

Undergraduate EFL Students' Perceptions About Their Experiences Attending Online Classes During the COVID-19 Pandemic at a Saudi University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate EFL students' perceptions about their experiences attending online classes at a Saudi higher education institute during the COVID-19 pandemic. Random sampling was used to obtain the subjects of the study, twelve undergraduate EFL students who attended online classes for the first time at Al-Baha University, Saudi Arabia. A SWOT analysis was used to process the collected data. The main strengths of using online classes in the EFL context were time/place flexibility, promoting a more active/interactive learning style, and the availability of recorded sessions, all of which helped the students when they were reviewing the asynchronously-delivered content. The weaknesses were all related to technical issues (access to an adequate internet connection and an appropriate device on which to access the internet). This study is expected to generate new insights into the process of implementing online classes or blended classes to teach the English language in the Saudi context, and to examine the potential strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to such an adoption at the target university during the shift to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings may be beneficial for other higher education institutions with a similar context in Saudi Arabia and may benefit higher education policymakers in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: e-learning, higher education, TEFL, Saudi context, perceptions

1. Introduction

Currently, emerging innovations and advancements in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have had a strong influence on many areas of our lives. These innovations and advancements have presented countless opportunities, as well as challenges, for organizations within several industries, including higher education, in Saudi Arabia. These developments suggest that most organizations, including higher education institutes, are obligated to offer, in part or in full, their services online.

E-learning has become essential for universities to operate effectively in accordance with the digital emphasis of the twenty-first century. The development of ICT has contributed to the enhancement of teaching and learning, by providing new approaches for the acquisition of knowledge, and the development of students' skills. With the continual expansion of e-learning operations, and developments in higher education, higher education institutes face the demanding process of updating their already-adopted e-learning tools, in order to cope with competition from other higher education institutions, as well as other rapidly changing and developing educational technologies (Cairns & Alshahrani, 2013).

In acknowledgment of the demands of a digitally connected world and a globalized marketplace, the Saudi government has been giving serious attention to e-learning in the higher education sector. The Saudi Ministry of Education has emphasized e-learning as an essential innovation that can neither be ignored nor avoided. Some of the steps taken in response to this need were the establishment of the National Centre of E-learning and Distance Learning (ELC), and the Saudi National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment in 2006. Their aim is to organize the shift toward e-learning, and to prepare e-learning tools for all public universities (About Saudi Government Universities, 2011; El-Rashidi, 2007).

The unanticipated COVID-19 pandemic disturbed numerous sectors of the economy, and every single aspect of

human life, not only in developing countries, but across the globe (Bacher-Hicks, Goodman, & Mulhern, 2021; Raaper & Brown, 2020). In an effort to manage the contagion of COVID-19, many countries have executed restrictive measures to decrease social gatherings and encourage social distancing. This included the closure of higher education institutions, and a major and unprecedented shift away from conventional classroom-based teaching and learning to a virtual approach—"distance learning". While higher education may have transformed, and moved online due to COVID-19, it is unknown whether this procedure of transformation produces positive teaching and learning outcomes (Mseleku, 2020). Higher education institutes in Saudi Arabia were obligated to move to online education, because attending physical classes became an impossibility as a result of COVID-19, and the consequent national lockdown. The most common response from higher learning institutes was to shut down campuses and cancel all conventional class meetings.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the adoption of online classes in the TEFL context, along with ascertaining undergraduates' perspectives of this adoption in a Saudi university in a relatively remote area during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also aimed to map the use of technology in teaching and learning languages, with a focus on the potential advantages and disadvantages of the use of technology in this context, and to analyze the application of online classes during the COVID-19 era, for teaching the English language, with reference to possible benefits and drawbacks.

2. Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this study indicated that many terms were used to reflect the impact of changes to telecommunications in general, at a time when the use of Information Technology (IT) in the field of education was beginning to expand into Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The term 'e-learning' was not adopted in education until 2000 (Bell & Federman, 2013; Cahill, 2008). Instead, other terms like 'web-based instruction,' and 'computer-assisted learning' were used interchangeably to define e-learning. Conversely, 'e-learning' can be considered an umbrella term that labels them all (Bell & Federman, 2013). It is challenging to be precise about the exact extent of the term 'e-learning', one of its attributes is the fact that it shows that educational technologies are rapidly changing and developing (Bell & Federman, 2013).

