

EFL Learners' Perspectives of E-Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Study on Saudi College Students

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Abstract

The learning process during Covid-19 pandemic has witnessed significant changes in the modes of instruction, with E-learning emerging as an absolute path in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The current study seeks to investigate the perspectives of Saudi EFL students with regard to e-learning during the pandemic and the challenges encountered. The significance of this study stems from the importance of integrating e-learning into language learning in a methodological way with the proper planning of activities, technologies, and tutors and students' skills. The participants of this study consisted of Saudi EFL learners in two Saudi universities, namely King Saud University and King Khalid University, who study in the department of English language. The sample consisted of (53) students who study in their fourth year and who were selected randomly from the department of English language. The research results demonstrated that the perceptions of the students of e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic were positive because they see that e-learning makes learning easier, especially in the student-instructor interaction, as well as using various teaching styles and assessment methods and they participated in making the students prefer e-learning in their future education. However, the students reported that they do not have all the technical skills needed for e-learning and that they face technical problems and a lack of social relations during online learning. Based on these results, the researcher recommended training the students on e-learning skills and platforms and providing them with the required technologies for the effective adoption of e-learning.

Keywords: EFL learners' perspectives, e-learning, covid-19 pandemic, Saudi students, online learning

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Introduction

Significant changes have occurred in the educational field, with the e-learning emerging as the basic learning mode in all instructional institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic. This occurrence has made the transition to e-learning an obligation since each school and university must follow in order to deliver its classes and continue teaching its students. Several applications and platforms have come into scene as significant e-learning tools, especially Blackboard, Microsoft Teams, ZOOM, and etc. (Alsuhailani, 2021).

In fact, e-learning is a beneficial learning mode, especially in the language learning arena. Hjeltnes and Hansson (2004) reported that e-learning is an interactive learning environment that employs web technology, combines the advantages of electronic content management systems and social networks and enables learners to publish lessons and goals, set assignments, apply educational activities, and communicate with teachers through multiple techniques (Long, 2004). Also, it provides opportunities for individual education, suitable for all students who learn English as a second language, and this method enables students to discover their own educational methods (Soliman, 2014).

E-learning delivers considerable benefits to EFL learners (Abu-Ayfah, 2020). It is noticeable that the use of the English language by students will increase through exchanging opinions with their peers, joining educational and cultural language forums, and organizing meetings with other students using the English language through e-learning (Ahmad, 2020). E-learning gives EFL students the opportunity to use the language. Therefore, their self-confidence empowers them with the language and works on the rapid growth of their language competence and on the development of their vocabulary. When students have the opportunity to interact using e-learning, the student's four language skills are developed (Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020).

In Saudi Arabia, with the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic, the transition towards e-learning has been unprecedented. By the start of March 2020, all the universities started to use e-learning platformed and virtual classes to deliver learning. The blackboard, Zoom, Google Classrooms, Webex, Edmodo, and WhatsApp were the most prominent e-learning tools adopted in Saudi universities (Alsuhailani, 2021).

Like all other countries, Saudi Arabia has taken major steps toward e-learning during the pandemic, especially at the university stage. The learning process was majorly based on online platforms and applications that support language learning and education (Alkinani, 2021). Although the introduction of e-learning is not new in the Saudi educational system, but the learning experience during the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the whole learning process and inserted new insights for each of the universities, teachers, and students. Therefore, the e-learning process during the pandemic was viewed differently. The present study focuses on considering the Saudi EFL students' perspectives of e-learning during the pandemic in order to elicit how useful was the experience, the challenges encountered, and the best ways that can be introduced to improve the practice.

Despite the benefit of e-learning in the educational process, several studies reported that EFL teachers and students have various perspectives on the experience of e-learning in language

learning (Hakim, 2020; Asseel, 2014; Tawalbeh, 2018; Fageeh, 2015; Al; Mohsen & Shafeeq, 2011; Fageeh, 2011; Hassan & Shukri, 2017). Furthermore, Mohsen and Shafeeq (2011) concluded that EFL teachers and students see that the Blackboard is a beneficial e-learning tool in motivating EFL students and enhancing their classroom interaction.

Although online learning systems have benefits in the educational system, the use of e-learning in language learning encounters some challenges. These challenges include connection problems (Alshehri & Cumming, 2020), personal devices problems (Hakami, 2020), privacy issues (Sharma, 2019), technical difficulties (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021), and lack of technical skills (Oyaid & Alshaya, 2019). Also, it was reported that some EFL teachers resist the use of e-learning in language learning classes, especially in sharing files, presenting materials, and in making assignments and educational activities (Al Shlowiy & Layali, 2020).

