

**Virtual Classes and EFL Students' Linguistic Performance;
Case Study of Engineering Students at Imam Abdulrahman
bin Faisal University**

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Abstract

This study identified the perceptions, attitudes, and difficulties that university students encountered to better understand how EFL virtual classrooms affected their language performance. In order to test the study's hypotheses, 124 engineering college students were given a three-section questionnaire comprising 29 statements, and 15 of them were also interviewed. All participants signed up for the English-language online writing composition course. The study's findings indicate that the participants had varying opinions about how virtual EFL classes affected the improvement of their linguistic ability. Additionally, the results showed that students only partially preferred this method of learning because they had to deal with a variety of concerns, including technological difficulties, inadequate instruction and training, financial commitments, workload pressure, and limited access to the internet. In order to properly employ virtual courses in the teaching of EFL, it is strongly advised that the aforementioned issues be fixed. This case study contributes to the body of research by focusing on a situation where there is a dearth of empirical data regarding EFL learners' perceptions of English learning. To understand why this disparity evolved, additional studies in this area are needed.

Keywords ; challenges of online learning - EFL learning – linguistic performance –students' attitude – virtual classes

1. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the recently implemented legislation, academic institutions were quickly closed with the outbreak of Covid-19. In terms of education, this position was able to make a historical change in all educational practices that had to adopt a new delivery mode of teaching, so it was necessary to pay greater attention to developing technology (Alvarez, 2020). However, the lack of experience with a fully digitalized educational system made most countries all over the world not well-prepared to handle a transition of this size. Regarding the Saudi context, the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic sparked an extraordinary shift toward online learning, and the Saudi government responded quickly to the pandemic by allocating unlimited funds to face this unexpected situation. It took action to stop the spread of COVID-19 by ceasing all campus activities while the pandemic was still ongoing; however, it was formally responsible for paying the ongoing cost of online education. The sector of education lacked a powerful IT infrastructure, so efforts had been made to use technologies that are compatible with the ideas of online learning. By the beginning of March 2020, everyone needed to remain home in order to prevent the outbreak of this illness to maintain both social and physical distance. As a result, it is envisaged that teachers and students would both continue to fulfill their tasks while staying at home. The online learning system replaced the face-to-face mode of instruction that was previously used in the classroom. All academic institutions started operating entirely online, leveraging digital resources by using eLearning platforms and virtual classrooms to give instruction. The impact of technological advancements on teaching methodologies has long been a matter of debate given how complicated it is to substitute in-person instructional situations with virtual classroom environments. Two of the lately hotly debated issues have been whether or not face-to-face learning will continue to dominate the delivery of curriculum and whether or not virtual classes will be as successful as learning in a classroom setting (Bonk, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020). Different perspectives from diverse parties have emerged with the transition from face-to-face learning to web-based learning. Several study topics have caught the attention of academics in the area of English-language education as well as in other disciplines as a result of this significant shift in the modes of instruction provided. Numerous studies showed the value of student perceptions as a guide for instructors and academic institutes in managing this online learning process to keep it running smoothly. However, doing research on how virtual classes

affect EFL learning is difficult and multidimensional by nature, and given the current situation, nothing is currently known about how this emergency remote mode of learning has affected EFL learners' linguistic performance. The purpose of the current study was to identify how engineering college students at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University in Saudi Arabia felt about the usage of virtual classrooms in EFL contexts during the pandemic in order to evaluate how effective the experience was, and the issues encountered.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The conception of virtual classes and their function in teaching, technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), and the techniques of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and the analysis of many research papers in these disciplines serve as the theoretical foundations for this work. Numerous research undertaken in various settings and at all educational levels were included in the body of literature; nevertheless, to allow for a more significant overview of the chosen studies, they were organized into three subsections. After defining virtual classes and providing a foundation for the current study, previous studies in the literature were collated under the headings of the benefits and downsides of virtual classes.

2.1 Virtual Classes and EFL Learning

The swift production of cutting-edge learning management systems in advanced states and the rapid advancement of technology allowed for the quick adoption of online learning during COVID-19. Online learning refers to using technology to deliver courses and offer educational materials, while "distance education" refers to a teaching approach in which instructors and students are virtually separated in time and place with no physical connection. Despite the fact that there are some key distinctions between them, phrases like "remote education," "online education," and "e-learning" have started to be used interchangeably as a result of the new coronavirus. Another phrase that has become more common during this period is "emergency remote teaching (ERT)." According to Hodges et al. (2020), ERT is "a brief change of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery method owing to crisis circumstances" (p. 7). The aims or functions of these various concepts may differ significantly or even slightly, but it is outside the focus of this study to

