

A Qualitative Study of Faculty Members' Perceptions of Their Role in Enhancing Learners' Engagement in EFL Online Classes

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Abstract

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) online presents substantial obstacles in terms of fostering learners' participation during lectures. To facilitate the use and practice of the language by English learners and to effectively administer classrooms, it is crucial to investigate the roles of faculty members. The purpose of this study is to examine faculty members' perspectives on their role in promoting student engagement and participation in online English classes. The researcher employed a qualitative research methodology to collect data, which involved document analysis and conducting interviews with faculty members at Umm Al-Qura University. The findings of the investigation suggest that the primary responsibility of the faculty members is to cultivate relationships with students, facilitate their ability to confront learning obstacles and increase their involvement in the educational process. Additionally, the implementation of flipped classrooms to facilitate student engagement during lectures is another critical consequence of effective roles. The present study's findings indicate that EFL instructors prioritize students' interests by providing options that are consistent with them and encouraging interaction during the learning process. Faculty members implement strategies like collaborative learning and communicative techniques to support learners' engagement and facilitate profound learning experiences. The study's conclusions emphasized the importance of effective classroom administration, appropriate instruction, enhanced interaction with learners, and the use of English as the primary language in the classroom. The analysis revealed that interactive curricula, student support, and video contact with students are excellent methods for improving learner engagement. The investigation emphasized the importance of faculty members in creating a dynamic online learning environment, the need for building relationships with students, and the requirement for pedagogical training to enhance the effectiveness of online EFL instruction and boost learner engagement.

Keywords: EFL faculty members, Interaction, Online classes, Learner engagement

1. Introduction

In nations where English is not the official language, non-native speakers learn English as a foreign language (EFL), requiring unique teaching approaches to provide access to English models and instruction in environments where English is not the dominant language (Okyar, 2023a; Si, 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all forms of education, necessitating the transition of schools and learning institutions to remote and online learning. This shift has presented challenges for instructors in maintaining learner engagement and motivation. Researchers are increasingly exploring the impact of online EFL learning on student motivation and engagement, considering factors like relaxation, self-confidence, anxiety, contentment, enjoyment, and curiosity (Nguyen & Tran, 2023; Esra & Sevilen, 2021). Organizational problems and a lack of social connection are two obstacles that affect engagement, highlighting how crucial it is to comprehend these psychological aspects in order to succeed (Jiang et al., 2023; Ningsih, Santosa, & Kusuma, 2023).

According to Newton and Nation (2020), instructors can play an important role in encouraging students to improve all four language proficiency areas while teaching English: speaking, reading, writing, and listening (Newton & Nation, 2020). Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019) emphasized that in online EFL teaching, instructors must employ strategies and techniques to help learners effectively engage in online classes with the help of interaction and communication (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). EFL learners cannot become active without employing appropriate methods to promote interaction during online lessons. Thus, online EFL classes may turn into lectures,

which is not an effective strategy to help learners practice the language and achieve the target of learning EFL. Learning EFL should be more focused on helping learners understand how to make use of the language in their social life or community (Syatriana & Sakkir, 2020).

While teaching the English language, the instructors must promote the enhancement of the four skills of the language: listening, reading, speaking, and writing (Sarifa, 2020). EFL students cannot become active learners without employing appropriate methods to encourage interaction during online lessons. Furthermore, classroom management can pose a significant challenge in an interactive environment (Moradi, 2020). The existing literature mainly focuses on classroom management in face-to-face classes; however, only a few studies have discussed classroom management during online classes (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). Students' interaction and communication in the class correlate with classroom management. Greater and effective learning process management leads to a more productive class. Like face-to-face classes, online courses must follow appropriate class management techniques to encourage students to communicate more (Washington, 2019).

Alutaybi and Alfares (2024) identified numerous challenges and obstacles associated with online instruction in university-level EFL courses. They have discovered that EFL instructors encounter numerous obstacles when instructing online classes, particularly in large classes. They have stated that online EFL classes frequently transition to a lecture mode, where instructors deliver all lessons, focusing more on the teacher. Consequently, the challenges that EFL instructors face may render the online mode of teaching EFL less effective. This study addresses the research gap by revealing the various roles of EFL teachers, formulating effective strategies to enhance learner engagement, and examining the interaction between instructors and students in EFL online courses. Additionally, this investigation will explore the methods by which EFL instructors address the obstacles they have encountered while instructing EFL in an online environment.

This research is significant because it has the potential to assist EFL faculty members in identifying various roles that facilitate learners' interactions in online classes. This research may be significant for EFL faculty members as it offers comprehensive insights into effective strategies that facilitate learners' communication with the instructor and other learners. Additionally, this research has the potential to enhance the EFL literature by investigating valuable variables that could be beneficial to EFL instructors when instructing in an online environment. Consequently, this investigation has the potential to explore various and different effective strategies used in EFL online classes, which reflect the role of the EFL instructors.

