for e-learning (ibid)

Al-Mubireek (2019) carried a similar study consisting of 1364 students' samples on e-learning in the English classroom in Saudi Arabia. They also identified that most of the respondents firmly believed that e-learning platforms play a significant role in strengthening the English language.

Algahtani (2011) investigated Saudi students' perceptions of the effectiveness of e-learning in Saudi Arabia. The findings disclosed that students were highly motivated by e-learning programs since they could learn autonomously using online tools and technology. The study also found that the shortcomings of e-learning can be avoided based on the learners' needs and suggestions. The researcher believed that the study's evidence would help in reducing the controversy of e-learning implementation.

4.   Methodology

Objectives

This study presents a descriptive account of the presentation drawn from students' response against each item towards the adoption of online classes during the COVID-19. This analysis will help teachers figure out the students' real issues and perceptions, and further, all such information obtained from the analysis will also be used to design the teaching-learning material to meet the students' requirements. Therefore, the data had already been collected both from male and female students to get gender-specific requirements and needs.

Target Audience

The target audiences for the current study were the undergraduate EFL learners of Qassim University. The total number of the respondents was 50 out of which 24 (males) and 26 (females) of 18 to 25 years of age group.

Methods Employed For Analysis

As the first step, a questionnaire has been prepared using the insights from some early studies (Rahman, 2020) by keeping the effect of online class during COVID-19 in view. The questionnaire was prepared using 10 items (close-ended). As the second step, the questionnaire was sent to the EFL students by e-mail, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc., among 50 students. Further, the questionnaire was rated by using 5 points Likert-scaling system from 1- strongly agree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-disagree, and 5-strongly disagree.

Steps Followed

This study presents a qualitative analysis of the valid responses collected from the students against each item. The total responses from the students were 50 as the questionnaire was circulated among 50 students. To perform a qualitative analysis, the SPPS 26 was used, and a valid response and frequency were analyzed.

5.   Results

Interpretation of the Data

In this section*,* the interpretation has been presented about the valid response received from the EFL learners about the online classes during COVID-19. This section includes two different tables; table-1 presents the demographic details (gender) of the students, while table-2 includes the valid responses of the students from SA (strongly agree) to SD (strongly disagree).

Table 1: *Demography of the Respondents*

Gender	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	24	48
Female	26	52
Total	50	100

Table 2: *Student's Response Against Each Item Asked*

Questions (Items)	SA		A		N		D		SD	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. I am delighted that the university is providing an online teaching program during Covid-19.	23	46.0	16	32.0	10	20.0	1	2.0	-	-
2. Covid-19 has no impact on me in attending online classes.	9	18.0	8	16.0	13	26.0	17	34.0	3	6.0
3. I know how to use online teaching tools, like zoom, blackboard, etc.	5	10.0	31	62.0	12	24.0	2	4.0	-	-
4. When I attend online classes, I never have technical difficulties using the teaching tools, like zoom, blackboard, etc.	-	-	20	40.0	23	46.0	3	6.0	4	8.0
5. If the university provides proper training to the students and teachers, online learning English will be more	4	8.0	19	38.0	15	30.0	7	14.0	5	10.0

enjoyable.									
6. Online learning English can save a lot of time.	20	40.0	15	30.0	9	18.0	2	4.0	4	8.0
7. I can understand online teachers' lectures easily.	3	6.0	13	26.0	18	36.0	10	20.0	6	12.0
8. If I have any issue in understanding teachers' lectures, I instantly discuss it with him.	15	30.0	23	46.0	7	14.0	5	10.0	-	-
9. Teachers provide lots of online teaching materials to improve my English language.	12	24.0	21	42.0	9	18.0	5	10.0	3	6.0
10. The online teaching English program helps me in improving my English language.	9	18.0	17	34.0	16	32.0	6	12.0	2	4.0

Based on the student's response against each item in the table-2 above, the following section enumerates the data interpretation. This study includes a total of 10 items that are used to determine the overall impression of the student's perception towards the use of online class during the COVID-19. The questions aim to target.