In light of the current status of e-learning in Saudi Arabia, and in consideration of these efforts, learners could resist the change and display a negative attitude (Sharma, 2019). EFL learners have different perspectives toward using e-learning depending on the instructors' ability to design and implement online classes (Bousbahi & Alrazgan, 2015). Still, several teachers prefer using traditional learning media than online learning and that several EFL teachers and students lack the necessary skills and knowledge of e-learning particularly if they are unable to exchange ideas, increase their knowledge, and boost their skills (Al Shlowiy, A., Al-Hoorie, A., & Alharbi, M., 2021).

Since the beginning of the period of school suspension in Saudi Arabia, the MoE has worked hard to efficiently adapt the educational system to distance learning. In fact, distance learning is not new to Saudi Arabia (Oraif & Elyas, 2021). Saudi universities adopted a comprehensive e-learning system. For example, King Saud University and King Khalid University introduced the Excellence in E-learning Program and Award in order to enhance the learning process for both the students and instructors. The Excellence in E-learning Program achieved premium results in terms of delivering quality learning, overcoming the problem of grades inflation, and making both students and teachers competent in online learning tools and materials. However, it was shown that the students at the universities came across some challenges and their perceptions constitute a major step towards the future orientation of using e-learning in the university. Therefore, this study examines the Saudi EFL students' perspectives of e-learning during the pandemic.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most learning schemes worldwide have been transferred to online. Learners who previously engaged in traditional learning now face a new challenge, a distinctive rise in e-learning. That drastic change could impact their learning behavior and acceptance of the change. As a result, the learning engagement could be affected massively (Oraif & Elyas, 2021).

The students' perceptions of e-learning are a prerequisite to improve the language learning process in order to identify the students' preferences and the barriers that face students while learning. As indicated by Al Shlowiy (2021), e-learning is the future of education in Saudi

universities and a major part of Saudi Vision 2030 and the interest in e-learning is a big concern to deliver highly competent learners who are linguistically robust and cross-culturally players.

The results of this study shall provide valuable insights to all Saudi universities about the students' views of e-learning, the valuable benefits and challenges demonstrated during EFL learning during the pandemic and the possible ways to enhance the integration of e-learning in the curriculum, teachers' preparation programs, the classroom activities, and the technological plans to enhance the learning process.

Literature Review

E-learning is a self-learning process through computers, tablets or mobile phones, whether through an internet connection or through Compact Discs (CDs), and this process lets the learner to learn anytime and anywhere (Anas, 2020). Displaying texts, audio clips, videos, animations and virtual environments create a very rich learning environment that can outperform the traditional classroom learning environment (Hakami, 2020).

E-learning is an interactive system of education provided to the learner using communication and information technologies and is based on an integrated digital electronic environment that displays courses via electronic networks, provides ways of direction and guidance, organizes exams as well as evaluates and manages resources and processes (Long, 2004).

In addition, Khafaga (2021) defined e-learning as a self-learning method that connects the learners and teacher through computers or smart phones so that they can communicate at any place and time. This method uses various effective means and technologies such as videos, audio clips, virtual environments, etc., and is divided into three basic types, namely synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, and blended learning.

E-learning is based on the philosophy of distance learning that is based on self-learning for learners, that is, transforming the education process into learning that type of education in which the learner is highly self-reliant, and in which the direct relationship between the teacher and the learner is absent, and here the role of the communicative mediator is growing in achieving skills necessary for the learning process which is represented in the Internet with its advanced characteristics (Hjeltnes & Hansson, 2004). According to Long (2004), e-learning is characterized by being cost-effective, flexible in time and place, easy to use and learn, and controlled management.

There are a number of studies based on the significance and efficacy of the implementation of e-learning (Alkinani, 2021; Tawalbeh, 2018). Many universities across the world are promoting it as a teaching method and it is being widely appreciated by the learners. There are several reasons for its overall acceptability such as its flexibility, better control over the environment, and ease of utilization (Ahmad, 2020). On the other hand, e-learning was reported to be criticized for being encouraging isolation and lack of teacher-learner interaction (Abbasi, S., Ayoob, T., Malik, A., & Memon, S. I., 2020).

