Teaching in Tough Times: Examining EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Online Learning Challenges in the Context of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The global spread of online learning is noticeable and has further expanded due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this mode of learning is effective, several concerns have been raised by teachers. This qualitative study aimed to explore English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perceptions of the online learning environment in order to uncover the challenges they face while teaching online. To achieve this objective, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 EFL teachers from the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia to examine their perceptions of online teaching. The transcribed interviews were coded using NVivo®, after which a thematic analysis was employed to reveal the emerging themes. The results showed challenges related to four main themes: students; institution; teachers; and the system, as well as a number of sub-themes. This study found that the most significant challenge that EFL teachers faced in an online learning environment was related to students, specifically their participation, motivation, tendency to cheat during online exams, and not taking responsibility for their learning. Another major challenge was the result of copying face-to-face learning to the online learning environment without making suitable adjustments. This research also shed light on some of the negative consequences of online learning for EFL teachers; its findings could help institutions and policymakers to modify content and support teachers by training them to develop their online teaching skills.

Keywords: online learning, teachers' perceptions, challenges, English language teaching, PYP, cheating, motivation, higher education, blended learning, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world in general and learning and teaching in particular. Many universities and schools have shifted to online learning; and although there are many advantages related to the low cost, safety, and flexibility of this mode of learning (Almahasees et al., 2021), some obstacles have arisen in the context of higher education. The effects of online learning on English for Foreign Language (EFL) students have been studied and explored to a large extent (Al Bataineh et al., 2019; Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020). However, there is a dearth of studies on the impact of online teaching on EFL teachers across higher education. When education was suspended due to the pandemic, online classes at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) were mediated by the learning management system (LMS) Blackboard to manage lectures, mentor classes, and assess students. It is, therefore, crucial to explore and investigate the different aspects of online learning and teaching, which will aid in improving the teaching process and solving problems related to the system, platform, process, and logistical management. However, there has been a lack of research into EFL teachers' perceptions in the Saudi context, particularly at the English Language Institute (ELI), of the challenges with online learning. The present study seeks to fill this gap and gain a deeper insight into EFL teachers' perceptions of the challenges that occur in the online learning environment (OLE) in Saudi Arabia in the context of higher education, specifically the ELI at King Abdulaziz University. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify opinions held by the EFL teachers regarding the difficulties that they face in the online learning environment.

Online learning is a mode of learning in which technology is used synchronously and asynchronously in instructions, planning, assessments, and course content (Lowenthal, Wilson, & Parrish, 2009). This mode of

learning fills the vacuum created by the pandemic as most schools have been forced to close down. However, online learning has resulted in issues affecting institutions, teachers, students, and parents. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the challenges that teachers face in online learning in order to improve this mode of learning and solve its problems, particularly in the EFL classroom.

Although online learning saves time usually spent commuting to schools and institutions (Hussein et al., 2020), teachers' workload and responsibilities have increased as online classes require more preparation and planning (Koʃar, 2016). Furthermore, there is more time spent in discussion with students outside of the classroom as they expect teachers to be available all day (Margolis et al., 2017). Therefore, some learners behave irresponsibly and believe that the process of online learning, including teaching, managing, mentoring, and motivating them is their teachers' responsibility (Koʃar, 2016). As a result, the lack of interaction and students' participation are some of the main concerns of teachers in online lectures (Damary et al., 2017). Although KAU provided students at the start of the shutdown with the initiative to get computers in case they did not have the ability to buy a personal one (KAU_Web, 2020), some did not take advantage of this scheme and used lack or inadequacy of their equipment as an excuse to miss or not participate fully in online classes (Alsobhi et al., 2021). Moreover, one of the barriers to communication between students and teachers is not taking advantage of the use of the webcam, which causes less interaction as visual interactivity is missing (Al-Nuaim, 2012) and is also discomforting as the learners are not visible to the teacher and vice versa. This issue is owing to cultural restrictions in Saudi Arabia in using video features, particularly for women (Daraghmeh, Mead, & Copeland, 2021). It is possible that permission to open the webcam could be one of the solutions to the lack of physical interaction, which may promote immediate responses from students, which teachers currently find lacking (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2021). This aspect is considered significant for the learning and teaching environment since body language plays a significant role in guiding teachers to use the effective and appropriate classrooms strategies and techniques (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2017).