The above table reveals the responses of the students against each item is like, the question number 1 receives the responses like 23 select strongly agree (46.0%), 16 agree (32.0%), 10 neutral (20.0%), 1 disagree (2.0%), and no response has been recorded for strongly disagree. Further, question no. 2 receives the response in such a way that, 9 strongly agree (18.0%), 8 agree (16.0%), 13 neutral (26.0%), 17 disagree (34.0%), and 3 strongly disagree (6.0%). Similarly, question no 3, the students have noted their response like, 5 strongly agree (10.0%), agree 31 (62.0%), 12 neutral (24.0%), 2 disagree (4.0%), and no response for strongly disagree has been recorded. Question no 4 gets the responses in form of, none choose to strongly agree, 20 agree (40.0%), 23 neutral (46.0%), 3 disagree (6.0%), and 4 has chosen to strongly disagree (8.0%). Question 5 says that, 4 strongly agree (8.0%), 19 agree (38.0%), 15 neutral (30.0%), 7 disagree (14.0), and

5 chooses strongly disagree (10.0%). Furthermore, question no 6 reveals that, 20 strongly agree (40.0%), 15 agree (30.0%), 9 neutral (18.0%), 2 disagree (2.0%), and 4 strongly disagree (8.0%). Question no 7 presents that, 3 strongly agree (6.0%), 13 agree (26.0%), 18 neutral (36.0%), 10 disagree (20.0%), and 6 strongly disagree (12.0%). Question no 8 receives that, 15 strongly agree (30.0%), 23 agree (46.0%), 7 neutral (14.0%), 5 disagree (10.0%), and no response have been recorded for strongly disagree. Question 9 reveals that, 12 strongly agree (24.0%), 21 agree (42.0%), 9 neutral (18.0%), 5 disagree (10.0%), and 3 strongly disagree (6.0%). Finally, question no 10 gets the responses like, 9 strongly agree (18.0%), 17 agree (34.0%), 16 neutral (32.0%), 6 disagree (12.0%), and 2 strongly disagree (4.0%).

6.   Discussion

The present study was an attempt to identify the learners' perceptions of teaching English online, and the findings supported the expected hypothesis. The findings revealed that the majority of the students (88%) were delighted to know about the university's online teaching program during the Covid-19 global pandemic. They were aware of the various online teaching platforms like zoom or blackboard, so they had less difficulty using the tools and understanding lectures.

Contrary to expectations, this study did not find any significant difference between much of the previous studies discussed earlier. This supports the previous findings by Rahman (2020), Shahzad et al. (2020), Al-Mubireek (2019), Zakarneh (2018), and Algahtani, (2011).

However, the results are contrary to some other studies, highlighting several challenges like internet connectivity and lack of prior experiences in online teaching. In addition, teachers had difficulty monitoring students' engagement due to a large number of students' presence in a class (Bao, 2020; Tanveer, et al., 2020; & Utama et al., 2020). A possible reason for this might be that their studies were conducted during the initial stage of Covid-19 due to what online teaching started all of a sudden without any proper preparation, while the present study was conducted after completion of the semester through online mode. Furthermore, unlike the previous studies, the participants for this study were only 50 students, a small size, which might be another possible factor of contrastive results.

7.   Conclusions

In this study, the aim was to assess undergraduate EFL learners' perceptions of teaching English through e-learning during Covid-19 at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The results of this study indicate that most of the students have positive attitudes towards learning English online, and they have retained their academic goal i.e., learning through online teaching. Despite several technical issues like poor/unstable internet connectivity and lack of prior training in using online platforms, students consistently acquired the required knowledge/learning through various online modes.

Therefore, based on the findings of this study, research has the following recommendations which can be useful indicators of the e-learning program at university:

1.   Both students and teachers need to be trained at the beginning of the course about the full functionality of the learning management systems so that during the course, they troubleshoot problems or teachers can assist them, or both can assist each other. This needs to be assured that platforms are lucid and user friendly to the users. Therefore, a suitable orientation program should be conducted both for teachers and students to use various e-learning platforms seamlessly.

2.   The findings of the study suggest that course content should be well designed and use attractive animation, which motivates students towards using e-learning systems. In addition, the quality of the course content needs to be designed, which ensures large numbers of students' participation and engagement in an e-learning system.

3.   Lastly, the researchers strongly recommend regular evaluation of the progress, which is another significant indicator of e-learning effectiveness. Therefore, a careful and standard evaluation must be done to check the learners' progress and meet the desired goal of the prescribed course.

