

Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Benefits and Challenges for EFL Students

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Abstract

Online learning has been a vital tool to be used during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many research studies have been conducted on this topic from different perspectives. However, it can be argued that it is important to identify and evaluate the students' experience especially those of them who are experiencing online learning for the first time. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate Saudi EFL learners' experience towards the rapid shift to an entirely online learning environment. Specifically, this study aimed to identify the benefits and the challenges of online learning during COVID-19 and compare the traditional way of face-to-face learning to online learning from the students' perspective. The research method employed for this paper was a quantitative method in terms of a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 15 items and was utilized to identify the benefits and challenges that the students have faced during their online learning experience. Participants were 72 Saudi EFL learners in their preparatory year at a Saudi higher education institution. Major findings revealed a number of benefits of online learning, such as: "Easy access to online material", "Ability to record meetings and sessions", and "Retrieve information". On the other hand, technical problems were the most reported challenge for students, in addition to lack of interaction with teachers. Based on the research findings, several suggestions and recommendations were presented to enhance the effectiveness of online learning.

Keywords: online learning, digital classroom, virtual classroom, students' perception during COVID-19

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Problem

During the crisis of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak of 2020, most of the countries around the world shifted the teaching and the learning process virtually as the pandemic caused all the educational institutions across the globe to shut down to follow the social distancing (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020). For example, online learning has been considered a solution for all the schools, colleges, and universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since March 2020. Online learning can be defined as "learning that takes place partially or entirely over the Internet" (Aud et al., 2010). The unexpected shift to online learning is clearly a serious challenge for the learning community although there might be some benefits. Some of the challenges could be: lack of students' IT skills which could affect their online learning. Accordingly, one might argue that students who did not have the chance to participate in any online learning programs before the pandemic might have a negative experience. The aim of this paper is to investigate Saudi EFL students' perception of the benefits and challenges of online learning. Getting to know students' perception toward online learning can aid us in recognizing some of the challenges that students face, and then we will be able to try to find some solutions to make the online learning experience more fruitful for students.

1.2 Research Hypotheses

- Due to the sudden shift to online learning, there might be some challenges that students have faced despite the benefits, which this study aims to investigate based on the following hypotheses:
- Students' lack of IT skills could affect their online learning.
- Students who did not participate in any online learning programs before the pandemic would have a negative experience.

1.3 Research Questions

- What are the benefits and the challenges of online learning for EFL students?
- How effective is the online learning experience compared to the traditional way?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Learning Background and Definition

Many people might think that online learning is a recent medium or technology that we use today. In fact, it has a very long history, and it is one of the first seeds of the invention of e-mail (Harasim, 2000). Hodges et al. (2020) described distance education as “all arrangements for providing instruction through print or electronic communications media to persons engaged in planned learning in a place or time different from that of the instructor or instructors”. Online learning is effective, accessible, and provides flexible timing to schedule classes, however, learners need to use the internet technology to communicate with their teachers (Rao, 2019).

Online learning as a medium of teaching and learning has been a necessity for many learners over the past 10 years due to many factors. In the 21st century, the demand of online learning has increased as it can reach a large number of learners which increased diversification and globalization (Ibid.). Barbour and Reeves (2009) argued that the benefits of online schooling could be classified into five main areas: expanding educational access, providing high-quality learning opportunities, improving student outcomes and skills, allowing for educational choice, and achieving administrative efficiency (Cavanaugh et al., 2009).

2.2 Challenges of Online Learning

Besides all the benefits, there are many challenges. Some of these challenges are the high start-up costs associated with virtual schools, access issues surrounding the digital divide, the approval or accreditation of virtual schools, and student readiness and retention issues (Cavanaugh et al., 2009). However still there are many debates about the sufficiency of online learning. For example, Pomerantz and Brooks (2017) stated that Faculty members have a love-hate relationship with online teaching and learning: They do not want to do it, however, they think that they would be better instructors if they did. Most faculty agree that online learning makes higher education available to more students, but few agree that online learning helps students learn more effectively. Faculty predominantly teaches courses with not sufficient knowledge about the digital world.