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of EFL faculty members regarding their responsibilities in the delivery of EFL online courses. The study also aims to explore how EFL faculty members perceive the implementation of suitable strategies to regulate and supervise their classes to enhance learners' communication and interaction in EFL online courses. This research is crucial because it would allow EFL instructors to investigate the diverse methods employed by different teachers, which could assist them in the development of an interactive online learning environment. Consequently, the following research questions are the focus of this study:

- 1) How do EFL faculty members contribute to improving learners' engagement in online courses?
- 2) What are the opinions of EFL faculty members regarding the strategies employed, appropriate feedback, and course syllabus to increase learners' engagement in online EFL classes?
- 3) What obstacles do EFL faculty members face in fostering communication and interaction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Management of Online Classes in EFL

Online classes require effective class management and well-planned instruction. Taghizadeh and Amirkhani (2022) emphasize that online learning is more successful when instructors can effectively manage the class, including planning, organizing, leading, directing learners, and preparing well-designed materials in the EFL classroom (Taghizadeh & Amirkhani, 2022). Abdulrahman and Samimi (2021) contend that practical strategies, effective communication with students, and effective classroom management programs for professional development in online education are important. They also highlight that managing and controlling the classroom is essential for creating a conducive learning environment for successful instruction (Abdulrahman & Samimi, 2021). Lastly, to effectively manage online education, Burden (2020) recommends the establishment of rules and disciplinary actions, the maintenance of effective teacher-student relationships, and the cultivation of an appropriate mental framework.

In addition, previous research suggests that EFL instructors should be aware of online learners and provide appropriate feedback. They should also promote responses and manage lesson time effectively to improve engagement (Susanti, 2020; Tian & Zhou, 2020). Techniques to increase engagement in online EFL classes include

grouping learners, dividing lesson activities, and providing productive materials. These strategies aim to enhance the overall learning experience and improve overall student engagement (Jeong, 2019; Fischer & Yang, 2022).

Moreover, previous research also indicates that setting appropriate rules for learners' engagement positively impacts their interaction (Taghizadeh & Amirkhani, 2022; Fareh, 2018). Taghizadeh and Amirkhani identified a positive correlation between classroom management and students' attainment of course objectives. Further, Gold and Holodyski (2017) and Macías (2018) suggested that Three patterns impact classroom management: using the target language, interaction, and communicative competence (Gold & Holodyski, 2017). Teachers should use English as the primary language and create opportunities for learners to interact using the language (Alzeebaree & Zebari, 2021; Macías, 2018).

2.2. *Strategies to Enhance Learners' Engagement*

Glazier (2021) highlights strategies for teaching online classes to build positive relationships with students and encourage interaction (Glazier, 2021). One key strategy is caring for students and treating them as human beings. Learning is a human activity, and if students feel valued and their needs are considered, they are more likely to learn (Retnawati, Arlinwibowo, & Apino, 2018). Therefore, instructors should make students feel important by resolving any issues or concerns they may face, helping them settle in. Building a positive relationship with students is crucial for effective online teaching (Pham et al., 2022). Communication and interaction between instructors and students are essential for creating a productive learning environment. Glazier (2021) used real photos of herself smiling as her profile picture on Blackboard to motivate students. If instructors don't feel comfortable, they could upload images related to them, like their pets (Glazier, 2021).

2.2.1 Interactive Curriculum Design

Designing an interactive and interesting online course syllabus is crucial for student engagement. The syllabus guides students, helping them manage expectations, become organized, and set goals to achieve course targets (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). For instance, interactive maps can enhance interaction in online classes by providing students with geographical information. This allows them to share common goals and experiences, even if they cannot physically meet (Palaigeorgiou, Karakostas, & Skenteridou, 2018; Kim, 2020). Instructors can classify students based on their geographical area, making relationships more meaningful. This also allows students to share common topics for discussion, as the place of living reflects human characteristics, allowing for more common ground for understanding. Overall, interactive maps can cultivate a more stimulating and participatory educational atmosphere (Sebillo, Vitiello, & Di Gregorio, 2020).

2.2.2 Video Interaction Between Instructors and Students

According to Karakaş and Yükselir (2021), instructors can use short videos to keep students on track during class, emphasize the course's importance, remind them of tasks, and discuss important events. These videos can guide students through the course and be more effective than videos provided by third-party content providers (Karakaş & Yükselir 2021). The videos are not the main factor in enhancing student interaction, but rather, the instructor's focus on humanizing the teaching process through these videos, ultimately enhancing their relationship with students (Muthmainnah & Hasbi, 2022).

Research suggests that improving the human aspect of online teaching can be achieved by using real videos that reflect the instructor's life. Instructors can record videos while teaching at home, showing their children or pets and allowing students to interact with them (Kirk-Jenkins & Evans, 2022; Pacansky-Brock & Infographic, 2020). This approach can help students communicate more effectively with instructors, as using only written methods in online classrooms may lead to students needing to teach themselves (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021). Therefore, incorporating interactive methods like videos can enhance online teaching experiences.