investigate such variances. In this study, the concept of “virtual classes” was used to refer instead to refer to the operating assumption by which instructors and students were physically separated from their learning environment, so emergency remote teaching was a mandate where virtual classes were employed. Learning platforms called virtual classrooms were developed using a number of essential components to improve students' educational experiences (Charles & Babatunde, 2014). Virtual classrooms were defined in a wide range of ways in both formal and non-formal settings. It was stated by Beatty (2013) that a virtual classroom is an illustration of an "online classroom that can be expanded in time, distance, and topic" (p. 156). They are described by Herrera Mosquera (2017) as online settings where instructors and students can present materials, work together on tasks, and exchange ideas (p.481). Applications of virtual classes have thus had an impact on the way that EFL is taught and learned, transforming the contexts in which learning can take place from being constrained to being unconstrained (Liu, Shih & Tsai, 2010). As a result, Lou (2010) viewed online classrooms as a cutting-edge audio-visual aid for teaching English that allows students and teachers to improve collaborative skills by letting students to express their opinions and offer feedback to other peers more openly. These platforms can be utilized to deliver an entire online course or as a supplementary component for in-person classes. Margaret (2016) defined virtual classrooms as a non-restrictive, affordable, adaptive, useful, and accessible online learning environment. It is advantageous to have access to virtual classrooms from multiple locations and at different times. It makes it possible for students and teachers to communicate utilizing a range of mechanisms, such as texting, audio chatting, video chatting, PowerPoint presentations, and oral discussion (Yadav, 2016). Because they are synchronous and "live," students took part in them at the same time.

2.2 The Possible Benefits and Downsides of EFL Virtual Classrooms

The advantages of virtual classrooms have been extensively studied. In one of the earliest pre-pandemic research on online learning, Mohammadi et al. (2011) contrasted in-person and online language instruction and concluded that the key benefit of e-learning is the rise in academic achievement, punctuality, and engagement. According to Chang, Chen, and Li's (2008) research, traditional classroom instruction does not always produce the same learning outcomes for students as virtual classes do. Students who learn online can put their knowledge to use and have unrestricted access to it. Smyth (2011) highlighted

that the use of software applications enhanced the learning and instruction method and that employing video conference technology can give students more opportunities for indirect and direct online collaborative meaningful learning. In a similar vein, Hariri and Bahanshal (2015) investigated L2 interaction in EFL classes in Saudi Arabia using both methods—online and blended learning—and they concluded that there was an acceptable relationship between students' English proficiency and the utilization of web-based learning. According to Lan (2015), a virtual environment could help students become more fluent in English as it provides a setting that encourages active student interaction. It has also been demonstrated that video chatting increases L2 productivity and fosters more advanced output, making it especially advantageous in EFL classroom settings (Kern et al., 2004). In a study on virtual learning classes by Barker and Gossman (2014), they focused on an electronic questionnaire into the virtual settings utilized by 248 students, where Moodle software was employed to encourage students in studying English as a foreign language. They subsequently learned how virtual settings could be useful in enhancing academic achievement, the educational experience, and language skills. All of the studies that have been described so far were conducted prior to the epidemic. The research discussed below examined learners' perceptions with varied focus while the epidemic was going on.

Since virtual classes are now required, the emphasis of the following studies on their effects may have altered drastically. Research conducted by Vitoria et al. (2018) revealed that the students thought the web-based learning module was helpful in enhancing their comprehension, autonomy, self-discipline, willingness to study, and relationships with other students and instructors. Numerous studies conducted recently in the field of English as a Foreign Language concentrated on the possible benefits of virtual learning for EFL students. The results of a study by AlAhmdi and AlRaddadi (2020) showed that Saudi students, particularly in virtual classes, interacted and communicated well. Additionally, participants expressed a favorable attitude toward taking L2 lessons online; therefore, using virtual classes for language learning and instruction was highly recommended by them in various EFL contexts. According to Matthew, Sreehari, and Al-Rubaat (2019), students' language skills, particularly their articulation, comprehension, grammar, fluency, and diction, can be successfully improved in virtual classes. Hamouda

(2020) made a comparison between students' speaking performance in both virtual and traditional classrooms and he found out that students in virtual classes had much superior speaking performance. On measures of pronunciation, comprehension, grammar, fluency, and diction, students often favored online learning and did better than in-person learning. Laachir (2019) looked into the online learning practices of 95 undergraduate English majors with an emphasis on the online learning tactics utilized by EFL learners. He discovered that, in addition to enhancing students' basic language skills, the online mode of learning also assisted students in developing interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Overall, the students reported that e-learning was more convenient and cost-effective, and gave them the option of going over the material again. Furthermore, students favored e-learning over conventional learning since they found it to be a fascinating method of learning. Herrera Mosquera (2017) emphasized that the use of virtual classes in EFL courses was extremely favored for L2 learning activities and advocated using them for many other education settings with a similar structure. In the midst of the Covid-19 outbreak, Pratiwi and Kurniati (2022) looked at how EFL students perceived e-learning in the university. The findings revealed that learners favored online education because of its affordability, adaptability, effectiveness, and reliability. Haque (2022) looked into how Saudi EFL students perceived internet writing tools. It has been established that using online writing tools could help with spelling, grammar, and vocabulary.