Delivery approaches to e-learning can be categorized in two ways: they are either "synchronous," or "asynchronous" (Donnelly, Benson, & Kirk, 2012; Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, & Gijsselaers, 2014). In synchronous e-learning, learners are required to be online with their instructor/facilitator, via streaming audio/video, at a fixed time, using learning management systems (LMS) provided by their educational institutions. This allows students to collaborate with their instructors, and to hear/read their colleagues' comments and questions using real-time interaction(s). On the other hand, asynchronous e-learning provides time flexibility, as students participate in learning activities available online at a time that suits them best. One major weakness of synchronous e-learning is the fact that flexibility around time is lost. Thus, for some students, this could mean that they have to be online at inconvenient times (Donnelly et al., 2012; Giesbers et al., 2014).

There are many things to consider with adopting e-learning for educational purposes (Bell & Federman, 2013; L. Johnson, 2014). These considerations include, but are not limited to, the following:

- E-learning supports personalized content that meets the students' needs and expectations; it supports students' ownership and contributions to the process of their own learning
- E-learning's incorporation into education offers the opportunity to capture the learning of content in a digital form; thus, allowing for quality control and staff development in ways almost impossible in conventional learning settings
- Reducing costs is another reason to adopt e-learning, as it is believed that e-learning contributes to educational cost reductions. However, Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) stated that this claim is difficult to prove, as it is extremely difficult to accurately estimate the costs of e-learning adoption
- Meeting students' expectations of technology use; they expect that the technologies used inside classrooms should be comparable to those available outside classrooms
- Because of its flexibility in time and location, e-learning provides an orientation for a widely distributed group of students (Donnelly et al., 2012; Gosper & Ifenthaler, 2014).
- E-learning off-campus, or blended learning, with campus-based teaching, might be a solution to meet the needs of all types of students (Ashwin, 2006; Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007).

On the other hand, several studies indicated that despite the rising popularity of online learning, the traditional classroom is still the most popular form of delivery for students. Unlike online education, the conventional

learning environment is more “real,” and students have the ability to debate, deliberate, and discuss the material with their instructors and classmates. Therefore, while remote learning may sound like an alternative to face-to-face learning, it has created a lot of challenges for students and academics (Radha, Mahalakshmi, Kumar, & Saravanakumar, 2020).

Several studies have been conducted in the Saudi context, one of which is Alebaikan and Troudi's (2010) quantitative study on blended learning in Saudi universities. Their findings indicated that blended learning had the potential to enhance the quality of student learning. Sajid et al. (2016) conducted another quantitative study to evaluate undergraduate students' performance and perceptions of blended learning (comprised of conventional classes combined with online classes). Their study was comprised of 127 third-year students at Alfaisal University in Saudi Arabia. Their findings indicated that the students expressed satisfaction with the online courses, which were presented as part of a new and effective learning approach. Their findings also showed that online courses promoted student-centered learning and critical thinking. Another quantitative study, carried out in a Saudi university, explored EFL students' perceptions of blended learning. The study included 160 male students, and their findings indicated that blended learning promoted more effective and cooperative learning. The study design also included several drawbacks, such as some technical issues, and the need to provide proper training for students before implementing the online courses (Al Zumor et al., 2013).

3. Research Design and Context of the Study

One of the major features of qualitative data, as illustrated by Flick (2009), is that it focuses on naturally occurring, ordinary events, in their natural settings. The qualitative methodology used in this paper serves the paper's objectives, and qualitative scholars have a strong handle on what ‘real life’ is like. Also, the fact that the data were collected in close proximity to a specific location, where the possibility for understanding the underlying issues is more likely to be stronger, rather than through mail, email, or phone, gives qualitative data an advantage over quantitative data (Creswell, 2012).

Qualitative methodologies were chosen because qualitative researchers differ from quantitative researchers in that the focus of the claims that they make for their research is different. Quantitative researchers are very eager to generalize their findings, while qualitative researchers are less interested in generalizing, and prefer instead to conduct a study that is ‘authentic’ by delivering results that are reliable and trustworthy within a specific context (Gray, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

As shown earlier, most previous studies were quantitative correlational studies designed to investigate the relationship between demographic factors and positive/negative attitudes or perceptions toward using e-learning. This study differs as it uses the qualitative method because it aims, as claimed by Flick (2009) and Gray (2009), to provide an overview of the context of students' perceptions toward attending online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study are comprised of the results from 12 semi-structured interviews, where the subjects were five males and seven females that were randomly sampled.