2.2.3 Instructors Training and Relationship with Students

According to Graham (2019), online instructors receive more technical training but lack sufficient pedagogical training, leading to a shift from face-to-face methods to online teaching (Graham, 2019). A study by Madhu and Bhattacharyya (2023) found that students' preferences for teaching styles vary, with 5% preferring lectures, 14% expressing interest in interaction and knowledge sharing, and 15% seeking responsiveness to questions and clarification (Madhu & Bhattacharyya, 2023). Lecture-based online classes are not popular among students, as they can take asynchronous classes without instructor attendance. Instructors must communicate with students and consider their needs to help them achieve their goals in online classrooms. Therefore, online teaching methods need to be adaptable to accommodate students' varied requirements (Ng & Przybyłek, 2021). Students prefer interacting with their instructors because they perceive their learning as valuable. This motivates them to excel in class (Gannon, 2020). Glazier (2021) used emails to communicate with her students, allowing them to express

their feelings about the course and positively impacting their achievement.

Further, providing feedback is crucial for maintaining and enhancing classroom interaction, especially in online learning. It helps students learn how to improve their learning and address their weaknesses (Wang et al., 2022). Studies have shown that providing feedback in online learning is more important than face-to-face learning, as students need to start interacting (Pham, 2022). Good feedback characteristics during online learning include bridging the disconnect, providing individual feedback, giving quick feedback, using a positive tone, and providing recommendations for future enhancement (Annansingh, 2019). Overall, giving feedback is essential for effective classroom interaction and student learning.

3. Research Method

The purpose of this study is to explore the contribution of the faculty members in improving learners' engagement in online EFL classes, as well as find out their opinions of the techniques used and the challenges encountered regarding the main issue of the present study. Therefore, this study employed a qualitative approach to achieve its purpose and answer the research questions. This was achieved by collecting in-depth data that could assist the researcher in exploring the targeted phenomena (Alam, 2021). This study applied qualitative methods, specifically interviews with EFL faculty members and document analysis of materials provided by each participant.

The researcher applied semi-structured in-depth interviews, which included 14 questions, to explore the perspectives of EFL instructors on enhancing student engagement in online classrooms. Alam (2021) deemed this method to be the most suitable for answering the research question and investigating the phenomena. The researcher designed the interview questions by considering that the questions should not lead the participant to the answers. Furthermore, all questions were open-ended and did not seek specific answers. Lastly, the interview questions were reviewed and approved by some EFL experts, and the researcher ensured their validity by collecting non-leaded details. Furthermore, the research required documents from each participant, including the lesson plan, tasks used, extra activities, and support materials used in their lectures.

3.1 Data Collection

The researcher initially contacted a few EFL faculty members from the English Language Institute at Umm Al-Qura University, requesting their participation in the current study. In the beginning, the researcher communicated the purpose of the study and asked for their consent to participate. Then, the researcher received a response of willingness to participate in the study from five EFL faculty members. Thus, the researcher gathered this data from five female EFL instructors at Umm Al-Qura University, whose experiences ranged from two to ten years. The researcher assured confidentiality and anonymity, and all participants agreed to participate. The researcher conducted the interviews in English for a duration of 35 to 45 minutes. The researcher began with general questions about online learning and classroom activities, followed by specific questions. After the researcher completed the interview with each participant, a copy of the lesson plan, used tasks, and activated and supported materials were required to enrich the interview data. The researcher recorded the interview after obtaining consent from the interviewees. A copy of the interview questions is available in Appendix A.

3.2 Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the documents provided, including the lesson plan, objectives, and activities, by writing detailed descriptions of their characteristics. The EFL instructor incorporated these data into each transcript, using them as plans, tasks, and support materials. The researcher qualitatively analyzed the documents to understand how the participating instructors managed their EFL lessons. The researcher added the analysis of the provided documents to each instructor's transcript to provide an overview of the applied lesson plan and activities used. The researcher was able to enhance the interview data by incorporating the document analysis into the interviewer transcripts under each appropriate theme.

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested using thematic analysis to analyze interview data. Therefore, the researcher employed specific and gradual stages in the analysis of the interview transcripts. The researcher initially reads and re-reads the collected data several times before coding the emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher then grouped and organized similar concepts into a single category. These categories aimed to answer the research questions. The researcher also presented the data analysis process to several experts in the EFL field to confirm the validity of the research processes and the deduced themes from the transcript. The researcher took into account some feedback and suggestions to enhance the objectivity of the data outcomes. This could help avoid bias in the analysis of qualitative data.

4. Results

4.1 Instructors' Perceptions of Their Role in Managing Online Classes

Two out of five EFL instructors interviewed stated that they primarily focus on flipping classes for classroom management. This approach encourages online discussion and allows learners to control the learning process. Instructors send videos to students to help prepare presentations and invite them to write blogs to discuss their work. This approach allows learners to learn independently while instructors can provide clarification in class. One of the instructors stated, "I divide students into groups and use a flipped classroom approach, sending videos before class, requiring presentations, and discussing them in class. I also regularly check discussions and blogs". So, I can just ask, 'Oh Jenna, what do you mean by this? I like it when you do this.' So they feel that the teacher and their writing recognize them "(ANN I.1).