However, it is necessary to thoroughly evaluate how online learning could be as effective as traditional classrooms in addition to the potential application of these settings (Hamouda, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, studies also revealed that students generally disapprove of their online study experiences and that virtual education is a less common option for education (Bristow, et al., 2011; Ganesh, et al., 2015). According to certain studies, one of the challenges for virtual classrooms is the potential for technological difficulties (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Bianchi et al., 2019; Olbertz-Siitonen, 2015). In virtual learning settings that rely on video, for example, pauses or "lagging", which may reduce the effectiveness of interaction, is common (Alshehri & Cumming, 2020; Rusk & Pörn, 2019). In addition to the connection issues that disrupt online learning during the epidemic, Almekhlafy (2020) came to the conclusion that first-year college students did not have a positive perspective of the online learning system during the pandemic. It can

be argued that, at least occasionally, technological limitations may prevent certain participation or involvement (Oyaid & Alshaya, 2019). According to a previous investigation on learning during the COVID-19 outbreak, students' opinions of virtual classrooms varied, and they expressed poor to average levels of satisfaction with online courses and distance learning (Gonçalves, et al., 2020; AlAteeq, 2020). Pastor (2020) investigated synchronous online instruction in the Philippines during the outset of the epidemic to ascertain students' feelings. The findings demonstrated that most students weren't yet prepared to accept synchronous delivery, and 66.55% of them had an unfavorable opinion of it. The students identified challenges that would prevent them from continuing their studies as technical difficulties and poor internet connection.

Cicillini and Giacosa (2020) analyzed English-medium instruction lecturers' and students' perspectives on the shift from in-person teaching to online learning by gathering both quantitative and qualitative data from 100 students and 49 lecturers at 14 institutions in Italy. Their study was conducted in an effort to obtain insights into the effects of the pandemic on classroom instruction through English during the early stages of the pandemic. The results of their study revealed that face-to-face classes were favored by both students and instructors because online classes missed specific components like communication, cooperative learning, and school experience. In his investigation into how online learning was used in educational settings during the pandemic, Al-Nofaie (2020) found that EFL students still favored traditional instruction. Herrera Mosquera (2017) noted a number of difficulties that students encountered when using instructional tools such as the capacity of computers and labs in addition to internet access. The same issues were highlighted by AlAhmdi & AlRaddadi (2020) and Hakami (2020) who confirmed that not all colleges and universities had access to resources like computer labs or internet services that would allow for the broad use of such tools. Hamlaoui (2021) and Sharma (2003) referred to the rejection or opposition to new technology as another different obstacle. As a result, Bianchi et al. (2018) proposed that any deployment of virtual classrooms be accompanied by a rigorous technological assessment and suitable instruction for learners including how to use it.

3. Statement of the Problem

Most English Language programs around the world have been moved online as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic. The rise of e-learning has presented a new challenge for learners who previously participated in traditional learning. That significant change might have affected how they learn and how they accept the change. In order to better the language-learning process, it is important to understand how students view online EFL learning in order to understand their preferences, attitudes, and the challenges they confront.

4. Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will be helpful to all Saudi institutions in understanding how students feel about online EFL learning. Additionally, using information from the current study will assist in improving the platform structuring to suit the demands of EFL students.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How well do virtual classes at Imam Abdulrahman University promote English language proficiency among engineering students?
2. How do engineering college students at Imam Abdulrahman University perceive taking English classes online?
3. What difficulties do students face when taking EFL classes online?

6. Hypotheses of the Study

The following hypotheses were put to the test by the research questions:

1. Virtual classes improved the linguistic proficiency of engineering college students.
2. Students' attitudes toward learning EFL in online classes were positive.
3. EFL virtual classes have several challenges.