Pratiwi & Kurniati (2022) examined the EFL students' views of e-learning in the university during the pandemic of Covid-19. The results showed that the students supported e-learning due to its cost, flexibility, efficiency, and confidence. Khalil & Alharbi (2022) examined EFL teachers' views of e-learning platforms during Covid-19, especially Zoom, Blackboard, and Google Classroom. It is shown that Google Classroom is the most effective platform for EFL learning, then Blackboard and Zoom. Haque (2022) compared Saudi EFL learners' and instructors' perceptions in terms of online writing instruments during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was shown that online writing tools are beneficial in improving vocabulary, minimizing grammatical errors, and enhancing spelling. Also, online writing tools were associated with more confidence from the part of the students.

In Saudi Arabia, researchers such as Hakim (2020), Anas (2020), Almekhlafy (2020), and Al-Nofaie (2020) investigated the employment of online learning during the pandemic in educational contexts. Almekhlafy (2020) concluded that the first-year college students do not have a favorable perception of e-learning and the blackboard system during the pandemic and that the students lack major technical skills of e-learning in addition to the connection problems that disturb the e-learning during the pandemic. Al-Nofaie (2020) reported that EFL students still prefer traditional learning, but they perceive e-learning in a positive way during its flexibility. Furthermore, Khafaga (2021) reported that both learners and teachers are prone to use e-learning due to easiness of use, enhanced interaction, and better evaluation and testing mechanisms.

Alsuhailbani (2021) concluded that the Saudi EFL students supported the use of blackboard during the pandemic in the Saudi universities due to the flexibility, the time and place control, the easiness of uploading and downloading documents, and the ability to post and ask questions easily, and the ability to submit assignments and presentations without more guidance from the instructor.

Prior studies investigated that there is a positive attitude toward e-learning implementation by undergraduate students, academic members, and organizational staff. According to Hussain et al. (2018), tracking student engagement in different educational learning activities, e-learning encourages high-quality learning and comprehensive analysis of student engagement can help to minimize course dropout rates. Technology in general and most particularly e-learning provides this opportunity for foreign language learners to have a flexible learning platform.

The results of AlKinani (2021) revealed that Saudi students in the college positively perceived online learning as the reasonable cost, flexibility, and richness of information. Also, the students favored the online class activities, but they were less favorable of the connection problems, the delayed feedback, and the lack of motivation and isolation.

Based on the studies (Jebreen, 2017; Hussain et al., 2018; Al-Azawei et al., 2016; O'Doherty et al., 2018), the barriers are commonly related to the new e-learning modules, students' anxiety within an unfamiliar e-learning platform, and the alignment of e-learning within the contexts of teaching and learning. Besides, lack of technical supports, ICT skills, and lack of infrastructure is considered to be the major obstacles to e-learning implantation.

Yet, some studies found that e-learning is perceived differently by teachers and students. Tawalbeh (2018) stated that teachers' use of e-learning is limited despite the conviction of its capabilities and flexibility. Also, Al IHassan and Shukri (2017) reported that students are satisfied with e-learning and the easy access to materials, activities, exercises, and evaluation. But, Soliman (2014) concluded that e-learning has some limitations such as lack of interaction, decreased social relations, and technical problems.

Despite acceptance among many Saudis, the culture of e-learning still presents a considerable challenge that must be addressed. There is major controversy surrounding online learning and its benefits for Saudi learners. Al Shlowiy (2021) stated that Saudi EFL students, during Covid-19- based e-learning process, faced a number of challenges represented mainly by the sudden shift to e-learning in the Saudi universities.

According to Kisanga and Ireson (2015), successful e-learning implementation is a means to solve the authentic concerns of teaching and learning. This affirmation supports the idea that empowering e-learning implementations particularly in EFL education is also a means. According to Rahim and Sandaran (2020), e-learning works as an effective approach for foreign language learning which integrates collaboration. This is not effectively possible without the enhancement of e-learning as an approach to pave the way for effective learning.

Methods

This study uses the descriptive analytical approach. The descriptive approach focuses on collecting data through describing the events and analyzing their components in order to give in-depth details about the topic being studied (Crowder et al., 2017).

Analytical research takes descriptive research one stage further by seeking to explain the reasons behind a particular occurrence by discovering causal relationships (Robson, 1993). Once causal relationships have been established, the search shifts to factors that can be changed (variables) in order to influence the chain of causality.

The present research describes and analyses Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of e-learning during the pandemic. The research design constructed here is based on the questions formulated. These questions were raised from the literature and the researcher's observation.