Another instructor illustrated their approach as they said, "To manage classrooms, I send students a PDF or YouTube link in advance, allowing them to review before class. This creates a flipped classroom, where students have something to discuss before class, allowing them to prepare and engage in class discussions" (GEG. I.2). EFL instructors are urged to promote interaction and communication among their students. Some instructors believe they should respect learners' opinions, provide opportunities for expression, and choose interesting materials. They also emphasize that an instructor should classify students into groups and randomly regroup them to help them learn from each other's experiences. This engages students in the learning process and prevents reliance on friends. Instructors should also maintain a positive learning environment to foster a supportive learning environment.

Interviewee GEG. I.2 added that learners should receive indirect instructions to enhance their motivation to engage in online classes. The instructors should clarify the procedures to them, which would help them understand their role from the beginning of the class as she illustrated:

"How I activate them since the level of engagement was so sad, you know, but I guess this term is better because I'm trying to send them and like, you know, indirectly send a message to them that you should work harder, and because I might pick up students randomly, so don't rely on others. This is what I'm doing. I feel like, yeah, because when the class is inactive, it's so bad. It makes you feel bored and unable to give more because you get bored yourself, you know?" (GEG. I.2)

Further, FEM. I.5 believes online classes offer opportunities to introduce new lessons and information, but she finds them unsuitable for language practice. She prepares the necessary information for online classes and presents it to students. However, she believes face-to-face teaching is better for language practice, allowing learners to practice their knowledge in the present. As she stated:

"For the online class, I'm dedicating the online classes to expose the students to the new units. In the book, I just keep the actual or face-to-face classes for practical aspects of the course. However, for the teaching parts and the new information for each unit, I just keep it for the online classes." (FEM. I.5)

In addition, FEM.I.5 emphasizes that teaching language skills requires specific management and preparation methods. For example, improving listening skills requires suitable activities and materials, grammar requires activities and presentations to understand grammatical rules, and vocabulary lessons require more worksheets and usage in daily life. These preparations can be done in advance, allowing instructors to focus on the target lesson. Also, other instructors stated that they engage more with students by asking personal or social questions, which attracts their attention and helps them become closer to their instructors. For instance, one of the instructors stated:

"Promote their interaction simply by motivating them to work harder; maybe you can ask them to play a role or give a quick presentation where they can summarize what they did during the weekend. So, I feel like students interact well in these kinds of activities when it's personal, and you make it easy for them to simply minimize that task to just a minute or two, where you tell me about your weekend or a fun activity that you've done. So that improves their interaction." (AMA. I.3)

4.2 Strategies Used in EFL Online Classes

Four interviewees stated that they employ more communicative strategies in online classes. the most common strategy being cooperative learning. For instance, ANN I.1 stated:

"I depend on the communicative language approach and what comes under it, like the cooperative learning strategies, the act of learning, reflecting shared writing, and reflection discussion. So, it's...it's not only one strategy; it depends on the task itself. For example, if we have writing emails, it is different from having a lesson about a conversation at an office. So, it depends on the task, how we will apply it, and what is a more effective way to identify suitable strategies based on the lesson you teach." (ANN I.1)

Moreover, most interviewees found online class strategies effective in promoting active student engagement. However, some instructors suggested that these strategies could be more flexible to accommodate different learning groups. They constantly adapt their approach to find the best fit for all learners. Two instructors preferred the deductive-based strategy, believing they were more suitable for language learning. Such as GEG. I.2 illustrated:

The most common strategy I used may be the deductive strategy. You know, I showed them a YouTube [video]. I posted it in advance to help them prepare the content of the videos for next week, then I posted what they were going to see, you know, to watch, and then I played this video; after that, I asked them to rethink it in two weeks. And just trying to remember the last before. We had, like, answered a phone call. Yeah, answering the phone call. After I had finished the material in the course book, I played this video, and then I asked them to work in groups and make use of this video to make their phone calls, I think that I'm helping them with this, maybe this is the most you use strategy that effective and work. (GEG. I.2)

Further, other instructors state that in online classes, they focus on self-regulated learning strategies to help learners direct themselves and find answers. They ask learners to explain the process of completing exercises, which enhances their autonomy in learning. WEG.I.4 prefers cooperative learning strategies and a deductive teaching approach but believes that learners would be less active if they saw maps and diagrams of lesson content, especially in grammar lessons. WEG.I.4 said in this:

"I asked the students to create mind maps for the grammar points we learned in class and post them online on the blackboard. So, some of them used special software to draw effective mind maps. It helped them a lot when they studied for grammar before the final exam. I asked them to do a dictionary online, also posted on Blackboard. For example, I asked them to choose five words for each letter and write words in English that begin with that letter, write the meaning in good Arabic, and give me the meaning in English, in addition to writing a sentence in English using that word." (WEG. I.4)

While instructors like FEM. I.5 prefers the PPP approach, starting with audio or video materials and asking warm-up questions to elicit answers. They then introduce the lesson and allow learners to practice their language skills through exercises. Some instructors view this as exposure or teaching before assessment, while others consider it the same as online class assessment. Instructors cannot assess learners' understanding due to body language issues. Working with learners to practice language skills in online learning may help instructors complete course assessments.