7. Research Method

An explanatory, sequential mixed-methods design was employed in this study. This design was chosen because it benefits researchers who are examining a subject by gathering quantitative data and utilizing qualitative data to clarify or

elucidate the findings from the study's initial phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A hybrid strategy of data collecting, and analysis was used for this study. The collection, analysis, and integration of both qualitative and quantitative data allowed for a thorough and precise comprehension of the study's conclusion. The current study used two main instruments to get the necessary data: a questionnaire for 124 engineering college students and interviews with 15 of them. The purpose of the questionnaire was to ascertain the effect that virtual classes had on their EFL learning, the main challenges they encounter when learning EFL online, and their attitude toward that kind of class. The main goal of the interviews used was to learn more about how the three previously mentioned elements were seen by students. In this study, respondents' rights and privacy were respected when it came to the confidential nature of the data collected from them. The participants were made aware at every stage of the procedure that this study would be conducted for educational objectives. For the sake of maintaining secrecy, it was required that the respondents not write their names on any of the forms used in this study except for the interviewees. The study was conducted with adherence to ethical norms and considerations, maintaining privacy, and acknowledging all references cited.

7.1 Tools of the Study

7.1.1 The Questionnaire

A questionnaire was made by the researcher and submitted to the students. Participants were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale by selecting an option ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Three components made up the questionnaire; the first section's nine items focused on how virtual classrooms affected students' proficiency in the English language; the second section discussed how students felt about taking online classes to learn English, and the third section discussed the difficulties students had using virtual classes to study EFL. Zoom was used to conduct 15 semi-structured interviews to learn the rationale behind the students' responses to the questionnaire items, how they perceive their experience in EFL virtual classes, and the challenges included in such classes.

7.1.1.1 Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire

Prior to collecting data from the respondents, the questionnaire was validated by a focus group of education-related experts. 10% of participants from the population who were excluded from the main study were chosen for the pilot study using a general thumb rule. The questionnaire was suitable for collecting data from the original sample, according to the reliability coefficient Cronbach alpha, which had a value of 0.85 or 85%.

7.1.1.2 Data Analysis of the Questionnaire results

The frequencies and percentages of the respondents' answers were calculated in this research using transform/compute parameters and the SPSS results. It is significant to highlight that the questionnaire findings were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, which was utilized to ascertain means and variances.

Table 1. Illustration of the 5-Point Likert Scale

Likert-scale	Interval	Difference	Description
1	1.00 < 1.8	0.8	Strongly disagree
2	1.8 < 2.6	0.8	Disagree
3	2.6 < 3.7	0.8	Neutral
4	3.8 < 4.2	0.8	Agree
5	4. 2 < 5.00	0.8	Strongly agree

7.1.1.2.1 Section one: Impact of Virtual Classes on linguistic proficiency

The findings showed that virtual classes only had a marginally positive impact on student language proficiency. It should be noted that students' replies to this section were not conclusive with respect to the intervals listed in table 1 because they all fell within the neutral range of 3.09 to 3.56, as shown in the following table.

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Section one

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. My speaking abilities have improved because of my EFL virtual classrooms.	3.56	1.28
2. My listening skills improved because of taking EFL virtual classes.	3.40	1.29
3. My writing was enhanced via EFL virtual courses.	3.38	1.27

4. My reading skills has developed after studying EFL virtually.	3.48	1.31
5. My vocabulary has grown because of taking EFL online classes.	3.34	1.34
6. Virtual classes developed my knowledge of grammar.	3.11	1.15
7. EFL virtual classes encouraged student interaction.	3.47	1.30
8. My use of the language has improved due to my EFL virtual classrooms.	3.48	1.27
9. In virtual classes, communication between students and teachers is fostered.	3.09	1.12
Overall	3.43	1.21

These results demonstrated how students struggled to articulate their opinions about the impact of virtual classes on developing their language skills. With scores of 3.56, 3.48, 3.48, and 3.47, respectively, improving speaking skills (item 1), using the language (item 8), developing reading skills (item 4), and communicating with peers (item 7) were the items with the highest mean. These items were above the overall average of all the items in this section, which was 3.43. Yet the subsequent five items' scores were below the section's average. The means for enhancing writing (item 3), listening (item 2), vocabulary (item 5), grammar (item 6) and communication between students and EFL instructors (item 9) were 3.40, 3.38, 3.37, 3.11, and 3.09, respectively. Students realized that virtual classes could not adequately give them the chance to develop the previous skills, and this was evident in both their written assignments and their written chat messages to one another.

7.1.1.2.2 Section Two: Overall attitude of using virtual classes in EFL classes

In this section, 10 items were used to determine the students' attitude towards EFL virtual classes as indicated in the following table.