In terms of the system of the online learning environment, Blackboard is widely used in higher education in Saudi Arabia and is the most common web-based course management system in the region (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). Although there are advantages to using Blackboard in terms of its interactive features, teachers are faced with challenges, including storing recorded lectures, uploading assessments, and creating appropriate tests (Alghamdi & Bayaga, 2016; Al Meajel & Sharadgah, 2018; Tawalbeh, 2018). Furthermore, teachers have reported a number of concerns related to internet issues (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Aliyyah et al., 2020), which render these features useless.

There have also been instances of personal concerns related to teachers' health, particularly with reference to eye and back pain due to the long hours spent sitting in front of a computer screen; these issues have steadily increased as the pressure of teaching duties has become greater during the pandemic (Mohalik & Sahoo, 2020). Another reason may be due to the transferring of traditional content, curriculum, and assessments without making adjustments to the online learning mode despite the changed circumstances (Daraghmeh, Mead, & Copeland, 2021). The exhaustion, fatigue, confusion, and anxiety resulting from spending extended periods of time in a virtual environment has prompted researchers to call the phenomenon 'Zoom Fatigue' (Wiederhold, 2020; Bailenson, 2021). Due to the negative effects of online learning, it is crucial to find practical solutions such as decreasing the workload for teachers as ignoring the problem will adversely affect their efficiency in the online learning environment, also affecting students benefitting from this mode of instruction. Besides issues related to the system, students, and other challenges, previous studies have found that the large class size in online classrooms is not conducive to engaging students in live discussions and group work. As a result, teachers may feel inadequate and not in control of the class (Cheok et al., 2017; Mishra et al., 2020).

1.1 Review of Local Studies

In Saudi Arabia, Mahib ur Rahman (2020) conducted a survey on 50 teachers (male and female) in three different universities in Saudi Arabia (Qassim University, King Khalid University, and Najran University), finding that most of the participants preferred traditional learning and reported that they were concerned about the large classes in online lectures. Another study performed by Rahmatullah (2021) at King Khalid University in Abha examined perceptions of 125 female undergraduate students and 25 female teachers on the effectiveness of the use of Blackboard in online learning, concluding that teachers face challenges related to students' participation and motivation, in addition to the difficulty of providing feedback for each student in the online classroom. A recent study conducted by Meccawy et al. (2021) to investigate the perceptions of 547 students and 213 faculty towards online assessments during the pandemic reports that teachers were concerned with the widespread cheating among students, which led to an increase of their workload in the online learning environment. The findings of these studies indicate that little attention is being paid to the challenges that EFL

teachers encounter in the online learning environment at the ELI in KAU. Therefore, this study attempts to address the gap and contribute to the field of online learning by gaining a deeper understanding of the obstacles and seeking suitable solutions to these issues.

2. Methodology and Research Design

This cross-sectional study aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the challenges they face in the online learning environment. Considering this aim, this research is guided by the following main question:

What are the challenges that EFL teachers face in the online learning environment?

To answer this question, the study adopted a qualitative design in the form of semi-structured interviews, which facilitated gaining a more comprehensive understanding of and deeper insights into the phenomena being studied (Cohen et al., 2017).

2.1 Context

This study was conducted at the English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia offering English language courses in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP). This program is a one-year course and consists of four language levels. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Blackboard has become the learning platform for students and their main link to teachers, lectures, homework, and assessments.

2.2 Population

The study population consisted of EFL teachers teaching students enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at the English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, consisting of 470 male and female teachers based on 2021 ELI statistics (S, Khalil, personal communication, September 02, 2021). This population was selected due to the appropriateness of teachers' characteristics to the research aim as they have taught virtually for at least one semester in higher education and was convenient in terms of access to conduct the study and contact participants. Finally, the lack of research at the ELI in higher education concerning teachers' perceptions of the challenges in the online learning environment was one of the motives for the selection of the current context.

2.3 Sampling Procedures

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to select EFL teachers teaching online in higher education, selecting participants who met certain criteria based on the aims of the study (Crano, Brewer, & Lac, 2014). The sample consisted of female (n=12) and male (n=13) EFL teachers to avoid gender bias and was conducted at the end of the second academic semester of 2020−2021. From 44 EFL teachers (male and female) who agreed to be interviewed, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted; all interviewees taught on either the Arts or Science tracks online at the ELI.