Participants

The population of this research consists of all Saudi EFL students who were studying during the pandemic in two Saudi universities, namely King Saud University and King Khalid University. The research population is those students who study at the English language department in each university in the fourth year whose number is (106). The target sample is (50%) of the research population. So, the sample size is (53) students, being selected randomly. Those who responded to the data collection tool with valid responses is (42) students with a response rate reaching to (79.2%).

Research Instruments

A closed questionnaire is used as the main data collection tool in this study. The research questionnaire is designed based on previous researches and studies. The questionnaire items were drafted based on the empirical research related to the EFL Learners' perceptions of e-learning during the pandemic. The questionnaire tools were applied as they fit to collect data from a large sample and can be responded easily by the participants without place and time restrictions (Girko, 2018).

The research questionnaire consists of (25) items that address the EFL learners' perceptions of e-learning during pandemic and the challenges encountered. The questionnaire is distributed on the research sample and the responses are gathered within one week.

The rating scale used in this questionnaire is Likert scale that has five ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questionnaire was written in the English language. The questionnaire was self-administered and distributed personally to the participants.

The participants of the research were made aware of the research objectives and their approval to participate in the study was ensured. In addition, the participants were informed that their responses will be used for the research purposes only and will not affect them in any aspect. Moreover, the confidentiality of the data is ensured.

Validity and Reliability

The researcher achieved the face validity of the questionnaire by verifying that the questionnaire measures what it is intended to measure. The questionnaire has been made available to a number of judges who are majored in EFL. In light of the comments and remarks provided by the judges, the researcher has modified the questionnaire and rephrased the items that need more clarity and relevance to the intended goal.

Reliability is concerned with the consistency of findings (Girko, 2018). The researcher has used Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and the findings are shown in table one as follows:

Table 1. *Reliability statistics*

No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
25	.869

From the above table, Cronbach's Alpha for all the items of the questionnaire is (.869) and it is a high reliability value. The questionnaire is then considered a reliable tool.

Statistical Tools

Selecting the proper statistical methods depends on the nature of the data and the relationship between the method and the research objective (Girko, 2018). As such, this study used what is relevant to the research question and framework. The main data analysis techniques used in the research are as follows: mean, percentage, standard deviation, frequency, and order of mean scores.

Research Procedures

The researchers started by collecting the theoretical information of the study by reviewing many of the relevant research articles and publications. Then, the researcher designed the questionnaire based on the literature review and the research questions. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire are verified by the appropriate statistical methods. The researchers distributed the questionnaire on the research participants and got their responses personally. The researcher finalized data collect and put the results for analysis

Results

This part presents the findings of the study. As the main data collection tool in this research is the questionnaire, this research seeks present the participants' responses to the items of the questionnaire. In the below part, the findings related to students' perceptions of e-learning during Covid-19 pandemic are presented. The responses are shown in table two:

Table 2. *Students' responses to the questionnaire items*

Statements	%	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Standard Deviation	Order
E-learning makes the learning process easier.	%	3.2	15.3	27.5	29.9	24.1	3.56	1.11	2
Student-Teacher interaction during isolation has increased	%	7.1	12.4	23.6	32.1	24.8	3.55	1.19	3
I interact with my classmates through the available communication tools.	%	4.6	18.7	28.7	28.7	19.2	3.39	1.13	8
I feel satisfied with the knowledge acquired during the e-learning process.	%	6.8	18.5	27.5	26.5	20.7	3.36	1.19	11
I feel satisfied with the skills acquired during the e-learning process.	%	7.1	16.5	31.6	27.0	17.8	3.32	1.15	17
I feel satisfied with the development of my experience in performing various activities on the Blackboard.	%	7.1	17.0	30.2	29.0	16.8	3.31	1.15	18
I feel satisfied with my academic Grade Point Average (GPA) during the e-learning process.	%	4.1	20.9	28.5	30.9	15.6	3.33	1.10	14
I generally recommend the implementation of the e-learning process in the post-pandemic period	%	6.1	17.5	29.7	30.4	16.3	3.33	1.13	15
The teacher motivates me to participate actively during the e-learning process.	%	10.2	12.4	31.6	29.9	15.8	3.29	1.18	19
The teacher helps me overcome the technical problems in the e-learning process.	%	6.6	20.0	29.9	27.3	16.3	3.27	1.15	20
The teacher encourages me to become actively involved during the e-learning process.	%	5.6	22.4	27.5	29.9	14.6	3.26	1.13	22
The course content on the Blackboard LMS is well-organized.	%	5.4	19.7	32.8	30.2	11.9	3.24	1.07	23
I do not have all the technological skills needed for e-learning.	%	1.2	17.5	17.8	30.7	32.8	3.76	1.12	1