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of Section one

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Virtual classes are more stimulating than physical ones.	3.19	1.39
2. Learning English has been made more enjoyable by using virtual classes.	3.34	1.32

3. An engaging environment for language learning is provided via virtual classrooms.	3.31	1.35
4. My ideas can be simply shared in online classes.	3.88	1.65
5. The delivery tactic of taking EFL classes online is intriguing.	3.36	1.27
6. Collaborative learning is encouraged in EFL virtual classes.	3.06	1.09
7. Online EFL classes give me more confidence to join in class discussions.	3.87	1.66
8. I can study English in less time by using a virtual classroom.	3.19	1.38
9. Because of virtual classrooms, I can rapidly receive teacher feedback.	3.10	1.19
10. Because of virtual classrooms, I can rapidly receive my grades.	3.90	1.70
Total	3.69	1.29

The results shown in the previous table reflected mixed visions in terms of students' attitude toward EFL virtual classes. Items 4, 7, and 10 in this section, which had mean scores of 3.88, 3.87, and 3.90, respectively, were accepted by all participants. They acknowledged their happiness with the time allotted to receive their grades in online classes (item 10). Additionally, they discovered that these programs were more inspiring in terms of increasing self-confidence to participate in class discussions more frequently than in conventional physical classes (item 7). On the other hand, they had no trouble collaborating with their peers online (item 6). In comparison to the overall mean of all the items in this section, the means of the next seven items were lower. Regarding other aspects, such as the characteristics of this new learning environment, they had a neutral perspective. When asked whether virtual classes were more stimulating (item 1) or entertaining (item 2) than physical ones, students were unable to determine. Therefore, instructors are required to maintain the students' interest through making more effort to alter the general atmosphere to be more engaging and useful. Additionally, students were unable to express full satisfaction with the delivery mode used in these classes (item 5), which is meant to foster collaborative learning (item 6) and create an engaging environment (item 3). They provided neutral responses to the questions on the

time allotted for receiving feedback from their instructors (item 9), or for learning English in less time than traditional classes (item 8), indicating that they are unable to judge whether it is adequate or not.

7.1.1.2.3 Section Three: Challenges of Using Virtual Classes in EFL Classes

The biggest problems that students encountered when using virtual classes in EFL learning are shown in the following table.

Table 4 Challenges of Using Virtual Classes in EFL Classes

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Joining virtual classes takes less time on Zoom.	2.48	1.200
2. There is enough instruction on how to use virtual classrooms.	2.45	1.206
3. Virtual classes require financial obligations from students to guarantee engagement in the EFL course	4.00	1.141
4. I am interested in using technology in EFL learning.	3.06	1.094
5. There are a lot of technical problems with virtual classrooms.	3.81	1.169
6. Composition course resources are available.	2.49	1.126
7. The internet connection can be problematic in online classes.	2.51	1.194
8. Taking online classes puts a lot of pressure on me.	3.13	1.188
9. Virtual classrooms add to the workload of the EFL program.	3.13	1.140
10. Students may engage in unethical behaviors such as cheating in virtual classes.	4.16	1.27
Overall	3.07	0.851

In their responses, students complained that the virtual classes' instructions were insufficient (item 2), and that enrolling in them used to take much longer time than anticipated (item 1). It's crucial to have the confidence necessary to use a computer and navigate the Internet. These results provide us with evidence that improving a country's internet infrastructure is a must for it shifting toward virtual classrooms. Additionally, because of issues with the internet connection (item 7), some students would be unable to participate in online classes due to a lack of internet connectivity. Having trouble accessing course platforms and materials might also be caused by slow connectivity. Only

if internet access is made available to everyone in a reasonable and acceptable manner, virtual classes can be effective. Also online course material were not available (Item 6) as they should have been prepared and uploaded soon after the session by the instructor. The means of these four items were 2.45, 2.48, 2.49, and 2.51 correspondingly, which were lower than the 3.07 mean of all the items in this section. Although they regarded the other items (except 5 and 10) as significant challenges, they were unable to express their full agreement or disagreement with them. Additionally, they gave a neutral response when asked about their interest in adopting technology in EFL learning (item 4), stating that they believed it to have both benefits and drawbacks. They were cautious to respond when asked about the pressure placed on them (item 8) or the increased effort brought on (item 9) by taking virtual classes since they were undecided on these two concerns. However, they concurred with items 3, 5 and 10, whose respective means were 4.00, 3.81 and 4.16. financial obligations represented one of the biggest challenges they encountered when shifting to study English virtually (Item 3). The same applies to technical issues that caused them a lot of problems and deprived them of enjoying EFL virtual classes. They highlighted their dissatisfaction with the technical assistance offered by the college due to the numerous technical issues with virtual classrooms (item 5). On the other hand, despite all the safeguards the teachers took, the participants thought that taking virtual classes fostered unethical actions like cheating (item 10).

7.1.2 The Interviews

Semi- structured interviews that included a prepared set of questions pertaining to the study questions were conducted by the researcher. Three subject-matter experts reviewed the tool for accuracy and validity after it was developed based on themes found in the body of existing literature. To ensure that respondents provided their broad opinions on the study's issue, the researcher used open-ended questions. These interviews enabled the researcher to delve deeply into participant perspectives and attitudes toward this sort of class, as well as the influence and difficulties of virtual classrooms on EFL learning, through interviews.