2.3 Impact of Online Learning on Students

Additionally, today we can see the global impact of the online learning process during the outbreak of the COVID-19. As almost all the global activities have been paralyzed due to the social distancing and the implementation of the lockdown, especially in the education systems. The education is one of the main building blocks to create a good nation (Baiyere et al., 2016). Accordingly, technology has played a major role in the sudden shift that has happened, and it provided a solution to the learners who are unable to access the traditional schooling due to the present situation (Soni, 2020). Many researchers have investigated the impact of the sudden change, discussed the role of the online learning during the crisis of the COVID-19, benefits and challenges, and tried to identify the gaps in the virtual learning systems. Although virtual classes have been the solution for different educational systems and has many tools that offer effective content, still it is difficult to compare their effectiveness to the traditional classes in precise language classes which needs direct interaction (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020).

The evaluation for most of the faculties is based on three main attributes teaching, publications/research, and service, and these attributes were used to evaluate during the traditional teaching (Ruth, 2018). Even though we have shifted to the online learning, the evaluation system for this educational tool is achieved very little publicity (Ruth, 2018). Therefore, this paper aims to find the benefits and challenges of the online learning for the EFL Saudi students in their preparatory year.

3. Methodology

3.1 Type of Research Method

The research method employed for this paper was a quantitative method in terms of a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 15 items and was utilized to identify the benefits and challenges that EFL students have faced during their online learning experience due to the pandemic.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 72 Saudi EFL learners in their preparatory year both male and female, their ages range from 18 years old up to 25 years old. Their native language is Arabic, and they have different IT skills. Some of

the participants never participated in any online learning programs before.

3.3 Research Tool

The implemented research tool was a questionnaire which was adapted from (Bączek et al., 2021) on ‘Students’ perception of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic’ a survey study of Polish medical students. The questionnaire was modified and translated into Arabic in order to ensure full understanding of the students. This questionnaire consisted of three parts. In the first part, demographic details were asked such as (age, gender, and educational field), also students were asked to describe their IT skills, and state whether they had previously participated in any online courses. While the second part included the following questions:

A. What are the advantages of e-learning? Pick all that you consider true.

- Access to online materials
- Learning on your own pace
- Ability to stay at home
- Classes interactivity
- Ability to record a meeting
- Comfortable surrounding

B. What are the disadvantages of e-learning? Pick all that you consider true.

- Reduced interaction with the teacher
- Technical problems
- Lack of interactions with colleagues
- Poor learning conditions at home
- Lack of self-discipline
- Social isolation

The Third part consisted of seven questions using Likert scale to compare between the online learning and the traditional learning in terms of increasing knowledge, social competence, and students’ activity during classes. In addition to a question that evaluates the students’ learning classes during the pandemic.

3.4 Procedure

First of all, an ethical approval was requested from ELI for the data collection. Secondly, a Google form was used to construct the survey, and then the electronic survey was distributed online to the students via WhatsApp.

3.5 Data Analysis

The method used to analyze the data from the survey was frequency and percentage response using SPSS to identify percentages and find the relation between different variables.

4. Results

Table 1. The students’ age

Age	Frequency	Percent
18-20	64	88.9
21-25	7	9.7
+25	1	1.4
Total	72	100.0

The 72 participants included 77.8% females (n= 56) and 22.2% males (n=16). As shown in Table 1, almost 88.9% between 18-20 years old, 9.7% are between 21-25, and 1.4 older than 25 years old.