2.4 Data Collection and Procedure

This study used a qualitative research design and semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand (Creswell, 2012), namely examining the challenges in the online learning environment in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The researchers designed a number of questions based on the literature review and the research question. Due to the flexibility of this approach, the researchers were able to change question order and generate further questions during interviews if the need arose (Drever, 1995). An expert in qualitative studies validated the interviews by revising the questions based on their appropriateness and relatedness to the aim of the study and then submitted a report with comments to the researchers. This step was crucial as the validity of the interviews was dependent on the questions formulated to seek the answers to be investigated and measured (Zohrabi, 2013). Some modifications to the structure of the questions were made based on the report. Due to the importance of piloting the interviews, a process which picked up issues and modified them prior to the actual research (Dikko, 2016), two interviews were piloted with EFL teachers similar to the sample. Furthermore, one trial interview was conducted with a teacher who was not from the sample to get external insight into the instrument, after which the final version of the 'Interview Guide' consisted of six questions (Appendix A). The interviews (n=25) were conducted online via the Zoom platform, lasting for 30−40 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Participants were supplied with the study description and information on how the data would be stored. The collection process was terminated based on saturation as no new data and information was gained (Morse, 1995). The interviews were transcribed after being recorded; these transcriptions were then returned to participants to ensure interview validity and increase research ethics (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). NVivo® was then used to organize and code the data, which was followed by thematic analysis to produce themes and sub-themes emerging from the data (Guest,

MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). An expert in qualitative studies revised the final version of these themes to validate results.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

A consent form was obtained from the ELI administration, and participants' anonymity was ensured by the researchers not requesting names or emails. Participants were also informed that transcripts would remain confidential, data would be used for research purposes only, and pseudonyms would be used instead of real names.

2.6 Study Limitations

Although a number of significant findings were obtained from this research, the research has a number of limitations. Firstly, the research used only a qualitative design to explore the challenges that EFL teachers face in the online learning environment. Secondly, the participants were restricted to the faculty at the ELI in the KAU without integrating students' perceptions, which might have afforded a more comprehensive understanding of the online learning environment and its challenges for both students and teachers.

3. Results

This study focused on investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of the challenges that they face in the online learning environment by implementing a qualitative research design in terms of semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis of the data revealed four main themes related to the institution, system, teachers, and students, which were then categorized as several sub-themes. Figure 1 presents the four themes and sub-themes.
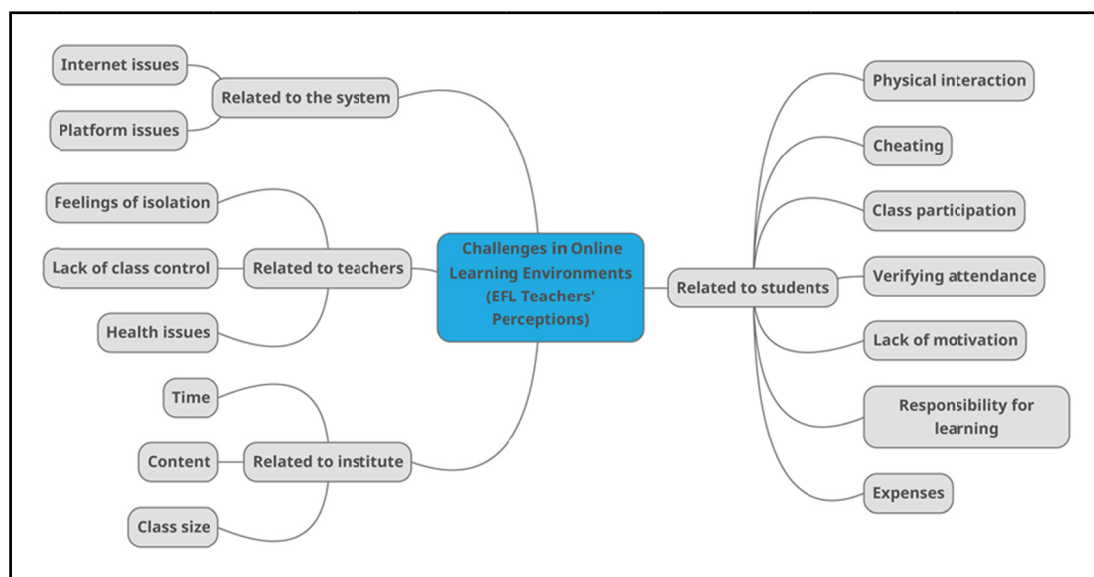