7.1.2.1 Procedures of the Interview

15 students from the College of Engineering at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University, who were enrolled in the online composition course were sought out to help with the answer to the interview questions. The researcher set up an appointment to conduct the interview with each participant after obtaining their agreement to participate in the study. Using the Zoom program, all interviews were carried out in English. Since meaning was what I was most concerned about, I used a denaturalized technique, taking out, for instance, unintentional utterances. Pseudonyms were employed as aspect of the privacy - preserving procedure (either chosen by the respondent or suggested by me and agreed by the respondent). When choosing the interview material, I kept in mind that students rarely talk clearly, so I removed a lot of slang terms and pauses if they did not alter the message. I took care to only include quotes from the interview in the body of my paper unless they significantly enriched my topic. The quotations there were utilized to bolster the questions' pre-existing items. They made it possible for me to record responders' unique, subtle replies. I tried to make the quotes' language more official by deleting colloquialisms, using proper grammar, and expressing the sentences clearly.

7.1.2.1.1 First question : Impact of Using Virtual Classes on Students' Linguistic Performance

Many students claimed that while virtual classrooms only partially promoted teacher-student communication, they were able to practice their speaking and use of the language through active involvement in fruitful discussions with each other about the material covered in their EFL courses.

“For me, I think EFL virtual classes gave me more confidence to speak. I felt I was not under pressure.” [Omar]

“It gives them the chance to talk and ask questions and improve communication.” [Alwaleed]

The students believed their knowledge of EFL vocabulary and grammar were insufficiently improved during or after taking virtual classes.

“Personally, I think the best method for teaching grammar is through face-to-face method. Grammar explanation is like math needs to white board and marker. [Ahmed]

"Okay, I believe growing vocabulary is missing in EFL virtual classes although I engage in vocabulary activity. I lack motivation to engage in such activities due to technical issues." [Salim]

As for writing, they declared that they faced problems in getting feedback on their writing due to the large number assumed to attend each EFL virtual session as in the following comment.

"The EFL instructor teaches three groups at once, therefore it is hard to provide feedback or editing for our writing with up to 82 students in attendance. All these issues need to be resolved if the college wants its EFL online classes to be successful." [Muhammad]

"Online writing instruction is not enjoyable for us engineering students. Too many obstacles stand in the way. A significant issue is feedback and correction." [Faris]

Many participants agreed that the EFL virtual classes were less effective than traditional ones due to the insufficient interaction between them and the instructors and students as highlighted in the upcoming response made by one of the interviewees.

"Okay, well, in my opinion, online EFL instruction is not very successful. In campus, you attend lessons and interact with the instructors." [Jihad]

Direct talk with instructors was missing and full comprehension of the content was also absent due to the shift to online learning as stated in the following comment.

"Face-to-face communication helps me actually understand what the instructor is saying. In addition, I can talk directly to faculty members who are ready to explain things to me and help me with any problems I may be having." [Hussein]

Since the e-learning system can occasionally be offline for a while before it resumes operation, some students felt that interaction between the students and the instructor in EFL virtual sessions is occasionally impossible.

"Sometimes it's quite difficult for instructors and students to communicate with one another. For example, when I'm in an EFL virtual class, the network sometimes disconnects while the teacher is explaining. How can I get back what he's already said? What if what he has just said serves as a foundation for understanding the subsequent sentences?" [Abdullah]

Few of the students thought that virtual instruction would produce better results than the traditional method.

"The difference in student outcomes between online learning and traditional methods is scary and depressing." [Omar]

7.1.2.1.2 Question 2: Students' Attitude towards EFL virtual classes

When questioned about his experience of taking EFL virtual classes, another participant made the following comment.

"When I'm attending my EFL course, I believe I favor the marker-board approach since it actually encourages me to do better" [Omar]

"Online EFL courses offer greater flexibility. However, I prefer to use social media over online learning platforms." [Ahmed]

Many interviewees also complained that the course was less enjoyable as a result of the virtual classes.

"EFL virtual classes always makes me worried about finding what my instructor and other colleagues posted." [Abdullah]

The usage of virtual classrooms appears to have been sufficiently assisted for students to effectively utilize their academic interaction, but it does not appear to have aided in their ability to socialize with several other classmates. Improvement in peer communication was rated poorly by students, yet it was frequently identified as a key issue in interviews.

