

ELT During Lockdown: A New Frontier in Online Learning in the Saudi Context

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Abstract

This study explores pedagogical challenges pertaining to the new online English Language Teaching (ELT) practices that emerged due to the covid-19 pandemic outbreak and the subsequent worldwide lockdown. Based on an explanatory sequential, mixed methods, descriptive research design, quantitative and qualitative data from 265 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in the Saudi context were collected by utilising a custom designed, twenty-two items on a psychometric five-point Likert items, open-ended questions, and a questionnaire. The quantitative data were statistically analysed using SPSS whereas the qualitative textual data were analysed employing the grounded theory. The findings of the study indicate that EFL teachers regard full scale online teaching as a challenging endeavour; however, a valuable and indispensable tool in language teaching, especially, during the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, most of the participants prefer to receive more professional development opportunities based on real life teaching experiences in online ELT. The study presents suggestions and recommendations for further research.

Keywords: BlackBoard®, ELT, mixed methods research design, online teaching and learning, Saudi EFL context, Zoom

1. Background

Online learning has taken an unprecedented new turn with the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic where nearly all instructions at tertiary level institutions in Saudi Arabia and worldwide have been delivered online (Jena, 2020). Such a new stretch of online pedagogical practices has brought several parameters where face-to-face onsite learning was ceased abruptly, and teachers were confronted with this new phenomenon of full-scale online teaching. Although the teaching mode has changed face-to-face to online, teachers have to achieve the same outcomes as they have been doing in onsite and class-oriented system.

This sudden transformation has also impacted English Language Teaching (ELT) practices as teachers have faced new online ELT parameters that are different to the traditional onsite teaching practices. The pedagogical delivery of English as a Foreign Language on a face-to-face or onsite educational environment requires different protocols to achieve the optimum language acquisition by the language learners to that of online learning (Castle & McGuire, 2010). These parameters are fundamentally different due to the fact that the physical, mental as well as the teaching and learning resources are characterized in various ways and the delivery of lessons and their management in an online setting to that of an onsite setting, are undoubtedly different (Hoffmann & Dudjak, 2012).

In Saudi Arabia, for the past two decades, the Ministry of Education has adopted technology as well as distance and online learning as one of the main components of their accredited and approved courses (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). However, up and until the recent covid-19 pandemic outbreak, online learning has never been implemented as the main pillar of any major tertiary undergraduate or postgraduate courses but rather, as a minor component of blended learning of few courses (Abedalla, Pinchot, Samrgandi, & Al-Masri, 2014). Consequently, the covid-19 pandemic outbreak which caused the lockdown in the entire KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) and mandated online learning, generated a plethora of challenges for EFL teachers. The challenges have called for an

extensive review of online ELT methods in order to optimize and achieve the educational targets in an online and distance learning setting. Hence, this study explores these challenges from the EFL teachers' perspective by answering the following two research questions:

- 1) What are the challenges in ELT that EFL teachers in the context of Saudi Arabia believe are the most common in such a transformation from face-to-face to online teaching?
- 2) What are the recommendations that EFL teachers believe are most suitable to ameliorate the transformation of ELT from face-to-face to online setting?

2. Literature Review

2.1 An Overview of Distance Education

Historically, in theorists' opinion distance education is based on a utilized technology for the purpose of education delivery (Nipper, 1989). Anderson and Dron (2011) list three generations of distance education by stating that "The first generation of distance education technology was by postal correspondence. This was followed by a second generation, defined by the mass media of television, radio, and film production. Third-generation distance education (DE) introduced interactive technologies: first audio, then text, video, and then web and immersive conferencing" (p. 82). Similarly, Moore and Kearsley (2011) define distance education as: "teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization" (p. 2). Due to the fact that there is an inevitable creation of the transcended physical distance between learners and teachers, the realm of distance learning has always mandated the dependency on the technological development and availability of online applications (Dron, Anderson, & Siemens, 2011). In this direction, the introduction of new educational software systems and platforms, such as the Learning Management Systems (LMSs) have not only revolutionized the practices of distance education, but also created an alternative pathway to the traditionally provided on-campus university courses, as well as providing the option to have a mix between the two, which is widely known typically as the blended learning approach (Lust, Collazo, Elen, & Clarebout, 2012). With the advancement of technology, different terms and abbreviations relating to the process of digital technology depending on the delivery and purpose have emerged. Such terms include: web-based learning, distance learning, online learning, e-learning, multimedia learning, blended learning, computer-aided instruction (CAI), learning management systems (LMS), technology-enhanced learning (TEL), computer-supported instruction (CSI), virtual learning environments (VLE) and Internet-based training (IBT), all of which fall, to a large extent, under the broader umbrella of distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). One of the most recent terms to be added to the above list of terms is MOOC which stands for: massive open online course (Ossiannilsson, 2018; Porter, 2015; Sandeen, 2013).