Figure 1. EFL teachers' perceptions of challenges in online learning environments

Theme 1. Challenges Related to Students

3.1 Lack of Physical Interactions with Students

Teachers expressed frustration with missing students' immediate reactions and body language, and one teacher said the following:

> I've been in the field of teaching for about 21 years. So, I just look at the facial expressions of the students then I know if they're there, and they understand what I'm saying. [If] they're following, they're comfortable or not. However, with online [learning], I don't know (T16).

3.2 Lack of Student Motivation

Lack of student motivation was a significant challenge for the teachers in the online classes as, although most students log in to Blackboard, they do not pay attention to the content, as explained in the following quote:

> Motivation usually stems from the students' interaction with you as a teacher; and it doesn't look real online. We can say that we are not familiar with the students' reaction or if they are there. It is just so

strange, honestly, to the extent that you are talking as if you're speaking to yourself (T6).

3.3 Cheating

Teachers reported cheating and plagiarism as a major problem and felt that many students did not have enough knowledge about its consequences. The following two examples of teachers' responses on this challenge:

I think online learning… it's all about cheating. They have the chance to do whatever they want (T18).

That is the big issue, it is very challenging. The students still don't understand that there is something called plagiarism (T13).

3.4 Lack of Students' Classroom Participation

Teachers highlighted the low level of students' participation as another challenge in the online learning environment, especially in speaking and writing classes as students blamed the poor internet connection:

So, it's hard to mentor the students and to get them to speak and reply to your answers (T19).

3.5 Verifying Student Attendance

Many teachers assumed that some students must have been sleeping or drinking coffee during the live lectures without paying any attention to the lessons due to their lack of participation:

Having students who are logging in and they are not physically there, they're just typing their names up there to make sure that they are not [marked] absent (T14).

3.6 Lack of Student Learning Responsibility

Teachers stated that online learning required responsibility, self-regulation, and independence, though they felt that many students were not responsible enough in the learning process, which was a challenge for the teachers, as stated in the following response:

They are not interested in actually learning the [English] language, just passing the exam [and] getting good grades (T18).

3.7 Students' Online Learning Expenses

A small number of teachers thought that students should buy updated technological equipment from their monthly allowance or avail of the initiative provided by the university (KAU_Web, 2020) rather than constantly complain about internet issues, or lack of devices, as highlighted in the following response:

You cannot, now at this stage, still tell me your microphone is not working; go and buy a new one (T21).

Theme 2. Challenges Related to the System

3.8 Internet Issues

Most participants faced technical issues during online teaching, which affected their classroom control and authority negatively. The following response highlighted this issue:

Sometimes, there is something [that] happens to the connection. For example, the connection is down and [you are] trying to solve the issue. Als, even if you do your part and things are OK from your side, students also sometimes have these issues. You need to have a very good connection. Internet connection may be the issue (T25).

3.9 Blackboard Technical Difficulties

Although the majority of teachers were satisfied with Blackboard, a small number expressed their frustration at some of its features, especially, the breakout rooms. One teacher stated the following:

I think [that] the technology is not [ready]. I don't think that we have a platform that is ready yet for a perfect online education (T6).

Using webcams during the online classes was a common suggestion provided by participants as they believed that could solve many problems related to the online learning environment and system, as one teacher explains:

I don't know if we can move to video classrooms. I mean, at least you will see [your] students and once you have this visual contact with them, at least you will see if there is an issue or if they're really there (T25).

Theme 3. Challenges Related to Teachers

3.10 Feelings of Isolation

Despite teachers enjoying the overall online experience, some felt isolated and missed the social aspects of face-to-face teaching, as the following quote demonstrates:

> In the online environment, we are completely isolated (T11).

3.11 Lack of Control in Online Classes

Few teachers considered the lack of control and authority in the online classes as a challenge in managing and monitoring the class live, as supported by the following comment:

> You cannot control the class actually; you cannot control the [students], you cannot monitor their activities, [and] how they are doing these activities (T19).