4.3 Syllabus of the Course to Enhance Learners' Engagement

EFL instructors highlighted that they receive a unified syllabus for their online English course, covering all content. However, they have added a detailed syllabus to guide learners in the learning process, aiming to motivate them to self-learn through extra electronic sheets. ANN I.1 stated that the main goal of studying English in university is to practice the language, and a lesson plan is necessary for each class. Instructor GEG 1.2. prepares a detailed syllabus and tasks for online classes to enhance motivation. She believes that without clarifying course grades and reminding students about them, they may not interact effectively, as they only aim to interact with graded tasks. This approach helps students stay engaged and motivated during online classes.

The English course's unified grade distributions make learners aware of no participation grades, causing difficulties in enhancing motivation for interaction. Instructors should address this issue by encouraging active participation in online classes and reminding them of the importance of learning English. Additionally, GEG. 1.2 emphasizes the importance of instructors fostering interaction and mutual benefits for high-ability and low-ability learners in English classes. She advocates for active participation and interaction rather than relying solely on textbooks and syllabuses. The course syllabus should guide learners with materials and activities to practice and communicate in English rather than just covering the content. They highlighted:

"This is what I want to highlight to the rest of the class: learning English is about being an active agent. And I always said frankly to them that don't come to class with the perception that I'll be able to make them speak the language. I'm sorry, no, I can't. If you don't want to, I can't. I'm just delivering the information. I'm just trying to make sense of them". (GEG. 1.2)

Two instructors highlighted that learners may feel frustrated when they study English for years but feel inadequate at communicating. Therefore, helping learners learn by themselves is the best solution to help them become aware of how they can enhance their proficiency in the language. Solely relying on textbooks and specific course content would not help them reach their aims of learning English. Instructor AMA. I.3 believes the syllabus should be more flexible during the semester, and instructors should change it when required to cater to the student's needs and the course's aim.

"Yes, I typically provide them with my preferred pace. So even though I asked them to check the course description and the syllabi that are there, I also like to add to it; you can say that I personalize my pacing because, you know, sometimes certain things come up during the semester, or maybe I notice that my students' level is improving, so I can add more tasks to their syllabi. They sometimes add or reduce functions and tasks, such as reading, so the applied college syllabus only requires them to write once. So, it's only one writing assessment. Therefore, I believe we could enhance this process by incorporating additional writing assessments. Typically, I encourage them to write once a week. I incorporate this requirement into my pacing plan." (AMA. I.3)

Furthermore, a few teachers stated that providing more worksheets for learners would be a good opportunity for them to practice more. Therefore, the syllabus should not only cover the content, but also include assignments, activities, and worksheets specifically designed for the English course.

4.4 Feedback to Enhance Learners' Engagement

EFL instructors emphasize the importance of providing feedback to encourage active online learning. To avoid discouragement, they prefer indirect feedback and direct identification of mistakes. They also emphasize the role of detailed feedback in helping students become proficient in the language. Some instructors encourage students to review each other's work before providing feedback, which fosters evaluation and learning from each other. They also highlight and record mistakes on a board, promoting awareness of one's and others' mistakes, ultimately improving language skills. This approach helps students become more aware of their errors and improves their language proficiency.

"If there is a mistake, I prefer direct correction, as I don't want to disrupt their fluency for accuracy." Therefore, I allow them to speak for a moment before responding, "Yes, you are correct." I believe you intended to say something different. If there is a mistake, I paraphrase their words to highlight the subject-verb agreement, grammar errors, or common mistakes we should avoid. Sometimes, particularly when writing, I prefer to group all common mistakes together in a single file, without specifying who is responsible for them. Wrote it incorrectly. I would like to share it with the entire class and provide them with an opportunity to work on fixing the errors." (ANN I.1)

They further stated:

"I give very rich feedback because, without my feedback, they're not learning anything. Yes, they're practicing. Yes, they are getting used to the language, but they're not improving. So, I feel like the feedback part is important. I specified about half an hour of my lecture because we have three hours, sufficient for us to give them feedback. So, I specify about 30 minutes weekly, 30 minutes only for writing feedback, or if it's a presentation that they have to submit, I also give them feedback on that as well. It's very important; it's a rewarding part for the student because she worked hard on her presentation or a writing piece that she submitted. So, the feedback is her reward, right? The teacher will give her what she thinks about it, the good and weak areas of her work. So, I think it's the last thing that we could do. And it's a...it's a very important thing, for sure." (AMA. I.3)

Two of the instructors believed that feedback should be private for each learner. Thus, they contact students individually, telling them about their mistakes and what they must work on to develop their language level.