The teacher applies various teaching styles and assessment methods.	%	6.3	16.3	25.8	29.7	21.9	3.45	1.18	4
The technological devices are expensive for me.	%	6.3	18.0	25.5	31.1	19.0	3.38	1.17	9
I feel satisfied with the university's support when I face technical problems during e-learning.	%	5.1	22.1	24.6	26.3	21.9	3.38	1.19	10
I feel satisfied with the speed of the internet connection during the e-learning process.	%	4.4	21.4	26.5	29.0	18.7	3.36	1.14	12
I feel satisfied with the university instructions on how to perform the e-learning process.	%	9.5	14.4	26.5	32.6	17.0	3.33	1.19	16
I feel satisfied with the university academic e-services during the e-learning process.	%	8.5	24.3	24.6	20.2	22.4	3.24	1.18	24
Repetitive technical problems occur during e-learning sessions.	%	5.4	23.6	24.1	24.6	22.4	3.35	1.21	13
Some lessons need to be explained face-to-face.	%	4.9	22.9	22.1	26.0	24.1	3.42	1.22	7
I sometimes feel lost and confused during e-learning sessions.	%	7.3	22.6	28.0	24.1	18.0	3.23	1.20	25
E-learning does not enhance my social relations with my classmates and teachers.	%	3.4	25.8	20.0	26.0	24.8	3.43	1.21	5
E-teaching is better than traditional teaching.	%	8.0	21.7	26.5	23.4	20.4	3.27	1.23	21
E-learning is my future learning preference.	%	4.4	26.8	19.7	20.7	28.5	3.42	1.27	6
Total							3.36	1.16	

Table two shows the responses of Saudi EFL students to the questionnaire items that check their perceptions of e-learning during the pandemic. The total mean is (3.36) and the SD is (1.16) which means that the students have moderate perceptions towards the items of the questionnaire and that there are some items that are highly approved by the students and other items that are moderately approved by the students.

Out of the (25) items, there are (7) items that are highly agreed by the students and got the highest mean scores, ranging between (3.76 – 3.42). These (7) items are “*I do not have all the technological skills needed for e-learning*” with a mean (3.76), “*E-learning makes the learning process easier*” with a mean (3.356), “*Student-Teacher interaction during isolation has increased*” with a mean (3.55), “*The teacher applies various teaching styles and assessment methods*” with a mean (3.45), “*E-learning does not enhance my social relations with my classmates and teachers*” with a mean (3.43), “*E-learning is my future learning preference*” with a mean (3.42), and “*Some lessons need to be explained face-to-face*” with a mean (3.42).

These findings show that the students' perceptions of e-learning during Covid-19 pandemic are positive because they see that e-learning makes learning easier especially in the interaction in the class, using various teaching styles and assessment methods and that the students prefer e-learning in their future education. However, the students reported that they do not have all the technological skills needed for e-learning.

The results also show that all the other items of the questionnaire got a moderate mean score ranging from (3.38 – 3.23), meaning that the students are average with regard to these items with varying degrees. The most prominent items agreed by the students are: *“I interact with my classmates through the available communication tools”* with a mean (3.39), *“I feel satisfied with the university’s support when I face technical problems during e-learning”* with a mean (3.38), *“I feel satisfied with the knowledge acquired during the e-learning process”* with a mean (3.36), *“I feel satisfied with the speed of the internet connection during the e-learning process”* with a mean (3.36), *“I feel satisfied with my academic GPA during the e-learning process”* with a mean (3.33), *“I generally recommend the implementation of the e-learning process in the post-pandemic period”* with a mean (3.33), *“I feel satisfied with the university instructions on how to perform the e-learning process”* with a mean (3.33), *“I feel satisfied with the skills acquired during the e-learning process”* with a mean (3.32), *“I feel satisfied with the development of my experience in performing various activities on the Blackboard”* with a mean (3.31), *“The teacher motivates me to participate actively during the e-learning process”* with a mean (3.29), and *“The teacher helps me overcome the technical problems in the e-learning process”* with a mean (3.27).

The above findings show, to a moderate extent, that e-learning helped students to interact with their classmates, that the students are satisfied with university’s support when they face technical problems during e-learning, satisfied with the knowledge acquired during the e-learning process, satisfied with the speed of the internet connection during the e-learning process, with their GPA, satisfied with the university instructions on how to perform the e-learning, and satisfied with their experience. Also, the students reported that the teacher motivates them to learn and helps them to overcome any problems.

