

Is it a blessing? The impact of Covid-19 on non-traditional language learners' satisfaction at Saudi Electronic University

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Abstract. This study examines non-traditional language learners' interactions and satisfaction with online learning in the Saudi context during the pandemic. Saudi Electronic University (SEU) is unique in Saudi Arabia as it has adopted a blended mode of teaching and students' completion of both online and class-based materials is mandatory. It enables non-traditional students to further their studies. In a quantitative study, 732 students completed a questionnaire which examines the online learning experiences of these learners. The survey assessed learners' self-efficacy for completing an online course, interactions with content, instructor, other students, and overall satisfaction. The paper examines whether moving to entirely online learning during the pandemic has affected their life and study positively or negatively.

Keywords: non-traditional learners, Covid-19, EFL.

1. Introduction

With Covid-19, 2020 was an unusual year and education worldwide was shifted to online learning. Despite the fact that some research reflects the effectiveness of online instruction (Markova, Glazkova, & Zaborova, 2017), this approach might be challenging for non-traditional learners who had to monitor their children's online learning during the pandemic. Non-traditional learners in the Saudi context are either mature learners or those who either took gap years after high school or have many responsibilities. In order to assess the learning outcomes of such non-

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traditional learners, more research is needed, particularly because the pandemic added extra pressure to the other commitments these learners have. Besides, studies show that language learners prefer face to face classes (Tosun, 2015) or blended learning (Bueno-Alastuey & López Pérez, 2014). Harrington (2010) highlighted that online education might not be a suitable option for some language learners, in particular those who are lacking the academic skills for success in online learning. Eventually, this situation might be further complicated for first year students enrolled in degree programmes provided in a foreign language, such as English in the case of SEU. Thus, the ultimate goal for this paper is to explore non-traditional language learners' online learning experiences in the foundation year at SEU – which is called the 'First Common Year' (FCY) – by focusing on the following questions.

RQ1. How did Covid-19 affect non-traditional learners' experiences at SEU?

RQ2. What is the preferred learning environment for non-traditional learners?

RQ3. Were non-traditional learners satisfied with their online learning experiences at SEU during the pandemic?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Seven hundred and thirty-two students of different proficiency levels in English enrolled in their FCY at SEU participated in the study. The participants were 318 females and 414 males from different regions in Saudi Arabia (37.3% were over 30 years of age while 34.6% were 24 to 29), and 51% of the participants were full-time employees and 51.8% were married.

2.2. Materials and procedure

The survey sought to address five learning dimensions (self-efficacy, interactions with teachers, content, learners, and overall satisfaction) which can potentially be related to online learning. The open-ended questions focused on Covid-19 impact,

learning preferences, some reflections on Blackboard, and the university. The survey was posted on the university’s virtual learning environment, which helped to obtain a broad range of responses from eight campuses.

3. Results and discussion

Nonparametric comparison tests were used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis was also used to code the themes which emerged from the open-ended questions. The general attitude towards online learning was generally positive (Table 1). Using the Mann-Whitney test, we observed that the two groups were significantly different in the self-efficacy (p -value=.006) and learner-content interaction (p -value=.043).

Table 1. Differences in the five learning dimensions between first online learning experience

| | Is this your first online learning experience? | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--------|------|--------|--------------|---------|
| | yes | | no | | Mann-Whitney | |
| | Mean | Median | Mean | Median | z | p-value |
| Self-efficacy | 3.86 | 4.00 | 4.03 | 4.00 | 2.725 | .006 |
| Learner-content interaction | 3.88 | 4.00 | 3.98 | 4.00 | 2.023 | .043 |
| Learner-instructor interaction | 3.93 | 4.00 | 3.95 | 4.00 | .579 | .562 |
| Learner-learner interaction | 3.89 | 4.00 | 3.88 | 4.00 | .167 | .867 |
| Student overall satisfaction | 3.93 | 4.00 | 3.94 | 4.00 | 1.084 | .278 |

To explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the five categories (Table 2), the Kruskal-Wallis test was used, and a significant difference was observed in learner-instructor interaction (p -value=.041).