2.2 For and Against of Distance Education

Historically, distance education began as a possible alternative of education to few individuals who lived in remote areas or had time and lifestyle constraints which made it extremely arduous to attend an on-site educational program (Sumner, 2000). Over the years, this distance education paradigm evolved into a much wider spectrum to include elements that are similar or identical to the on-site and face-to-face education, such as classroom assignments, projects, reliable grading and assessment systems, provision of feedback as well as the availability of teaching and learning materials in soft copies at the disposal of both, the teachers and the learners (Topper, 2007). With the technological advancement in smartphones, tablets, laptops and other digital devices which are very popular with the new generation, online learning gained huge popularity due to the advantages of saving money, convenience and ease of access to learning materials (Wolfe, DiSanto, Poma, & Rodriguez, 2018). However, distance education has regularly been a controversial topic as researchers have highlighted several issues with distance learning. Croft, Dalton, and Grant (2010) have outlined the most common issues of concerns with distance learning by stating that:

The rise in popularity of distance education programmes, taught through web-based media, belies the difficulty in preparing, delivering and studying on such programmes. Preparing and providing quality material and a rich learning experience are key challenges. The physical and temporal separation of tutor and student, and between students themselves, can lead to feelings of isolation. The lack of interaction and discussion between students on non-cohort-based courses lessens the richness of the learning experience and omits a significant element of the constructivist approach to learning (p. 27).

This is also in addition to other issues and obstacles that are related to the specific contexts of distance learning where there might be a recurrent issue, such as technical matters and financial constraints, mainly on part of the

students (Singh, O'Donoghue, & Worton, 2005).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned main dichotomy of arguments which are for or against distance education, the overall outcome has generally been a compromise between the two where distance education is endorsed but only partially or as one of several parts of a whole study curriculum. In other words, the main setting of delivery of a particular course is an on-site one with face-to-face education and the distance education is only part of that course in what is commonly known as *blended learning* (Fresen, 2018). Thus, the parameters of the argument, for and against distance education, have always been considered where both settings are available, i.e. onsite (face-to-face) setting as well as the option of distance learning.

2.3 Distance Education Under Covid-19 Lockdown

However, with the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic mandating lockdown and closure of nearly all educational institutions premises around the world, the educational setting is now entirely a distance learning one where online or e-learning is the only available option for teaching and learning (Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020). The focus is now shifted towards how to achieve the best teaching and learning outcomes under these conditions.

2.4 ELT and Distance Education Under Covid-19 Lockdown in KSA

Similar to the most countries worldwide, and following the pandemic outbreak of covid-19, the Saudi government enforced the lockdown restrictions which led to an immediate shift of entire education system from onsite (face-to-face) to an online, distance education setting (Alshehri, Mordhah, Alsibiani, Alsobhi, & Alnazzawi, 2020; Zitoun, 2020). This new development entailed a totally new approach to learning in general and to ELT in particular. Such unforeseen and abrupt transition from face-to-face ELT which the students and teachers have been accustomed to, to an online, ELT at a distance, meant that many elements of teaching and learning have to be adjusted and new pedagogical approaches suitable for such a setting have to be introduced (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). However, such a transformation is bound to have some challenges, especially with regards to accommodate decades of face-to-face practices to a new setting of an entire ELT instructions conducted online.

The above cited studies indicate that such a swift transformation requires extensive research exploration and as such, this study contributes to the wider body of knowledge by exploring the perceptions of EFL teachers to identify their pedagogical challenges and possible ways to overcome them in the Saud EFL context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Study Design

This study has adopted a mixed methods research design for data collection and analysis phases (Creswell & Clark, 2017). According to Plano Clark, Huddleston-Casas, Churchill, O'Neil Green and Garrett (2008) a mixed methods research design refers to a particular strategy where quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis design are combined. Creswell (2012) considers the aim of using this design is to: "provide a better understanding of the research problem and question than either method by itself" (p. 535). The current study employed the sequential explanatory mixed methods research design which can be defined as a two-phase model in which collecting quantitative data occurs first and then, it is followed by the qualitative phase to gain more details and consolidate the analysis and findings from the quantitative data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The quantitative ordinal data were descriptively analyzed (Kannan, Dongare, Garg, & Harsoor, 2019) and the qualitative textual data were gathered from the three open-ended questions, which were analyzed based on the principles of grounded theory which involved thematic coding of the participants' responses to the three open-ended questions in the questionnaire.