Researcher used a SWOT analysis to generate the semi-structured interview questions used in this study, as well as to analyze the collected data. SWOT is an abbreviation that stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Fine, 2009). In this study, the researcher used the Learning Management System (LMS) at the target university to carry out the interviews with the test subjects. An mp3 recorder was used to record all interviews. Interview transcripts were then exported to NVivo to use this software for qualitative data analysis; the data were analyzed on an individual-by-individual basis, and then the data were amalgamated to reveal the similarities and differences that emerged across participants' responses. The research context is the Al Baha University, which is located in Al Baha Province in the southwestern region of Saudi Arabia.

4. Research Questions

the research questions are as follows:

- ◆ How was the EFL students' experience attending online classes?
- ◆ What could be the strong points of attending online classes for EFL students?
- ◆ What could be the weaknesses of attending online classes for EFL students?
- ◆ What could be the positive opportunities of attending online classes for EFL students?
- ◆ What could be some of the threats of attending online classes for EFL students?

5. Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it focused on only one Saudi university. Also, there was a limited number of

participants, which is due to the scope and nature of the study, and the nature of qualitatively-oriented research. The inclusion of more participants and other similar Saudi universities would have allowed for more cross-comparisons, and would have better supported the generalizability of the research findings. Such limitations are due to the time constraints, the limited resources offered by the target university, and the fact that these relatively new universities are located in remote areas within Saudi Arabia. However, this study opens a window for future studies.

6. Findings and Recommendations

This study was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews, which were informed by the attributes identified, namely, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of attending an online class for undergraduate EFL students. The findings showed students' positive attitudes toward their first-time experience attending an online class; furthermore, the analysis showed that time/place flexibility, new/interesting ways to learn, which promote interactivity, and increase concentration, were the main strengths. On the other hand, the findings also showed that technical issues, some related to the provider, others linked to the poor internet connection, caused connection drops, and therefore, missing some of the content of the class was the main weakness.

1) In general, how was your experience attending an online class as an EFL student during the COVID-19 era?

The findings indicated the students' positive attitudes toward attending online classes; the students indicated that online learning was a more convenient and interesting learning method, as compared to conventional classes.

The following quotes demonstrate these points:

'I had a great experience; it was very convenient for me as a student to attend an online class and for the teacher as well.'

'It was wonderful [...] that I can get a lecture including all the valuable information...without any need of leaving my room'

2) What could be the strong points of attending an online class as an EFL student during the COVID-19 era?

Participants' responses to this question indicated that one of the main strengths of online classes is time and place flexibility, which became necessary during the shift to online learning throughout the COVID-19 lockdown. Furthermore, time and place flexibility are strengths in the context of the school (and the Al Baha region in general) where most of the winter days are foggy, and driving is not safe, so online classes might provide a solution to encourage students to be more active learners. This goes well with the cited literature, as time/place flexibility is believed to be the main reason to adopt e-learning (Donnelly et al., 2012; Gosper & Ifenthaler, 2014).

The following quotes demonstrate these points:

'...the most important point is that with e-learning I could attend the class from my phone from anywhere and anytime.'

'...you don't have to be in college to attend the class. You can have the ability to attend it even if you are traveling or living in another city.'

'You don't have to be in a certain place to attend the class; you can attend it...sometimes we do face weather issues and other things like the current curfew. In this region it gets foggy during winter; we barely see anything. So, you won't be able to drive, and that can cause so many problems; online classes might be the perfect alternative.'

3) What could be the weaknesses of attending an online class as an EFL student during the COVID-19 era?

The study findings showed that there are some weaknesses in the online learning environment. These included technical difficulties with the recorded voice, as it was not clear. Some students had some struggles related to accessibility to adequate internet connections. In other cases, access to the required hardware might be an issue, thus hindering the likelihood of taking more online classes after the safe return to conventional classes after the end of the COVID-19 curfew in Saudi Arabia. Sajid et al. (2016) reported similar difficulties with the adoption of e-learning.

The following quotes demonstrate these points:

'Sometimes the voice was unclear so I couldn't hear the whole lecture.'

'The weakness points are: some students do not have internet connections or smartphones, also a

microphone to participate effectively.’

‘I lost connection after 30 minutes...later I got into the class again, but it was too late.’

4) What could be the positive opportunities of attending an online class as an EFL student during the COVID-19 era?