Table 2. Differences in the five learning dimensions between being affected by Covid-19

| | Did Covid-19 affect your study at SEU? | | | | | | |
|--------------------|--|----------|----------|----------|-----------------------|----------------|------------|
| | no | positive | negative | not sure | positive and negative | Kruskal-Wallis | |
| | Mean | Mean | Mean | Mean | Mean | | Chi-square |
| Self-efficacy | 3.93 | 3.85 | 3.81 | 3.92 | 4.14 | 4.301 | .367 |
| Learner-content | 3.93 | 3.87 | 3.80 | 3.95 | 4.17 | 6.190 | .185 |
| Learner-instructor | 3.95 | 3.87 | 3.93 | 3.86 | 4.31 | 9.972 | .041 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|------|
| Learner-learner | 3.91 | 3.77 | 3.89 | 3.82 | 4.22 | 7.566 | .109 |
| Overall satisfaction | 3.96 | 3.88 | 3.85 | 3.91 | 4.19 | 5.724 | .221 |

For RQ1, 49.6% of non-traditional learners expressed no effect of Covid-19 on their learning while the qualitative data revealed both positive (17.1%) and negative (19.0%) effects on their learning experiences. The common positive effect of the pandemic was the effectiveness of the university and its online approach in saving time and cost, enabling students to develop their learning and English skills, enhance their participation (particularly shy students), and safety (from catching the virus to accidents with long distance driving to campus). The negative impact is categorised as reduced social interactions (mostly learner-teacher interactions and reduced opportunities to practise English in a natural learning setting), disappointment connected to a lack of self-efficacy for learning English in an online environment, difficulty in managing commitments (home/work with study), and negative personal feelings (isolation, loneliness, computer eye strain).

For RQ2, despite the fact that the study participants were aware of the blended approach implemented by the university, virtual learning (36.3%) and face to face (30.2%) reported to be the most preferable learning approaches and only (15.8%) favoured the blended approach. Students' self-efficacy in English and learners' commitments played roles in their preferences. That is to say, some students indicated that the online language classes improved their language skills while others – particularly beginners – found they had made no progress. In addition, learners' multiple roles in life and some workplace restrictions were behind the high percentage in favour of virtual classes.

Students also reported the reasons behind the high percentage (84.4%) of satisfaction with their online learning experiences during the pandemic (RQ3). Most of them acknowledged the efficiency of online learning (see [Table 3](#) below).

Results indicate that self-efficacy, learner-content interactions, and learner-instructor interactions were the most common factors that affected students' satisfaction regarding their online learning experiences. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data gives us some explanations about the consequences of the pandemic on the participants' learning outcomes and their preferred mode of delivery.

The results show differences in self-efficacy and learner-content interactions. Self-efficacy in online learning implies students' beliefs about their ability to complete the requirements of the course and it is a vital factor in online learning satisfaction ([Jaradat & Ajlouni, 2020](#)). Students who had low self-efficacy found it difficult to

achieve success in their online courses. More specifically, beginner English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students reported difficulties in improving their English skills in fully online classes that lack the authentic physical learner-instructor interactions.

Table 3. Distribution of relative factors of online learning

| | | Column N % |
|--|-----------------------|------------|
| Did the pandemic affect your study at SEU? | no | 49.6% |
| | positive impact | 17.1% |
| | negative impact | 19.0% |
| | do not know | 10.7% |
| | positive and negative | 3.7% |
| Which class do you like face to face or virtual? | F2F | 30.2% |
| | virtual | 36.3% |
| | both | 15.8% |
| | do not know | 17.6% |
| Would you recommend SEU to a friend? | yes | 84.4% |
| | no | 7.5% |
| | May be | 2.9% |
| | do not know | 5.2% |

Students' engagement with the content of learning can be related to their competence in using technology for learning, and the fact that they have to provide a sufficient score in an outer standardised English proficiency test. The inability to provide such a score is likely to affect student satisfaction as well as their willingness to further their education at SEU.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of Covid-19 on first year non-traditional learners at SEU. Students' self-efficacy in learning language online, learner-content interaction, and learner-instructor interaction were factors that affected their satisfaction. Their response to the move to online learning as a result of Covid-19 was positive overall, even though entirely online learning is not the university's usual mode of delivery. It was considered as a blessing (quoted by some students) to fulfil their dreams by learning while managing other responsibilities. However, EFL beginners reflected a negative response to the impact of the pandemic because they felt that they could not enhance their language skills in a completely online environment. The online classes provided seem to be a suitable approach for some non-traditional learners that enables them to learn and manage their life responsibilities more effectively.

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