3.2 Sampling

Due to the specificity of the study, a nonprobability, convenience sampling of 265 EFL teachers from four major Saudi universities was selected. The sample was purposefully chosen since the research revolves around the perceptions of EFL teachers on ELT challenges they face during full delivery of online sessions and the factors they believe might ameliorate them. The sample was gender unbiased and included both male and female EFL teachers. As per the time of conducting this research study where social distancing was enforced due to the covid-19 virus pandemic outbreak, close proximity to the participants was not possible, hence, the researchers were only able to collect primary data via an online questionnaire which was the most feasible option for the data collection part of this research. The data were collected from 159 female and 106 male participants.

3.3 Data Collection Tool

This study has employed a custom designed, 23-item questionnaire where items 1–7 are demographic in nature.

Items 8–20 are on a five-point Likert items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) whereas items 21, 22 and 23 are open-ended questions. The participants were asked to respond to the Likert items as well as the open-ended items to demonstrate their level of agreement with a list of items/statements. The items of the questionnaire were divided into three parts to reflect on the two research questions of the study. The questionnaire was administered online on www.surveymonkey.com and was sent via email and social media groups to EFL teachers who agreed to participate in this research.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 The Piloting Stage

The piloting of the questionnaire was very important since it determined the feasibility of the study procedure and the data collection tool (Detweiler-Bedell & Detweiler-Bedell, 2013). Ten EFL teachers (6 females and 4 males) were requested to participate in the piloting the questionnaire. No comment was made on any of the items on the questionnaire and it was evident that the questionnaire was ready to be sent to the main participants. The data collected at this stage were discarded and were not included in any parts of the study.

4.2 Reliability of the Questionnaire

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the twenty items of the questionnaire was calculated. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the teachers' questionnaire was 0.901 (Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability Statistics for the questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.876	20

The above resultant coefficient of **0.876** value of the Cronach's Alpha for the questionnaire gives a clear indication that the questionnaire is reliable.

4.3 Demographic Items Data Analysis

For items 1–7, Table 2 below highlights the percentages of the responses to each of the items.

Table 2. Demographic data for items 1–7

Item No	Item Options	Frequency	Percentages
Item 1	Female	159	60%
	Male	106	40%
Item 2	PhD/Ed.D	21	8%
	Masters	139	52%
	Bachelor	59	22%
	CELTA/Diploma	43	16%
	Other	3	2%
Item 3	0–10 years	124	47%
	11–20 years	95	36%
	21–30 years	31	11%
	31–40 years	15	6%
Item 4	PYP	197	75%
	ESP/EAP Course	24	9%
	Undergraduate ESP/EAP	19	7%
	Academic English	14	5%
	Graduate ESP/EAP/Research	11	4%
Item 5	Beginner (A1)	112	42%
	Elementary (A2)	88	33%
	Pre-Intermediate (B1)	31	12%
	Intermediate (B2)	24	9%
	Advanced (C1)	10	4%
Item 6	Expert (C2)	0	0%
	0–5 years	189	71%
	5–10 years	71	27%
	11–20 years	5	2%
	More than 20 years	0	0%
Item 7	BlackBoard/BlackBoard Ultra	212	80%
	Zoom	38	14%

Microsoft Teams	9	3%
Cisco Webex	4	2%
Other	2	1%

4.4 Part II (Importance of Online Learning)

In this section where all the items were on a five-point Likert items type, inferential statistical procedures were used to explore any significant differences among the responses of the male and female participants. This was calculated employing the Kruskal-Wallis (K-W). The K-W test revealed no discrepancies in the responses of both male and female participants with regards to items 8–14 which all showed a tendency towards agreeing with the statements. The mean rank scores for the two groups were compared that revealed no significant differences and the probability value (p-value) in the K-W test was more than $p > 0.05$.

4.5 Part III (Challenges to Online Learning)

The calculated Kruskal-Wallis (K-W), or one-way ANOVA, revealed no discrepancies in the responses of both male and female participants with regards to items 15–20. The mean rank scores for the two groups were compared and revealed no significant differences with the probability value (p-value) in the K-W test was more than $p > 0.05$ ($H = 2.175$). However, responses to the items 15–20, agreeing or disagreeing, depending on the item presented to the participants, were combined where strongly agree and agree were combined into one single sum and similarly, strongly disagree and disagree responses were combined into one single sum. Table 3 below highlights the frequencies and corresponding percentages of the participants' responses to items 15–20.