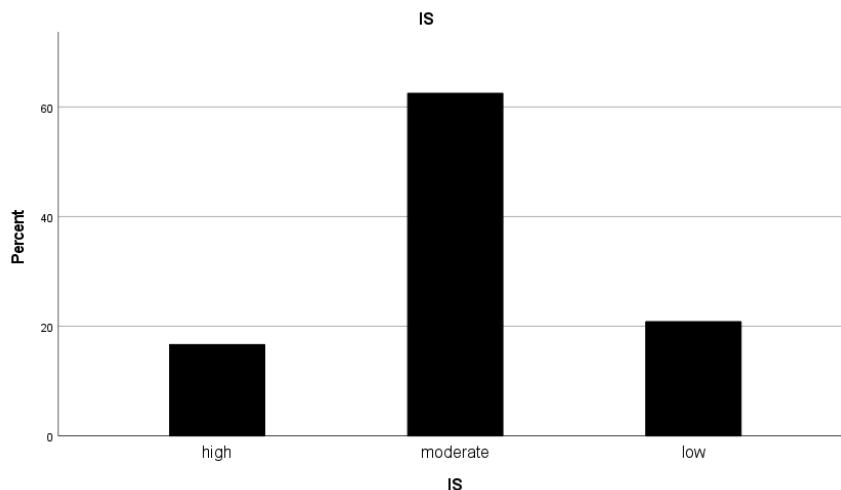


Figure 1. The students' perception of their IT skills level

The students' IT skills varied 62.5% rated their skills as good while 20.8% have low IT skills. Only 16.7% said they have high IT skills.

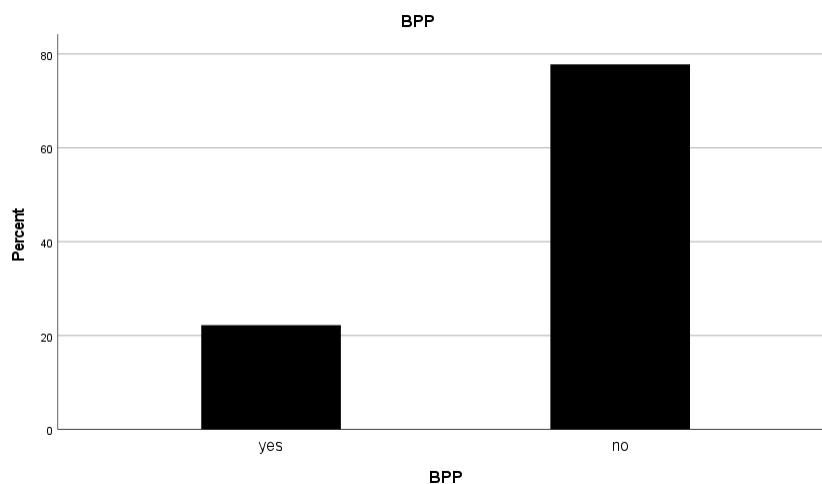


Figure 2. The students' participation in any online learning before the pandemic

The result showed that the 77.8% of the participants haven't participated in any online learning courses before the COVID-19 pandemic and only 22.2% have been involved in online learning.

Table 2. The number of male and female who have participated in this study and shows if they have been involved in any online learning before the pandemic

Gender	Students' participation in online learning before the Pandemic		Total
	yes	no	
male	4	12	16
female	12	14	56
Total	16	56	72
Percent	22.2%	77.8%	100.0%

Table 3. Relation between the students' participation in online learning and their IT skills

		Students' participation in online learning before the Pandemic		
		yes	no	Total
IT Skills	high	4	8	12
	moderate	11	34	45
	low	1	14	15
Total		16	56	72

Table 4. The Students' Perceptions about the benefits of the online learning

Benefits of the online learning	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Access to online material	40	18.4%	55.6%
Ability to stay at home	49	22.6%	68.1%
Classes interactivity	5	2.3%	6.9%
Ability to record a meeting	61	28.1%	84.7%
Comfortable surrounding	37	17.1	51.4%
Learning on you own pace	25	11.5%	34.7%
Total	217	100.0%	301.4%

Each of the benefits was selected multiple times as the students were asked to pick all the possible answers that they find as a benefit of the online learning. From the table above we realize that the "Ability to record a meeting" was pick 61 times by the students and was the most rated benefit. Unlike "Classes interactivity" which was only picked 5 times.