References

Algahtani, Abudullah Faleh. (2011). Evaluating the Eectiveness of the E-learning Experience in Some Universities in Saudi Arabia from Male Students' Perceptions, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3215/

Al-Masaud , K. and, Gawad. A. (2014). *Impediments of activating e-learning in high education institutions in Saudi Arabia.* International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications Vol 5(4): 12–18

Al-Mubireek, Sami. (2019). E-Learning in the English Classroom: Comparing Two E-Learning Platforms Impacting Preparatory Year Students' Language Learning. CALL-EJ, 20(2)

Bao, Wei. (2020). COVID-19 and online teaching in higher education: A case study of Peking University. Wiley Periodicals LLC. DOI: 10.1002/hbe2.191

Csızér, K., & Dörnyei, Z. (2005). The internal structure of language learning motivation and its relationship with language choice and learning effort. *The Modern Language Journal, 89*(1), 19-36. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3588549.pdf

Demuyakor, J. (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Online Learning in Higher Institutions of Education: A Survey of the Perceptions of Ghanaian International Students in China. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies, 10*(3), e202018. https://doi.org/10.29333/ojcmt/8286

Gilbert, Brittany. (2015). Online Learning Revealing the Benefits and Challenges. Education Masters. Paper 303. Fisher Digital Publications. St. John Fisher College. USA.

Khalife, Leyal. (2020, April 1). E-learning in Saudi Arabia: It started earlier than you think. *Step Feed.* Retrieved from https://stepfeed.com/e-learning-in-saudi-arabia-it-started-earlier-than-you-think-4360

Moawad, R.A. (2020). Online Learning during the COVID- 19 Pandemic and Academic Stress in University Students. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala, 12*(1Sup2), 100-107. https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.1sup1/252

Naar, Ismaeel. (2020, 15 August). Saudi Arabia coronavirus: Distance learning for first 7 weeks of new academic year. Al Arabiya English. Retrieved from https://english.alarabiya.net/en/coronavirus/2020/08/15/Saudi-Arabia-Distance-learning-for-first-7-weeks-of-new-academic-year-amid-COVID-19

Nduwimana, Arcade. (2019). Pure Sciences Students' Attitudes towards Learning English: A Case Study of University of Burundi. International Journal of Research in English Education. Vol.4, Issue 2.

Obaid, R. (2020). Saudi students, educators take on virtual education challenge amid coronavirus suspension. Retrieved from https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1640211/saudi-arabia

Rahman, M.M. (2020). EFL Learners' Perceptions about the Use of Mobile Learning during Covid-19. Journal of Southwest Jiaotong University. Vol. 55, No.5. *DOI* : https://doi.org/10.35741/issn.0258-2724.55.5.10

Shahzad, Syed Khuram, Hussain, Javaid, Sadaf, Nadia, Sarwat, Samina, Ghani, Usman & Saleem, Robina (2020). Impact of Virtual Teaching on ESL Learners' Attitudes under Covid-19 Circumstances at Post Graduate Level in Pakistan. English Language Teaching; Vol. 13, No. 9. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v13n9p1.

Smart , Karl L. and Cappel , James J. (2006). Students' Perceptions of Online Learning: A Comparative Study. Journal of Information Technology Education. Volume 5.

Smith, A. (1971). The importance of attitude in foreign language learning. *The Modern Language Journal, 55*(2), 82-88. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/321854.pdf

SPA. (2020, April 6). Saudi education directorate launches remote teaching award. Arab News. Retrieved from https://arab.news/924pu

Tanveer, M., Bhaumik, A., Hassan, S., & Ul Haq, I. (2020). Covid-19 pandemic, outbreak educational sector and students online learning in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education, 23*(3).

Thorell, M., Fridorff-Jens, P.K., Lassen, P. *et al.* (2015). Transforming students into digital academics: a challenge at both the individual and the institutional level. *BMC Med Educ* 15, 48. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-015-0330-5

UNESCO. (2020). A report about education: From disruption to recovery. Retrieved from https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse.

Utama, M. R., Levani, Y., Rumkhullah, E., and Paramita, A. Lidya. (2020). Medical students' perspectives about distance learning during the early period of COVID 19 pandemic: A qualitative study. Qanun Medika. Vol. 4, No.22.

Zakarneh, Bilal Mohd . (2018). Effectiveness of E-learning Mode for Teaching English Language in Arab Universities. International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature. Vol.7, Issue.7.

Zakarneh, Bilal Mohd. (2018). Effectiveness of E-learning Mode for Teaching English Language in Arab Universities. International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature. Vol.7, Issue 7.

Zhu, Y., Zhang, J.H., Au, W. *et al.* (2020). University students' online learning attitudes and continuous intention to undertake online courses: a self-regulated learning perspective. *Education Tech Research Dev* **.** 1485–1519. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-020-09753-w.