Table 3. Challenges to online learning

Item No	Item Options	Frequency	Combined Frequency	%	Combined %
Item 15	Strongly Agree	153	220	57%	82%
	Agree	67		25%	
	No Opinion	23	23	9%	9%
	Disagree	12	22	5%	9%
	Strongly Disagree	10		4%	
Item 16	Strongly Agree	123	184	46%	69%
	Agree	61		23%	
	No Opinion	44	44	17%	17%
	Disagree	19	37	7%	14%
	Strongly Disagree	18		7%	
Item 17	Strongly Agree	54	113	20%	42%
	Agree	59		22%	
	No Opinion	76	76	29%	29%
	Disagree	51	76	19%	28%
	Strongly Disagree	25		9%	
Item 18	Strongly Agree	74	173	28%	65%
	Agree	99		37%	
	No Opinion	24	24	9%	9%
	Disagree	43	68	16%	25%
	Strongly Disagree	25		9%	
Item 19	Strongly Agree	24	55	9%	21%
	Agree	31		12%	
	No Opinion	53	53	20%	20%
	Disagree	108	157	41%	59%
	Strongly Disagree	49		18%	
Item 20	Strongly Agree	29	61	11%	23%
	Agree	32		12%	
	No Opinion	44	44	17%	17%
	Disagree	108	161	41%	61%
	Strongly Disagree	52		20%	

The above table indicates that most of the teachers (82%) are satisfied with their experience of online teaching (item 15) and are also confident in using one or more online teaching platform at 69% (item 16). They also feel that the chosen platform endorsed by their institutions is easy to follow and operate (item 17) at 42% agreeing

(combined), 29% without an opinion and 28% in disagreement. With regards to item 18, more than half of the teachers (65%) were also in agreement with the statement that the class sizes they taught online are of acceptable size and easily managed. However, there was a disagreement to item 19 regarding the smooth transformation to online teaching due to the covid-19 pandemic lockdown where only 21% agreed, 20% had no opinion and 59% disagreed with the statement. Similarly, with regards to item 20 whether teachers believed that the same elements of online teaching and learning are exactly reflected in an online setting, 61% of the teachers disagreed (combined) with the statement, 17% had no opinion and 23% agreed (combined) with the statement.

4.6 Analysis of the Qualitative Data

The qualitative data collected from the three open-ended items 21, 22 and 23 were coded for initial 100 open codes which led to the emergence of three overarching themes.

In what follows are extracts from four participants' responses to the three open-ended items in the study. These excerpts aim at answering the research questions in this study.

4.6.1 The Experience of Switching from Face-to-Face to Online Teaching

The responses of the participants indicate that there were issues related to the new online teaching and learning. The following account of the participant is like others' views that explains how switching from onsite (face-to-face) setting to an online learning carries a lot of issue. He states:

The sudden transformation caught us by surprise. We are well trained for an online setting but never at this scale. This is a totally new experience for me in that my students are used to have hands on experiences with English language teaching and learning. I usually have students moving around where they sometimes pair up to carry out a particular activity. I feel limited in a tiny camera and I am sure my students feel the same too. There is that sense of missing links and incomplete authenticity in teaching the English language. (Participant A)

4.6.2 Challenges Related to Online Teaching

The qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions further reveals that EFL pedagogical practices were greatly impacted by covid-19 outbreak. Similar to other participants, participant B gave her views on how covid-19 pandemic outbreak lockdown affected her online teaching compared with (face-to-face) setting. She states:

The news of the lockdown was communicated to us over a weekend. We had not made the proper arrangements in time for the first few lessons. I managed to get a large white cardboard to fix on the wall because I wanted my students to see me write things on it as if it was a normal classroom. Unfortunately, some of my students felt they have lost the motivation to participate like they used to be because they could not adjust to the idea of having a lesson in their own bedrooms, for example. The sudden transformation was a bit of a shock for the students because they did not anticipate having all their learning confined to an online setting. One thing I missed is that seeing the girls do things and write things in front of me. That was not the case anymore. Using the large space of my classroom is no longer a possibility with the online setting. (Participant B)

Another teacher, Participant C, gave his views on an extended version of Participant B on the matter relating to the psychology and anxiety experienced by many of the students when the full transformation occurred abruptly. He states:

This complete and full transformation from onsite to complete online learning caught everyone by surprise. Apart from what my colleagues felt, I think many of my students were pretty upset and would text me and say how they miss the interaction in the classroom and the convenience of making conversations with teachers in English much more than what the online platforms would offer. Several students have informed me that since they tried to cope with the online platforms few times and did not manage to get the hang of it, they have felt a sense of desperation and demotivation in learning English. (Participant C).