The results indicated that online classes encouraged students to be more active learners; one of the main advantages was the capability to interact with their peers and instructors. This point complements the reviewed literature (Donnelly et al., 2012; Giesbers et al., 2014; Ginsburg, 1998). Another advantage of online classes, as indicated by participants, is the availability of recorded lectures for students so they could go back to them if they missed the class; or if they needed to review some lectures; similar findings were cited in previous studies (Bell & Federman, 2013; L. Johnson, 2014).

The following quotes demonstrate these points:

‘For me, it is a good way to learn; more developed, faster, and easier.’

‘I can interact more, understand faster, and think better than [in] conventional classrooms’

‘...I paid attention to everything [that] was said, and my instructor was making sure that everything was clear throughout the semester...’

‘Recorded lectures are helpful.’

‘Recording the classes is good, so if I have any difficulties, I can go back to the recorded class.’

5) What could be some of the threats of attending an online class as an EFL student during the COVID-19 era?

The overwhelming majority of participants stated that the poor internet connection in the Al Baha region is a major threat to effective online course delivery, as the region is lacking adequate infrastructure, and has poor cellular coverage, which is due to the fact that this region is relatively remote; similar findings were cited by Al Zumor et al. (2013).

The following quotes demonstrate this point:

‘The bad connection of the internet, if there is [one].’

‘Slow internet connection sometimes.’

‘Internet issues and issues related to the website provider of the online courses.’

6) Since we are back to conventional classrooms with some strict rules including social distancing and wearing masks, if online classes are still available as an option, which option (online or conventional courses) would you choose and why?

‘Online classes are good and convenient. I’ll definitely enroll in more online courses in [the] future.’

‘I prefer to attend online classes from my home than attend conventional classes in-campus.’

‘I will choose [the] online option if I manage to get a better internet connection; I scored better in online courses during [the] COVID-19 era’

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the study showed that despite some challenges, which were mainly technical in nature, and occurred due to the major shift from conventional classroom-based teaching and learning to a virtual approach, undergraduate EFL students held positive attitudes towards their experience attending an online course during the COVID-19 era, as it offered time/place flexibility. Students stated that they were more active as learners in the online environment. They emphasized that asynchronous content, namely, recorded lectures were helpful. The following table illustrates the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of attending online classes as stated by participants:

Table 1. Summary of the main findings

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The main strength point of online classes is time & place flexibility. <p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Online classes encourage students to be more active learners. This allows them to interact with their peers and their instructors. ▪ Recorded lectures allow students to go back to them if they miss the class; or if they need to review some lectures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The main weakness points of online classes are technical difficulties related to the voice of the lecturer, as it was not clear. Also, some students had difficulties related to access to an adequate internet connection. Others required hardware (i.e., a computer or smartphone) to access the internet. <p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The poor internet connection in the Al Baha region is a major disadvantage for online courses. The region is lacking adequate infrastructure to support internet access, and the area has poor cellular coverage.

The potential benefits of adopting e-learning are numerous, including, but not limited to:

- E-learning promotes personalized content that meets the students' needs; it supports students' ownership of, and contribution to, the process of learning.
- E-learning integration in the TEFL context offers the opportunity for capturing the learning content, permitting quality control, and reinforcing staff development in ways that are almost impossible in conventional (classroom) teaching settings.
- E-learning is expected to contribute to cost reduction, and reducing costs is another identified benefit of it.
- Students expect that technologies used in classrooms should be comparable to the technologies available to, or used by them. Thus, e-learning involves meeting students' expectations of technology use.
- E-learning provides an orientation for a widely distributed group of students because of its flexibility in terms of time and location.
- E-learning off-campus, or blended learning with campus-based teaching, might be a solution for all types of students.

Altameem (2013) stated that the ICT infrastructure is one of the most critical issues facing developing countries. Inadequate ICT infrastructure is a major barrier by itself, capable of hindering the effective and efficient delivery of e-learning content. A vital step that needs to be considered before further adoption of online classes in the future, especially in remote areas, is an assessment of the infrastructure available at the target location. In addition, the context of the process of online courses needs to be evaluated. However, in light of these findings, it is recommended that these issues would be further investigated before the incorporation or further adoption of such technologies.

The researcher would like to suggest that further studies should be conducted in other Saudi universities, within a similar context to the target university used in this research, or in other similar contexts in neighboring countries, as further studies on the effective use of online teaching and learning will contribute to the breadth of international research on online teaching and learning.

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