"I don't know many of my classmates. Sad to say, I don't really know the students in my EFL virtual class group." [Faris]

The assertion of another student was that

"My classmates' feedback on my writings are not helping me, and I did not even know how to assist them." [Muhammad]

7.1.2.1.3 Question 3: Challenges encountered in EFL virtual Classes

In their interviews, the students expressed a variety of opinions regarding the challenges they faced during their EFL virtual classes. Over 50 % of participants who were interviewed felt that the problems they faced while pursuing their online classes were numerous. The financial obligations students must take to guarantee they engage in the course were one of the greatest

problems identified by nearly most of them. The students felt that the cost of learning online was higher than what they paid for learning in a traditional setting.

"It's expensive to study online. With my data SIM, i receive 10 gigabytes per month in exchange for 100 SR. However, this bundle's size poses a challenge. I recall that after three hours of my first virtual EFL class, 500 gigabytes had already been used." [Alwaleed]

"We make use of our own ICT instruments, such as smartphones and laptops. We are not given ICT tools by the college. If you can't buy these ICT tools, you must borrow them from a friend." [Osamah]

The institution ought to offer students laptops so they can access a variety of internet resources. [Ajwad]

Many students held the view that network issues and the difficulty in accessing the internet had an adverse impact on English language academic performance.

For example, you are taking an online quiz, and the system is blocked. You've studied, and you think you can answer the questions. If it's a 10-point quiz, you think you can get 8 or 7 of the questions right. But you suddenly get 1 or 2 right, and it makes you very sad. [Saad]

"If I've got a quiz to pass and try to get in but the server jams, it simply logs you away from the site." [Abdulrahamn]

During their virtual EFL classes, the students frequently complained about the malfunction of the web platform and how it wasted their time.

"Once you try to log into a website, but it simply freezes. I really feel very bad. I take much time to log onto the EFL session sometimes." [Salim]

One of the most significant difficulties identified by students was getting online. A major difficulty is finding reliable internet access.

"Because the network can be unpleasant at times, I was less active in my internet activities. For example, when trying to download or submit EFL materials, the majority of students encounter issues related to logging into the online learning platform. This had disrupted our rest." [Faris]

One of the comments made by students was related to the course resources as some of the participants thought that studying materials should be available to be downloaded at any moment.

“Oh, right, the study materials for this composition course ought to be available online and ought to have been made available to us beforehand.”
[Ali]

Many of those interviewed claimed that they had not been provided with course material resources before beginning their EFL virtual classes. Some students demanded that the textbook be made available to others who cannot purchase them.

“ The college should make a Pdf version of the textbook available to my friends who can't buy a hardcopy.” [Ahmed]

For the instruction provided by the college or the university, most of them stated that they were required to depend on themselves or asking help of colleagues. Before their recent experience with the web-based learning approach, the majority of the participants had limited experience with this type of learning.

“Although I lacked any experience, the fact that we were able to use the online learning tool without receiving any training on how to do so was made possible by our prior knowledge of sending emails and submitting documents via a network.” [Saud]

Regarding the existence of IT infrastructure for the online learning, there were differing opinions. While some students felt that a lack of IT infrastructure had an impact on their learning, others were satisfied with it.

“A further barrier is the IT infrastructure. Desktop PCs, data centers, servers, and networking devices are insufficient.” [Amar]

8. Discussion of Results

The results slightly supported the research hypotheses as they revealed that virtual classes had a moderate impact on improving language learning performance. In addition, participants partially expressed positive attitudes toward learning EFL in virtual settings, and stated that they encountered various challenges. The outcomes of the current study did indicate that there was a considerable discrepancy between the conclusions drawn from this study, which is a revelation that is nevertheless worth noting, and the results of other studies in the field of EFL virtual learning. The findings revealed that engineering college students have conflicting ideas on adopting virtual courses

in EFL learning during the pandemic because they stated that virtual classes could not fully provide an engaging or motivating environment despite their audio, video, and interactive elements that enable the teachers and students to engage with each other well. The results did not support the claims made by Binmahboob (2022), AlKinani (2021), Abbasi et al. (2020), Haji, et al. (2017), Mosquera (2017), or Mohsen & Shafeeq (2014) that online education improves student learning and fosters social mobility.

One of the most startling results is that it confirms past studies' conclusions about the challenges of using online learning during COVID-19. The current study's findings, as well as those of other researchers including Binmahboob (2022), Khafaga (2021), Hakim (2020), and Anas (2020), revealed that students faced a variety of difficulties when learning English online. For instance, the current study's findings confirmed that the availability of internet facilities is essential for online learning, highlighting the difficulties with access to resources noted by Arthur-Nyarko and Kariuki (2019) as well as the uneven distribution of access to resources noted by Lembani, et al. (2019). According to the results of this study, lack of instruction on using technology as well as technical problems are a barrier to virtual EFL learning.

