

Unlocking Learning: A Review of Undergraduate EFL Students' Experiences in Online Classes Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic at Saudi Universities

Mohammad Ali Al-Ghamdi¹

¹English Language Unit, Applied College, Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Dr. Mohammad Ali Al-Ghamdi, English Language Unit, Applied College, Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

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Abstract

The primary aim of this review paper is to synthesize previous research and conduct a critical analysis of factual evidence to acquaint readers with the study results of Saudi undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of their experiences attending online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. This work compiles, investigates, and discusses published data on this specific case. The author aims to present an understanding of EFL learners' experiences with online education in academic institutions during the coronavirus outbreak and to address the question: How does the shift to distance learning affect EFL students' satisfaction with their education now and in the future? Additionally, it is expected that a thorough examination of the literature will yield essential information related to the research problem.

Keywords: e-learning, higher education, EFL, perceptions

1. Introduction

The global crisis triggered by the novel, dangerous coronavirus necessitated urgent measures worldwide to mitigate the risks of infection spread across various spheres of life and activities. Saudi Arabia was no exception to this, implementing similar precautions.

Several local universities were unprepared for such radical changes, leading to an emergency transition that required professors and students to adapt to entirely new conditions. Despite the psychological, organizational, technical, and technological challenges, a significant proportion of EFL students reported a relatively positive experience with online systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of several articles to confirm this thesis.

2. Literature Review

Based on an extensive analysis of various quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies on learners' perceptions of distance learning during the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, it is evident that the situation is complex and multifaceted. The unanticipated COVID-19 pandemic disturbed numerous sectors, including education. In this regard, the perceptions of distance learning are not unequivocal, as highlighted by numerous respected scientists and researchers. The academic community appears divided into two opposing camps. Some scholars assert that learning through modern and innovative technologies leads to high academic results, outstanding achievements, and success. In contrast, others argue that online education has a negative impact on students, affecting their attitudes towards the process of acquiring new knowledge.

One should highlight that the transition to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was the most significant disruption of educational procedures in the history of humankind. As practice shows, students during COVID-19 did not have enough time, effort, and resources to fully familiarize themselves with virtual tools and sufficient training (Al Shlowiy, 2021). In this regard, they were mainly not only disappointed but also annoyed with the circumstances (Al Shlowiy, 2021). Many researchers seem to agree that students are not accustomed to listening to lectures online, and the lack of physical interaction with teachers, to a certain extent, affects the quality of education (Al-Nofaie, 2020). In spite of the fact that all these challenges were present, many students adapted to the new mode of learning. However, there are also opponents of the idea that distance learning can

fully replace traditional education. Opponents argue that the negative impact on students' engagement and learning outcomes cannot be overlooked. In the same breath, focusing on the other arguments of promoters of distance learning, it becomes clear that there is limited evidence to support the notion that online education is universally beneficial. Consequently, the literature discusses various perspectives, and one more point highlighted is the need for improved virtual learning tools and training for both students and educators to enhance the effectiveness of distance learning.

The transition to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed numerous challenges and negative consequences. For instance, the problem with a reliable internet connection and access to digital devices, the absence of a comfortable study space at home, the difficulty in acquiring many practical skills online, and the insufficient time available for class preparation using digital devices were major challenges. Furthermore, there were concerns about evaluating the quality of knowledge, the skills gained, and the development of competencies, as well as the negative consequences of intensive online training for health, a decrease in the social activity of students, and many other negative factors, seemed to run like a red thread through the entire internal processes at universities during the coronavirus outbreak. Al-Nofaie (2020) states that students prefer learning using asynchronous tools as part of classroom learning, referring to such nuances. Altuwaresh (2021) agrees with this perspective, stating that the vast majority of EFL students prefer live classes as the most effective and productive forms of acquiring knowledge, systematizing it, and applying it empirically.

The transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was fraught with various disruptions and challenges. In addition, there were frequent "incidents" and "force majeure" in the educational processes. According to Alsuhaibani (2021), learners were more attuned to online learning through popular platforms such as Blackboard before COVID-19. However, in 2021, with the outbreak of the coronavirus, many students were forced to confront institutional policy shortcomings and numerous technical problems that hindered adequate knowledge acquisition. Many students and professors tried to access virtual classrooms simultaneously, leading to frequent server overloads and inaccurate site loadings. One survey illustrates that more than 500 students were extremely stressed by the sudden transition from a full-time to an online format (Oraif & Elyas, 2021). However, more than 50% of respondents "agree" or "completely agree" with the quality of Internet education regarding flexible lectures or practical classes (Oraif & Elyas, 2021). Consequently, these phenomena require deeper and more thorough analysis.

Despite the evident polarity of opinions on online education during COVID-19, some studies illustrate students' moderately optimistic experiences and perceptions of the "restructuring educational systems" during this period. Nevertheless, significant initiatives were required when the education system underwent critical phases during the COVID-19 quarantine (Ur Rahman, 2020). Without these initiatives, achieving positive outcomes would have been impossible, and students would not have gained an experience meeting their developmental needs, comparable to full-time education. Moreover, according to Altuwaresh (2021), about 37% of learners were satisfied with their educational outcomes, and more than 55% preferred online learning due to advantages such as re-recording lectures and fostering an atmosphere of cooperation. Oraif and Elyas (2021) claim that EFL learners are satisfied with online lessons, demonstrating involvement in distance learning through interaction with instructors and peers, skills practice, classroom work, and emotional engagement with class material. To date, these results allow one to draw precise conclusions regarding the further implementation of online learning.

In light of the strict government requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, some organizations have successfully maintained the quality of education. In general, students were satisfied with online learning, appreciating the new and flexible ways of education regarding time and place (Al-Ghamdi, 2022). Relying on the study by Mubarak and Magid (2022), EFL students from one of the leading universities in Saudi Arabia reacted positively to online classes, noting numerous advantages such as effective communication and feedback, as well as interesting methods and approaches to learning. A similar trend is additionally indicated by Ur Rahman (2020), who focuses on the active use of mobile devices by EFL students within the framework of m-learning to meet their educational needs. For example, Saudi male and female students reported positive experiences using Telegram to study EFL, approving of the application and considering it useful in their studies (Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020). Thus, most students supported integrating mobile technologies into academic processes to improve communication between peers and mentors, although a few noted the low speed of internet connections as a drawback.

Online courses have played a unique role in enhancing the quality of education and motivating students to study. For example, some EFL female students shared vivid emotions and impressions about their first experience of learning in a distance format, expressing their willingness to continue taking classes in this format (Altuwaresh, 2021). In contrast, male EFL students viewed online technologies within social networks and e-learning as

supplementary tools rather than substitutes for traditional learning. However, some individuals disagreed with this perspective, highlighting the many advantages of distance education.

In the same breath, focusing on the advantages of online learning, students widely appreciate its time-saving benefits, particularly in avoiding the commute to university. This format not only saves time but also allows students to showcase their abilities and communication skills, particularly benefiting shy individuals (Altuwairesh, 2021). Al-Nofaie (2020) corroborates this positive aspect in his research, highlighting the favorable perception of distance learning among apprehensive individuals as a means of self-expression and freely sharing ideas. Therefore, amidst the expanding global information and educational space, with communication technologies becoming increasingly pivotal, distance learning provides students with the opportunity to attain high-quality professional education. This is facilitated by easy access to academic and supplementary materials, as well as the swift transmission of information during interactions with professors.

Furthermore, one should not forget about the advantages of “blended learning,” which appeals to both full-time and distance learning enthusiasts. Numerous studies have revealed a strong correlation between effective, efficient, and productive education and a favorable perception of a combination of virtual classes with face-to-face meetings (Al-Ghamdi, 2022). Perhaps, this option is one of the most preferred in terms of the format of obtaining knowledge, serving as an alternative that satisfies the interests and preferences of every learner.

3. Study Design

Understanding the perception of online learning among students in higher educational institutions, particularly during the COVID-19 outbreak, serves as the focal point of this review paper. An insufficient amount of accurate knowledge and ideas about the degree of perception of online learning by students of higher educational institutions using innovative technologies during the COVID-19 outbreak forms the primary focus of this review paper. Consequently, the population of interest comprises adult men and women studying for a bachelor’s degree in EFL at universities in Saudi Arabia. In this context, the constructs and settings of interest include the degrees of satisfaction and emotional states regarding online learning within the framework of a global problem.