3.12 Health Issues

Only one participant mentioned the health issues that may result from the online learning environment:

> It was really a lot of energy [to be] sitting, and it does affect your health physically, sitting for six hours and seven hours on the chair. It does give [you] a lot of back pain, and we've got eye issues (T8).

Theme 4. Challenges Related to the Institute

3.13 Time Management

Time management in online learning was mentioned as a serious challenge for the majority of the interviewees as they needed more time for planning, preparation, and designing suitable activities and strategies for online class than the traditional one. One teacher stated the following:

> Online teaching takes more time (T21).

3.14 Content Overload

Some teachers mentioned that the pacing guide was strict and that there was too much to be taught in a short amount of time, which was overwhelming and did not factor in any technical issues or otherwise, as highlighted in the following response:

> They give us too much work to do (T17).

3.15 Large Number of Students

A small number of teachers supported the idea of having fewer students in online language classes as it would make it easy for them to track students' learning progress and give students opportunities to practice the language, as discussed in the following response:

> If you have a large class, like that … it's difficult to control the class. It's difficult to know that everyone is paying attention. I cannot include all the students in a discussion when you are having around 60 students (T16).

Finally, this study aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the challenges that they face in the online learning environment in higher education. The results yield two major findings indicating that the most significant challenges that EFL teachers face in online learning are related to students namely their participation, motivation, attendance, and their lack of responsibility for their learning. Moreover, the results indicate that blended learning should be used as it combines the positive aspects of online and traditional learning practices. However, copying face-to-face learning to online learning causes issues related to the content, time, and assessment.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the major challenges that EFL teachers are confronted with in the Saudi online learning environment in higher education are related to students. In this study, teachers were worried about the absence of the human factor in the online learning environment as teachers and students attended classes from their homes without live interactions or body language expressions, which is in line with the findings of Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2021), who found that EFL teachers considered being away from their students a significant issue with teaching online. Although the participants in Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2021) were EFL secondary school teachers, the current research builds on literature as EFL teachers in the online learning environment in higher education miss being able to communicate physically with preparatory year students. This absence of classroom interactions affects online participation, which leads to a decline in students'

motivation. However, there is a lack of consensus among researchers on the exact cause of students' demotivation in the online learning environment as there are many factors, some related to their context. However, it has been suggested that students' intrinsic motivation is awakened in the online learning environment due to their enjoyment of this new learning experience (Gustiani, 2020). This finding contradicts those of the current study as EFL teachers reported a lack of students' motivation in online learning despite the implementation of different methods and strategies. This result may be explained by the fact that English classes in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) are intensive, and lectures are very long (up to four hours a day), affecting students' energy levels and attention spans and resulting in distraction.

Cheating was another significant concern for EFL teachers related to students in the online environment. Existing literature has suggested several methods that students use to cheat, as asking for help from their classmates or using Google to copy and paste answers (Saleh & Meccawy, 2021). The results of the current study appear to be consistent with those of Meccawy et al. (2021), who found that the faculty at KAU considered cheating in online assessments a significant obstacle to online learning and teaching because cheating results in unauthentic grades that do not reflect students' actual levels. Although their study reflects the perceptions of KAU faculty members of online assessments, the current research investigates specifically EFL teachers' perceptions in the PYP program. For example, teachers in the current study believed that cheating was unavoidable not only because cheating online was easier, but because students do not care about language learning. Therefore, teachers demanded more responsibility towards learning from students, which may solve a number of problems in the online learning environment, such as students' participation and motivation. However, this finding contradicts that of Cao et al. (2021), who suggest that students in the online learning environment have a high level of learning responsibility, which makes them satisfied as they had high levels of self-efficacy and awareness during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This contradictory finding may be explained by the difference in participant ages between the two studies. For instance, the PYP students in the current study were students fresh out of high school, whereas the students in Cao et al. (2021) were older and more advanced undergraduate students who felt more responsible for their learning.