Table 5. Most of the challenges that students have faced during the online learning

Challenges of the online learning	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Technical problems	62	26.1%	86.1%
Lack of interactions with teachers	43	18.1%	59.7%
Lack of self-discipline	40	16.8%	55.6%
Social isolation	25	10.5%	34.7%
Poor learning conditions at home	38	16.0%	52.8%%
Lack of interactions with colleagues	30	12.6%	41.7%
Total	238	100.0%	330.6%

Technical problems were the most rated challenge that 86.1% of the participants have faced during their online learning experience. Also 59.7% of the participants reported that "Lack of interactions with teachers" as a challenge that happened frequently with them.

The following Figure 3 shows the students' perception about the online learning in term of increasing the knowledge.

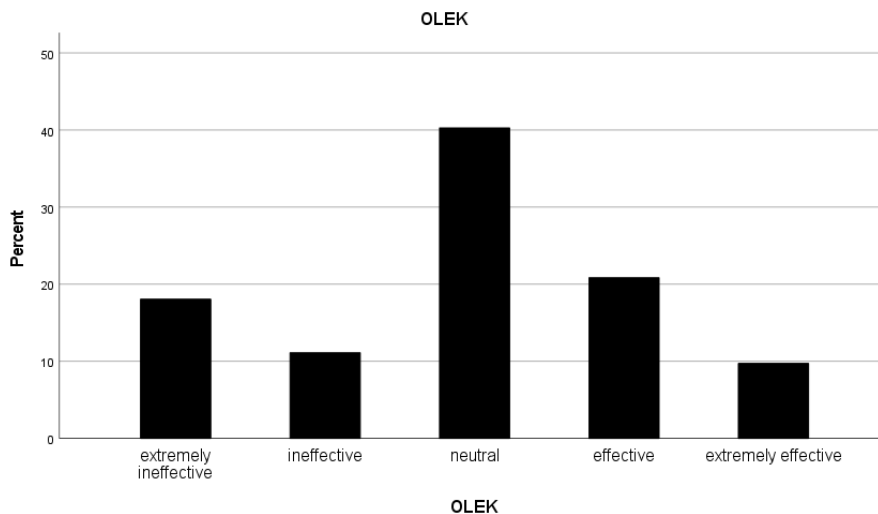


Figure 3. Students' perception about the online learning

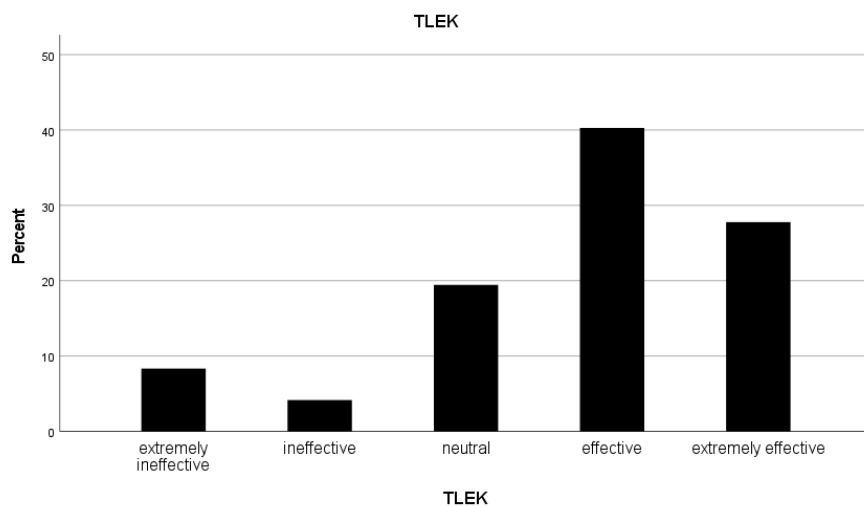


Figure 4. Students' evaluation for the traditional learning in term of increasing their knowledge and experience

Table 6. The Students' evaluation for their experience of the learning during the pandemic

		IT Skills			Total	Frequency	percent
		high	moderate	low			
Online Learning Evaluation during Pandemic	Extremely unenjoyable	1	10	6	17	17	23.6
	Unenjoyable	1	4	3	8	8	11.1
	Neutral	1	15	1	17	17	23.6
	Enjoyable	2	7	3	12	12	16.7
	Extremely enjoyable	7	9	2	18	18	25.0
Total		12	45	15	72	72	100.0

25.0% of the participants evaluate their online learning as “extremely enjoyable” and most of them have moderate or high IT skills while 23.6% have “extremely unenjoyable” experience and these learners have moderate or low skills. Additionally, 23.6% have neutral experiences.