Moreover, this review paper aims to delve deeply into these studies to discern similarities and differences in findings and methodologies used to investigate the topic. By analyzing these studies comprehensively, it becomes possible to provide a nuanced understanding of the perceptions of online learning among students, allowing for a more thorough examination of the challenges and opportunities associated with this mode of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, information sources were selected to address the aforementioned aspects.

4. Question

The inquiry is: How does the transition of educational processes to a remote mode influence the level of satisfaction with education among EFL students, particularly in the Saudi context, both presently and in the future?

5. Limitations

The constraints of this review directly influence the examination of various studies due to their specialized nature, language, and style of discourse. Furthermore, researchers offer divergent perspectives on the questions and hypotheses posed, often without offering precise responses. However, this review article presents a precise and coherent understanding of the extent to which the issue has been explored, taking into account assessments of other researchers' published works.

6. Findings

Exploring the multifaceted landscape of EFL students’ engagement with online learning during the COVID-19 era reveals a tapestry of diverse methodologies, findings, and interpretations among researchers.

Overall, the studies share a common focus on a specific context encompassing place, period, external and internal phenomena, as well as the objects and subjects of research. Primarily, the authors aimed to comprehend EFL students’ attitudes toward distance learning, particularly accentuated during the COVID-19 era. Their investigations explored various facets, such as the pandemic’s impact on the education system, the quality of education in novel circumstances, and the academic achievements of young individuals. Through thorough comparisons and interpretations of the gathered data, they sought to grasp the ontological effects of online learning on students and their perceptions.

Upon examining the primary and ancillary details of these studies, notable distinctions emerge in terms of study design, methodology, and approaches employed to address the specified inquiries concerning EFL students’

satisfaction with online learning during the COVID-19 epoch. Notably, a diverse array of analytical approaches was employed, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. For instance, authors like Al-Ghamdi, Alsuhaibani, Layali, and Al Shlowiy adopted interview-based methodologies, engaging directly with students. Conversely, Altuwairesh, Alsuhaibani, Ur Rahman, Al Shlowiy, Mubarak and Magid, Layali and Al-Shlowiy, Oraif, and Elyas placed particular emphasis on surveys and questionnaires. Additionally, case studies were undertaken by Al-Nofaie and Altuwairesh. Each researcher formulated hypotheses, gathered data through student interactions, statistical analyses, or literature reviews, and presented scientifically substantiated findings. The interpretation of results varied, with some employing tables, diagrams, or direct comments on student responses. Despite employing similar knowledge acquisition methods, each researcher arrived at distinct conclusions. It is noteworthy that many researchers also sought to comprehend students' perceptions of online learning through internet-based interviews and surveys.

Exploring the multifaceted landscape of EFL students' engagement with online learning during the COVID-19 era reveals a mosaic of diverse methodologies, findings, and interpretations among researchers. While each study brings valuable insights, collectively, they underscore the complexity of students' experiences and perceptions in navigating the transition to online learning. This rich mosaic of research not only enhances our understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by online education but also highlights the need for continued exploration and adaptation in the ever-evolving educational landscape.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, it is crucial to affirm that the selected investigations demonstrate reliability, trustworthiness, and relevance, showcasing both commonalities and disparities. Each researcher conducted thorough explorations into specific contexts, locations, and subjects of research, focusing on young individuals learning EFL. However, they employed markedly different methods, approaches, tactics, and strategies to achieve their specific objectives. Therefore, based on these information sources, it is notable that despite encountering various challenges and obstacles in navigating online educational environments, many students responded positively to the new adaptations. Some recognized several benefits, particularly in terms of time-saving and flexibility.

Conversely, certain learners encountered difficulties in establishing an optimal academic environment while at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a relatively negative perception of online learning. Nevertheless, the swift transition from one educational modality to another helped mitigate potential risks and threats within the education sector. The subsequent table serves as a visual aid for evaluating the key differences and similarities among the selected studies, thereby facilitating a clearer understanding of the points discussed.