This study also found that copying traditional learning aspects onto online learning without modification caused problems in assessment, quality of content, and duration. Consequently, the participants blamed the difficult transition from traditional to online learning on content overload in the online learning environment as the whole system was shifted without adjustments. This finding supports evidence from Juárez-Díaz and Perales (2021), who state that teachers need extra time in the online learning environment to plan lessons, design motivational activities, and correct students' assignments. In the current study, EFL teachers pointed out that the curriculum at the ELI was more suitable for traditional learning and needed more work hours to fulfil the syllabus requirements. As a result, language teachers must be available outside class time for longer hours to answer students' questions and requests. This finding is in line with those of Putri et al. (2020), who report that Indonesian primary school teachers working from home (WFH) in the online learning environment complained about the extensive time required to do the work and contact students' parents. However, the teachers in the current study were faculty members in higher education and wanted to see student numbers in online classes be reduced or the sessions be split into sub-sessions as large classes were difficult to manage during online learning. This result is in line with those of Whisenhunt et al. (2019), who report increased motivation and the ease of providing corrective feedback in smaller classes.

As well as the challenges related to students and the institute, EFL teachers reported barriers associated with the system and themselves. For example, some participants felt lonely and socially isolated in the online learning environment, which aligns with the findings of Mohalik and Sahoo (2020), who mention isolation as one of the teachers' concerns in online learning and recorded mental and physical health troubles, such as eye pain and anxiety. This finding was corroborated by one teacher in the present study, who suffered back pain as a consequence of the long hours working behind the computer screen. In terms of challenges related to the system, participants mentioned Internet and Blackboard difficulties as significant issues that needed to be solved, which is corroborated by studies that have reported network disruptions in online learning in many schools and universities as a major impediment to online learning (Gao & Zhang, 2020). In terms of platform, participants preferred integrating other platforms, such as Zoom and Coursera, with Blackboard to overcome obstacles related to some of its weaker features like the breakout rooms. Noting the issues with breakout rooms, participants also suggested the use of webcams to solve many problems in the online learning environment, which mirrors the findings of Schwenck and Pryor (2021), who state that using video conferencing is related to students' motivation and their willingness to take charge of their learning in online environments. Currently, the use of the webcam is avoided in Saudi EFL classrooms due to cultural constraints, but its value with regards to

students' participation and interaction has been recorded in the literature.

Another remarkable finding of this research is that blended learning has emerged as the future of teaching and learning as it combines the most effective aspects of online and traditional learning practices. Researchers have emphasized the importance of blended learning as a mode that has the potential to increase students' engagement and aid teachers with assessment and content (Matheos & Cleveland-Innes, 2018). In this study, participants preferred blended learning in higher education to encourage students and teach them more effectively. This finding aligns with those of Ma and Lee (2021), who suggest that blended learning is more productive in boosting students' self-regulation. Overall, although online learning has valuable features, EFL teachers in this study believed that blended learning was the most appropriate choice for teaching and learning.

5. Conclusion

This research set out to gain a more comprehensive understanding of EFL teachers' perceptions of the challenges that they face in the online learning environment in a Saudi higher education context. The thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed that the most significant challenges that EFL teachers confronted in the online learning environment were related to students, namely their participation, motivation, tendency to cheat, and lack of responsibility for learning. The findings suggest that blended learning is the most effective approach to be used in the future. However, copying face-to-face learning procedures in an online learning environment causes problems related to content, time, assessment, and use of the LMS platform. Taken together, these results suggest that limiting the number of students in online classes would improve their motivation and participation, which may lead to enhanced interactive discussions among peers and with their teachers. Furthermore, when considering issues with the Internet and Blackboard, conducting more training workshops with e-mentors, teachers, and students could fix many problems and ease the learning process; and integrating other platforms with Blackboard could help teachers to be more creative. Moreover, creating online blogs for EFL teachers to share knowledge, information, challenges, and discussions may be effective for teachers' social well-being. In summary, this study proposed the implementation of blended learning or a mix of traditional and pure online learning for optimal benefits.

Further studies may focus on designing a survey based on the themes that have emerged from this study and investigate their correlations with one another. Similar studies may be conducted in other contexts, which would provide further findings on the challenges associated with online learning faced by different universities and cultures. Finally, more studies need to be conducted to explore students' perceptions of the online learning environment and compare them to those of their teachers.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A

Teacher Interviews Questions

1) What challenges, if any, do you face when teaching in the Online Learning Environment?

2) How concerned are you about the issue of cheating and plagiarism in the online courses?

3) How would you describe the use of Blackboard as a platform for online learning?

4) What did you like the **most** about teaching online?

5) What did you like the **least** about teaching online?

6) What are the things that you would like to **change** if you teach online again?

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