In addition to learning that the current research study did refute various assumptions made in the field of time management. The results of this study were in line with those of Fish and Gill (2009), Cavanaugh (2005), and Bair & Bair (2011), which indicated that creating online lessons requires more time than creating lessons using traditional lesson planning. It is claimed that online teaching is more time-consuming than traditional teaching since it requires a lot of effort to design courses, upload materials, and download them. More time is spent writing or asking inquiries of classmates or instructors than providing feedback. It takes longer to write remarks than to speak with each student individually.

Online education demands a lot of work to be done and submitted. The amount of work required by students is rather tiring, and they frequently have queries that the teacher must answer. To meet the multiple online standards, they will have to put in more effort. The new approach to teaching and the heavy workloads made it challenging for the students to organize their time. Therefore, it is crucial that the college administration take the required action

to give the students the prerequisites they need to succeed in the modern digital age of learning.

The results of the present study were consistent with those of other researchers, including Dhawan (2020), Johnston (2020), and Alhabeeb & Rowley (2018), who underlined the importance of digital literacy. As a result, assistance and training should be provided to promote EFL proficiency in the adoption of education technology. For the students to undertake the task of online learning, they should have the appropriate training. The results showed that despite the challenges and difficulties encountered, students continued to study and meet their academic needs during the epidemic. The current study suggests that one strategy to ensure students have digital literacy is to incorporate it into the curriculum. It also suggests helping students through technology-related training sessions, cooperative learning, and pushing them to use mobile apps, as indicated by Sharpe and Benfield (2012).

The study's conclusions on the significance of technological assistance for giving students the chance to adapt e-learning were in line with those of Solangi, Shahrani, and Pandhiani (2018) as well as Muhammad, Albejaidi, and Akhtar (2017). For resolving hardware and software issues related to the software program, EFL learners must have ongoing technical support. The results of the current study support the notion that e-platform feedback from EFL instructors is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of online EFL instruction. These findings were also in line with those made by Rinekso and Muslim (2020) and Ozer and Badem (2022), who examined how students perceived synchronous online discussions and the difficulties they faced. Students' opinions on the utilization of synchronous online discussions included both good and negative ones. By utilizing technological devices, e-learning systems overcame the limitations of time and distance to become a cutting-edge teaching strategy to support in the instructional experience and raise standards.

9. Limitations of the Study

Only those who took the English Composition Course were included in the sample. The chosen sample only made up around 20% of the college of engineering's total enrollment of 596 students, therefore the study's results may have been different if it had been conducted on all college students.

10. Theoretical and practical implications

The current study improves upon earlier research on online learning by first determining how virtual classes affect students' proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and then analyzing the difficulties encountered by online EFL learners in the K.S.A during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the study's conclusions offer new information about the adoption and use of e-learning in EFL instruction for educators and policymakers. A learner-need analysis must be conducted to identify individual preferences and needs to adopt an e-platform that is beneficial for EFL learners. During the two weeks of orientation, students may enroll in courses that will help them advance their IT skills.

11. Conclusion

The transition from audio-visual aid-centered classroom education to a digitally focused virtual classroom setting calls for creative teaching strategies. The current study concludes that for online EFL learning to be successfully integrated into higher education institutions, there still must be a lot of support and a well-thought-out strategy. Further studies must be conducted to measure and investigate the effects of instructional technology with respect to curriculum activities that employ educational technology to use it efficiently. According to the study's findings, there are still difficulties with time management, lack of engagement, lack of technical support, and poor feedback processing. Students consequently thought that online classes were only marginally beneficial. The students claim that, even though virtual classes are a nice idea, they much prefer the conventional method to it because it is less difficult. The perceived inefficiency of EFL virtual classes could be linked to a lack of training and instruction, poor communication, and technical problems. The students mentioned a few other obstacles to online EFL learning, including a lack of ICT tools and workload. Most of the participants had no prior experience with online education or using ICT tools for academic purposes. A real challenge in EFL courses may be the loss of some nonverbal interaction in virtual learning environments. Aside from that, occasionally there might be technical difficulties with the platform, students having trouble logging in, and issues with the microphone and video. Even though students are still described as "digital natives," it may be important to understand the technological limitations imposed on online learning environments. The methods of teaching

used during virtual classrooms, time wasted to join online, and other unethical implications could all have an impact on how successfully virtual courses for teaching EFL function. The inclusion of virtual classrooms in the language learning process typically indicates that the language curriculum and activities should be modified to fit the virtual learning method to increase student and teacher involvement in and enjoyment of the learning process. Although they can cause students great trouble, such as downloading and setup issues, virtual tools could serve as a replacement for traditional classroom instruction.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest

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