"I've observed that when I provide feedback, they comprehend their mistakes and learn how to rectify them. But I don't give feedback. They won't even understand what they did wrong. So that's why I make sure I give them feedback on whatever assignment they give to me. I once asked them to read short passages and post them online. So, I listened to each student. And I recorded or wrote down every single word that the student mispronounced. I recorded the mispronounced words in a small box where I could send a private message or feedback to the student. I also instructed her to practice these specific words. Ensure that she pronounces these words correctly, and then send me her recording once she has read the passage again." (WEG.I.4)

4.5 Recording Videos to Promote Learners' Engagement

All the EFL instructors said that they do not record videos to enhance interaction and student relationships due to the new nature of online teaching. However, some record lectures for students who need to replay parts of the lessons. Instructor ANN.I.1 recorded all online classes for students who couldn't attend or train outside the classroom, allowing them to watch the videos at their convenience. Instructor AMA.I.3 recorded all lectures and repeated instructions orally to gain students' attention. These methods help instructors adapt to the new online teaching environment.

"I provide the instructions for the assignment verbally. I give all the instructions at least a week before their

presentation. I record myself in that lecture. All my lectures are recorded. I simply inform them that I am recording the lecture. And I start the recording. And at the end of the session, because I use WebEx, I send them the link to the recording." (AMA. I.3)

Instructor GEG.I.2 does not record her lectures but uses the Announcement feature in Blackboard to highlight important information. Instructor WEG.I.4 sends YouTube videos to students for class preparation without recording her lectures. Instructor FEM.I.5 agrees, as she also sends various videos from electronic resources without recording her lectures.

4.6 Enhancing Student Relationships to Improve Their Engagement

Most of the EFL instructors aim to improve student relationships through collaborative tasks. They use Blackboard discussions and encourage students to comment on each other's writing to foster communication. They also form digital groups on Telegram and WhatsApp to ensure different English-speaking abilities among students. These methods help students communicate effectively and complete tasks together, fostering better relationships and enhancing their learning experience.

AMA.I.3 highlighted the importance of fostering strong relationships among students to foster empathy and kindness. She recounted a class incident in which a student missed class without communicating due to her hospitalization. Therefore, it is crucial to encourage students to form strong connections and foster empathy within their classrooms. In addition, WEG.I.4 focuses on teaching learners cooperative work in groups, similar to face-to-face teaching. Still, she uses Blackboard chat to facilitate communication, especially for those who struggle with microphone use during home classes.

In contrast, FEM.I.5 explains that fostering student engagement in online teaching is challenging due to the interaction students typically have with the instructor. She encourages communication during online classes but does not encourage interaction due to technical issues like poor internet connectivity or program disruptions. She also notes that some students may face internet disconnection, causing the rest of the group to wait for them to rejoin the class. She illustrated it as follows:

"The problem lies in the technical issues, as they present the most significant challenge we encounter." For example, it takes students time to be in class without internet interruptions. This is in itself an achievement. When I, for example, use the breakout rooms or the groups, I assign them to do the tasks in groups. Some students simply lose their connection, making it difficult to return to their online classes. As I visited each group to assess their collaborative efforts, I discovered that some students had lost their connection and were unable to reconnect. This is what, for me, is a big difficulty when it comes to working together on an online class, which is the technical difficulties." (FEM.I.5)"

4.7 The Challenges of Promoting Interaction and Communication

The EFL instructors face challenges in online learning, including class timing, technical issues, and student motivation. Two instructors struggle with managing classrooms due to their lack of proficiency in Blackboard and the need for more training. They struggle to motivate students and choose suitable activities. Instructors must be mindful of when learners speak and switch between native and target languages, as they struggle to complete and use the target language effectively.

Further, WEG.I.4 emphasizes the importance of technology proficiency in teaching to enhance confidence and facilitate communication among learners. Without this experience, instructors may struggle to use appropriate materials for online classes. FEM. I.5 emphasizes the need for clear access to resources and assistance in navigating Blackboard to ensure students receive the necessary information in advance. Three teachers stated that their main challenge was interruptions from the surrounding environment while learners took online classes.

"My initial thought is that many students have flexible schedules. Consequently, they are compelled to listen to the lecture while driving, allowing me to hear their family and surroundings, which is inappropriate for an online class. Perhaps it's due to the time difference, as they typically complete their classes in the afternoon and return from the university campus afterward. Therefore, when they attend online classes, it appears that they have not set up a suitable environment for listening and interacting during the class." (ANN I.1)

Furthermore, ANN I.1 posits that students may underestimate the significance of online classes because they lack prior experience with online learning. They may need help with multiple courses and perceive English language classes as mere skill courses. Additionally, evening EFL online classes may cause exhaustion after long university days. Internet connection issues and inadequate infrastructure may also hinder online learning. Some students may not attend online classes due to cost or lack of internet access. Instructor GEG.I.2 emphasized the importance of high motivation in English learners to improve communication in online classes, emphasizing the need for

instructors to enhance motivation to encourage active class interaction.

"I believe that students who want to learn English are motivated to improve their language skills, while those who feel unmotivated may not need help. The new generation in Saudi Arabia is improving their English language skills, and many students aim to improve their level. Some students may find the course book straightforward and unchallenging, but they believe the current environment is better for them. Additionally, many students may find it unfair to choose between challenging courses and focusing on improving their English language skills." (GEG. I.2)

Therefore, GEG.I.2 explained that she teaches her students that learning the English language is the same as learning their first language, and they should try to use the language, make mistakes, and practice what they have learned.