4.6.3 Overcoming Challenges Related to Online Teaching

The participants' responses were analyzed for the possible solutions to the identified problems. Like other participants' views, participant D gave the best solutions to the challenges of full online ELT mode such as the situation with the covid-19 pandemic outbreak. She states:

There are many ways we can facilitate full mode ELT where we need to make the students feel more confident and motivated to learn and teachers need to have extensive training to prepare them for such a sudden transformation. We certainly need a new structure for our course curriculum so as to accommodate such transformation. Perhaps we can have our university's own server and service provider so the students

can access the online materials without any problems or complaints about the internet. (Participant D)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed at shedding light into the issue of full transformation from an onsite face-to-face teaching setting to an online, distance education setting in the Saudi EFL context.

With the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic worldwide, the full transformation to online learning meant that we are facing a new frontier with all its perks and limitations. The findings of this study affirm what most EFL teachers consider it important to have an element of online learning (blended learning) embedded into the ELT realm. However, they voiced their concerns regarding the readiness of online teaching platforms to accommodate all the needs of the students. They also expressed their reservations regarding the professional development and training which they required for effective language teaching since their existing training did not take into account the online component to a great extent. It appears to be a valid demand that comes from experienced ELT professionals which needs to be addressed in given situation of covid-19.

The EFL teachers expressed their concerns regarding the students' psychology, anxiety, and lack of motivation due to this full transformation. This is in line of what Croft et al. (2010) discussed and indicated areas which are necessary to take into consideration in online learning.

Students also need to be made aware of how to best use the full functionalities of the online platforms as well as having an open channel for instant support and guidance which is in line of what Singh et al. (2005) indicated in their study.

Research questions related to the solution is an important one. We need to add more quotes on that and then add a paragraph here. If there're references in the lit review on solutions, that can used here.

6. Recommendation for Future Research

This study can further be extended to include the views, opinions and perceptions of the educational institutions' stakeholders, ELT department chairs, curriculum designers, publisher and most importantly, the students themselves. The study can always be explored with similar parameters in another EFL context.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

ELT During Lockdown: A New Frontier in Online Learning

Part I (Demographics):

1. Gender Male Female

2. Highest Qualification:

- P.hD/Ed.D Masters Bachelor CELTA/Diploma
 Other, please specify, _____ .

3. Years in the ELT field:

- 0 – 10 Years 11 – 20 Years 21 – 30 Years 31 – 40 Years

4. Which university EFL course best describes where your current students are currently enrolled in?

- PYP ESP/EAP Course Undergraduate ESP/EAP
 Academic English Graduate ESP/EAP/Research

5. At what level would you describe your current students' proficiency of English (CEFR)?

- Beginner (A1) Elementary (A2) Pre- Intermediate (B1)
 Intermediate (B2) Advanced (C1) Expert (C2)

6. How many years of online ELT experience have you had?

- 0 – 5 Years 5 – 10 Years 10 – 20 Years >20 Years

7. Which platform of online teaching have you been using since covid-19 pandemic outbreak lockdown?

- BlackBoard/BlackBoard Ultra Zoom
 Microsoft Teams Cisco Webex
 Other, please specify: _____

Part II (Importance of Online Learning):

8. Colleges and universities worldwide have now endorsed online education as a mandatory policy (either partially or fully)

- Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

9. A sign of reputable tertiary level establishment is the inclusion of online learning.

- Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

10. At my institution, all courses have an element (part of the study) delivered online.

- Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

11. As part of my institution accreditation and endorsement of courses, partial or full pedagogical online delivery elements are mandatory.

- Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

12. The majority of our students are tech savvy and they are capable of using smart phones, laptops and PCs

- Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

13. Online learning can provide many important and beneficial aspects for the students

- Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

14. In this day and age, online (ESL) or (EFL) is a must for language learners.

- Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

Part III (Challenges of Online Learning):

15. I am satisfied with my experience of online teaching.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

16. I can use one or more online teaching platforms on an expert level.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

17. The chosen online learning platform endorsed by my institution is easy to follow and operate.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

18. The class size I teach online is of acceptable size and easily managed.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

19. The full transformation from partial online teaching and learning to full scale (during the covid-19 pandemic outbreak lockdown) was easy for me.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

20. The same elements of onsite teaching and learning are exactly reflected in online teaching and learning.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion
 Disagree Strongly disagree

21. In your own words, how did you see the transformation from onsite teaching and learning to the online system?

22. In your own words, how did the covid-19 pandemic outbreak lockdown affected your online teaching compared with the onsite teaching prior to the lockdown?

23. What are the best solutions to challenges of online ELT under a lockdown situation, such as the covid-19 pandemic outbreak, in your opinion?

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