5. Discussion

This study focused on the benefits and challenges of the online learning at a Saudi university in Jeddah, Saudi

Arabia, from the perspective of preparatory year students. The results showed that most of the students have no previous experience with the online learning as seen in Table 2, and the students' IT skills shown in Table 3 varied which can be a factor that might have an impact on their online learning experience which can be listed under students' readiness supported by (Cavanaugh et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the results showed a number of benefits of the online learning as reported by students. Some of the picked benefits of the online learning were "Access to online material", "Ability to stay at home", "Ability to record meetings and sessions", "Retrieve information", and "Having comfortable surrounding" which supported by (Rao, 2019) that online learning is effective, accessible, and provide flexible timing to schedule classes, however, learners need to use the internet technology to communicate with their teachers. Moreover, the highly rated benefit as seen in Table 4 is "Ability to record the meeting" which enables the students to recheck the class or the lecture in case of facing any technical issues or time management issues. Despite of all the reported benefits, there are many challenges such as student readiness and retention issues. Also, as shown in Table 5 "Technical problems" has been the most rated challenge for almost all the students. In addition, "Lack of interaction with teacher" has been a challenge for most of the participants. Moreover, the "lack of self-discipline" was a challenge for students through their learning process, students complained of the behavior of other students. In fact, students might struggle during their learning due to these challenges, and they need to be equipped with proper training to avoid such issues.

Additionally, learners evaluated online learning and traditional learning in terms of increasing the knowledge and social competence. As shown in Figure 3, 40.3% of the participants have neutral opinion about the effectiveness of online learning while in Figure 4, 40.3% evaluated the tradition learning as effective. In regard to this, more studies are needed to investigate the effectiveness of the online learning which is also supported by Mahyoob (2020) still it is difficult to compare online classes effectiveness to the traditional classes in precise language classes which needs direct interaction. This also was suggested by Pomerantz and Brooks (2017), who stated that few people agree that online learning helps students learn more effectively.

The students' evaluation of their experience of the online learning during the pandemic had very close percentages as seen in Table 6, 23.6% evaluate their experience as extremely unenjoyable, 23.6% have neutral opinion about their experiences, and 25% believe it was extremely enjoyable. It can be argued based on these findings that there might be a relationship between the students' readiness and their IT skills, however, further studies are needed in this field, and more standards are needed to evaluate the online learning accurately.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to identify the benefits and the challenges of the online learning from the perspective of preparatory year students at a Saudi university in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The results have showed that students agreed on the online learning benefits and challenges. The ability to record a meeting had the highest rate according to the students besides the ability to stay home with comfortable surroundings. On the other hand technical problems were the most rated challenge for students, in addition to lack of interaction with teachers. Despite of the benefits that could help the learners, the challenges could have a negative impact on the online learning experiences as students still agree that traditional way of learning is more sufficient and effective.

This research had some limitations, one of which was the small sample size. Moreover, the number of female participants was larger due to access issues related to culture. For further studies on online learning, researchers could find rigorous standards to measure and evaluate the online learning accurately at different contexts to highlight all the benefits and challenges in order to improve the online learning environment and make it more enjoyable to learners. Moreover, applying more qualitative methods with the participants and teachers could have a deeper view of the evaluation of the online learning.

For the pedagogical implementation for this study, a short technical course includes all the expected problems, and its solutions should be given at the beginning of each semester.

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Appendix

The Arabic version of the questionnaire

Retrieved from <https://forms.gle/dRuUxtX8bES5BjD9A>

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