"I always explain to them that learning a first language is similar to learning a second language, with a silent period and a sponge-like mind. Language exposure is essential for speaking, but reading and listening are too. Students need a lexical repertoire of vocabulary to understand meanings, and a strong vocabulary helps them communicate effectively. Misperceptions about language learning often arise, emphasizing the importance of exposure to the target language." (GEG.I.2).

Further, instructors AMA.I.3 and WEG.I.4 struggled to keep students motivated during online classes despite choosing suitable tasks. Instructors attributed the difficulty to the evening class time and the novelty of online teaching. The most common challenges were technical issues, such as students not having a proper place to sit and take the class, which led to less interaction during class.

"The main challenge for students in online classes is technical issues, such as lack of proper seating and noisy environments. This discourages participation and results in insufficient engagement. Students struggle with speaking English and have poor internet connections, leading to frequent logins and off-logging on Blackboard. This lack of engagement affects their participation in the class and negatively impacts the overall learning experience." (WEG.I.4)

Furthermore, students' lack of motivation and responsibility in self-learning can pose a significant challenge in online learning, as they require autonomy to participate in class actively. Online courses often lack face-to-face interaction between students and instructors; with WEG, I highlighted that some students join to appear present but do not attend or respond to class calls. This suggests a lack of responsibility, a focus on grades, and avoiding exam rejection, rather than an understanding of the importance of online learning. Also, Instructor FEM.I.5 identified technical issues as the primary challenges in online teaching and suggested utilizing available resources to promote effective student interaction.

"Many students are taking online classes through their phones, which means they lack access to decent laptops or computers. They also don't believe that taking classes on mobile phones is beneficial. In my opinion, students should have access to a good stick, a good-sized screen, and a pair of headphones that provide good sound." Not all students have access to these resources; some currently state that they lack the financial means to purchase laptops or computers." (FEM.I.5)

Teachers and students also encounter the challenge of internet disconnection during online classes. Many students reside in rural areas, where internet connectivity could be better. Moreover, the instructors also need a better internet connection during inclement weather conditions.

5. Discussion

The study explored the perception of EFL instructors on using techniques to manage online classrooms to improve learners' interaction and communication. The study findings suggest that teachers' primary role is strengthening relationships with students, enabling them to cope with learning barriers and engage more in the process. This aligns with previous studies, which suggest that creating friendly online classroom environments helps language learners cope with stress and anxiety, thereby increasing their engagement in the learning process (Han, Li, & Haider, 2022; Wang & Zhang, 2021). Instructors' attitudes towards online teaching are crucial in influencing learners' satisfaction. High motivation can lead to better communication and support for learners (Esra & Sevilen, 2021). However, low motivation can hinder communication in online EFL learning. Okyar (2022) emphasizes motivating instructors and providing diverse resources to help learners (Okyar, 2023b). This allows instructors to control and manage the learning process.

Moreover, some instructors utilize a communicative and flipped-classroom approach to foster an active learning environment. Huang (2021) stated that video conferences are effective for English language development, allowing learners to watch videos and learn materials in advance. This approach ensures that students have adequate

knowledge of online classes and can discuss their understanding with peers and instructors (Huang, 2021). Further, the present study findings indicate that instructors prioritize students' interests by offering choices that cater to them and encourage interaction during learning. The strategies utilized for online engagement include cooperative learning and a communicative approach, which can support learners' engagement and facilitate deeper learning experiences.

On the other hand, studies revealed that Chinese learners find learning English online more challenging than face-to-face classes due to communication and interaction issues between students and teachers (Cheng, Zhou, & Chen, 2023; Zhang & Wu, 2010). Thus, first-year students experienced anxiety while learning English. Further, the findings also showed that EFL instructors agree on enhancing student relationships and helping them communicate effectively in online environments. Instructors often believe in creating an interactive environment in online teaching, but some find it challenging. This is consistent with a study by Okyar (2022) that found online learning can lead to a lack of interaction between instructors and students, resulting in loneliness and hindering social interaction. This is consistent with previous studies that have found difficulties in interaction and communication for EFL learners in online learning. Therefore, instructors must prioritize interactive learning environments (Agung, Surtikanti, & Quinones, 2020; Maican & Cocoradă, 2021).

Further, the present study observed that EFL instructors often use an inductive approach, allowing learners to understand the lesson indirectly. This strategy helps assess students' understanding and helps them employ higher thinking skills to achieve specific tasks (Obeidat & Alomari, 2020). Further, instructors highlighted that self-regulated strategies often enhance students' autonomy and engagement in online classes. These strategies help students develop metacognitive skills essential for effective language practice and usage. Previous studies support this approach, as instructors can positively impact students' learning and rely on students to develop their strategies (Zeng & Goh, 2018; Hunutlu, 2023).