Table 1. A summary of the key findings and methodology used in the reviewed articles

No.	Author(s)	Methodology used	Main Findings
1	Al-Ghamdi	Qualitative: Interview through a SWOT analysis, the Learning Management System (LMS), and NVivo.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strengths of online classes included time and place flexibility, promoting active and interactive learning, and availability of recorded sessions. ▪ Weaknesses primarily revolved around technical issues such as internet access and suitable devices.
2	Alsuhaibani	A mixed-method research design: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ EFL students' use of Blackboard increased during online learning in 2020 compared to 2019 and significantly increased in 2021 compared to 2019. ▪ Students' perceptions of Blackboard differed significantly across the three phases, with more positive perceptions before COVID-19 in 2019 and during online learning in 2021. ▪ Technical issues faced during online learning in 2020 may have influenced students' perceptions.
3	Al-Nofaie	Qualitative: Case study.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The instructor taught classes on morphology, and analysis of students' learning logs revealed a preference for the asynchronous environment due to its flexibility. ▪ Unlike findings from previous studies, this study suggests that virtual education is not always appealing to students. ▪ The study compares synchronous and asynchronous aspects of Blackboard in Arabian contexts, offering valuable insights.
4	Altuwairesh	Quantitative: Online survey/ questionnaire, a case study.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Many respondents expressed satisfaction with their online learning experience and enjoyed learning online. ▪ However, more than half of the participants preferred traditional, face-to-face learning when compared to online learning. ▪ Challenges faced in online education included staying motivated, technical issues, and the lack of face-to-face interaction. ▪ Despite these challenges, the most commonly cited advantage of online education was its convenience. ▪ Shy students seemed to benefit more from online classes, as they reported increased participation and questioning compared to traditional classes.
5	Mubarak & Magid	Quantitative: the data was collected using a questionnaire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Results showed that EFL learners at Hafr Al Batin University had a positive attitude towards virtual classes. ▪ Participants cited efficient communication, immediate feedback, and engaging teaching methods and materials as benefits of virtual classes. ▪ The study recommended the use of virtual classes for learning and teaching in EFL environments like Saudi Arabia.
6	Ur Rahman	Quantitative: the data was collected using a questionnaire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quantitative analysis using SPSS 26 revealed positive perceptions of m-learning among the participants during the COVID-19 period.
7	Layali & Al-Shlowiy	Systematic review paper focused on eight primary studies, four conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and four after it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Results indicated positive views, numerous benefits, and limited drawbacks of e-learning for ESL/EFL in Saudi universities.
8	Oraif & Elyas	A quantitative research approach: random sampling (questionnaires).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ EFL Saudi learners exhibited a high level of engagement in online courses. ▪ The drastic shift to e-learning due to COVID-19 has significantly influenced learners' behavior and acceptance
9	Al Shlowiy	The descriptive approach: Reflective questions were sent to students via surveys and WhatsApp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students faced threats, ambiguities, and deficiencies categorized into emotions, learning environment, student characteristics, and needs. ▪ Over time, students gained experience in dealing with these issues and coping with their frustrations.
10	Layali & Al Shlowiy	Qualitative: a questionnaire and online individual interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Most Saudi EFL students appreciated e-learning during COVID-19 for its support from social media, increased responsibility for their learning, and enhanced teacher interaction and student ▪ Despite the benefits, students faced four main drawbacks, including challenges in adapting to the new e-learning format.collaboration.

Engaging in an extensive literature review and examining pertinent data is crucial, particularly given the dynamic nature of variables and determinants. For example, investigating learners' perspectives on online education worldwide could offer invaluable insights into emerging trends and challenges. Furthermore, there's a compelling need to explore how students in higher education institutions respond to the incorporation of distance learning elements, not only in 2022 and 2023 but also extending into 2024. This longitudinal approach enables a comprehensive comparative analysis spanning the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, elucidating shifts in attitudes, preferences, and learning outcomes over time. This process underscores the importance of adaptability in education and highlights the need for continued exploration and innovation in the

ever-changing landscape of online learning.

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