In addition, mind mapping can effectively engage students and enhance their comprehension of lesson content, as demonstrated by different studies (Sabarun et al., 2021; Raya et al., 2021; Vejayan & Yunus, 2021). Digital mind mapping can also reflect enthusiasm for language practice and idea generation, enhancing learners' motivation to comprehend the lesson. Further, this study's findings indicated that some instructors observed PPP as a teaching method that involves presenting the lesson content, helping learners practice, and presenting what they understand. This approach allows instructors to know what they have covered, aligning with a study by Wiyanah et al. (2021). EFL learners prefer instructors to create opportunities for practice and communication, while students prefer being guided and controlled by the tasks and activities provided by the teacher (Wiyanah et al., 2021).

Furthermore, some instructors suggest that providing learners with a detailed syllabus can help them improve self-regulation strategies. They also recommend that the syllabus be flexible and adaptable to the learning process, allowing instructors to adjust plans and techniques based on the learners' needs. Smyshlyak (2022) suggests that the syllabus should focus on the learners' language practice needs and be highly flexible (Smyshlyak, 2022). Research suggests practicing different syllabi with specific goals to achieve the language learning goal, as the diversity of these types helps determine the language needs of students (Lodhi et al., 2019).

Additionally, some instructors contended that their feedback is crucial in online learning as it motivates learners to work harder and engage more in the learning process. It helps learners give meaning to their knowledge and correct their mistakes, aligning with previous studies that found that feedback helps learners pay attention to their mistakes and become more aware and responsible about their learning. Further, some EFL instructors often provide feedback to students during online classes, either quickly or privately, through the Blackboard assignment platform. This is consistent with previous studies stating that giving feedback is the responsibility of EFL instructors to help learners improve their language skills (Ganapathy, Tan, & Phan, 2020; Basabrin, 2019). The present study findings also highlighted that some instructors prefer direct feedback, while others provide indirect feedback to prevent students from being discouraged. Negative feedback can lead to negative feelings and frustration for EFL learners (Vattøy & Gamlem, 2020). Overall, the choice of feedback method depends on the individual needs and preferences of the students. Finally, most of the difficulties of online EFL teaching are related to technical issues that are not in the instructors' control. Most instructors stated that internet disconnection is one of the main issues in online classes. This can cause disruptions for many students, especially regarding communicative learning strategies.

6. Limitations and Future Implications

Online EFL learning requires instructors to understand students' expectations and interests to find suitable resources for engagement. They should encourage learners to express their thoughts and utilize online classrooms to enhance communication skills. However, technical issues can hinder effective communication in online classes.

Some limitations of the study include a small sample size, manual analysis of the provided documents and the interview transcripts, and restricted to EFL female instructors at Umm Al-Qura University. As a result, this study recommends the implementation of additional quantitative research that examines the perspectives of a large number of EFL faculty members. Future research should investigate the general perception of EFL faculty members and their roles in facilitating learners' engagement in online classes, as well as identifying appropriate resources and activities for teachers to improve interaction in online EFL classes. Additional research is required to investigate the efficacy of the applied role by examining the relationships between the various roles of teachers and the academic performance of learners in EFL online classes.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study investigated the attitudes of EFL instructors regarding their role in helping learners engage in online classes. Participants agreed that online courses offer more flexibility for instructors and learners, but they must know how to manage and control their classes. Motivated instructors enhance engagement, fostering students' motivation, confidence, and participation in speaking while also supplying excellent tools that facilitate interaction in online classes. The study concludes that EFL teachers perceive their role as necessary to help learners engage in online learning. The findings suggest that it is important to consider how EFL instructors perceive their role in developing and enhancing learners' engagement in online classes. EFL faculty members could benefit from the result, as it provides detailed descriptions of methods proven to increase students' interest in their online EFL lessons at the university level. The findings may also lead to more studies discussing interactive activities to enhance EFL learners' engagement in an online environment.

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Authors' contributions

Dr. Nurah Alfares was responsible for study design, revising, data collection, drafting, and approving the final manuscript.

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No additional data are available.

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Appendix A

Interview's Questions

- 1) How long have you been teaching EFL at UQU? (Qualification, experiences)
- 2) How many online EFL classes do you teach each week?
- 3) How do you plan classroom management for online classes? Prompts: How is it different from face-to-face teaching, and how could you evaluate its efficacy ?
- 4) Do you have any training for teaching online classes?
- 5) In your opinion, what is the role of the instructor in promoting learners' interaction and communication in online classes?
- 6) What kind of strategies do you usually use when you teach online classes?
- 7) Do you believe the strategies you used work effectively with students?
- 8) Do you believe that the strategies you used help students interact actively with you or with other students?
- 9) Do you provide students with a course syllabus that contains sufficient information to guide learners toward achieving the course's objectives?
- 10) Do you usually give appropriate feedback to students for their work in online classes? (Submitted assignments, presentations, discussion)
- 11) Do you record a video of yourself for learners to remind them of the requirement to prepare the lesson or do the assignment?
- 12) Do you try to encourage students to enhance their relationship with each other? How do you do that?
- 13) What are the challenges for you to promote interaction and communication for learners in online classes? why?
- 14) Would you like to add anything?

Materials required

A copy of the relevant assignments and syllabus is needed to enable the researcher to explore in more rich information the issues investigated in this research. So, please provide a copy of any activities or materials that you have applied recently in this term.

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