These findings show that the most prominent challenges encountered by Saudi EFL students during Covid-19 pandemic in e-learning are their insufficient knowledge of technological skills, lack of support for social relations with classmates and teachers, some lessons need to be explained face-to-face and not online, technological devices are expensive for the students, the occurrence of technical problems repeatedly, and that students may get lost and confused during online sessions.

Discussion

How do Saudi EFL students at Saudi universities perceive e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic? The findings of this study demonstrated that Saudi EFL students have positive perceptions of e-learning during the pandemic even though there are some challenges experienced by the learners during the online learning. E-learning offers an engaging and a motivating platform to the students through its audio, video, animation, and its interactive features which allow the teachers and students to interact well with each other and that the students become active and positive in the learning process. These findings are consistent with the findings of Abbasi et al (2020) and AlKinani (2021) who reported that e-learning is an interactive facility that transfers the learning from a teacher-centered mode to a learner-centered mode, thus ensuring that the learners participate, cooperate, and become involved in class assignments, presentations, and activities.

Positive perceptions towards e-learning were showed by Saudi EFL learners because it makes learning easier than the traditional learning mode and that the teacher can use different

teaching methods and assessment approaches. This result matches with the findings of both Almekhlafy (2020) and Al-Nofaie (2020) who informed that e-learning is preferred by EFL students because e-learning cares for the different learning styles of the students and that the students can be given immediate feedback to their performance in the class. Furthermore, Alshehri and Cumming (2020) supported this finding since e-learning minimized EFL students' anxiety and reluctance to speak in the class where the students become in a motivating and tension-free environment where all can speak, ask, discuss, and answer without fear or hesitation.

In Saudi context, traditional approaches for teaching and learning EFL led EFL education to teacher-dominated classrooms (Alsuhaihani, 2021), whereas technology attempts to transform this atmosphere into a more dynamic context. According to Layali and Al Shlowiy (2020) learners' requirements changed since they are involved in these new technological innovations. However, paradigm-shifting in language teaching methodology is an issue for teachers. As Anas (2020) stated that EFL is transformed from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach.

Since the results of the current study showed that the e-learning enhanced the students' motivation, the student's interaction in the class, the students' GPA, it is in agreement with Hakim (2020) which supported the impact of using social media applications in learning and recommended activation of these applications in English language learning.

Also, the Saudi EFL students showed that they are satisfied with the university instructions and support e-learning and happy with the knowledge and experience acquired during the online learning. Furthermore, as for EFL learners' perceptions of e-learning are impacted by their enhanced interaction in the class and the tension-free environment in the online learning environment (Sharma, 2019; Rahim & Sandaran, 2020). E-learning is a new opportunity for Saudi EFL learners who need to be will equipped with the new technological skills and to be trained on how to submit and extract information from the platform (Rahim & Sandaran, 2020). EFL teachers should be provided with proper connections, infrastructure, and facilities in order to avoid the connection disruption and to be trained on the proper use of the online platforms (Khafaga, 2021).

In addition, the integration of online learning in language learning process implies that the language curriculum and activities should be tailored to suit the online mode of learning and that students and teachers find more able chance to interaction and to enjoy the learning process (Al-Nofaie, 2020).

What are the challenges of e-learning encountered by Saudi EFL students at Saudi universities during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The results also reveal some other issues that the learners faced, such as, the need for all online learning equipment, tools, systems, lack of social relations with the teachers and their classmates, the lack of digital skills in using the technological tools, etc. The findings of the present study corroborate the findings of previous research on the same issues about online learning during COVID-19, and the results revealed that learners are not happy with distance education and many obstacles have been encountered (Oraif & Elyas, 2021; Hakim, 2020; Anas, 2020).

This result is also consistent with Khafaga (2021) who stated that one of the barriers in online learning is technology among students and educators. This is a challenge because good lecturers have more excellent skills and know-how on information technology and can use more advanced technology architectures. In contrast, students have a lack of knowledge of basic information technology architectures.

Offering some online courses in most Saudi educational institutions before the COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated, supported, and provided an excellent opportunity for students and institutes to switch to online learning after the outbreak of this pandemic. However, in the beginning, most of the learners appeared online for the first time. In fact, they lacked the experience and confidence to learn online using a new medium. After some time, most learners could overcome most of the technical issues related to online learning platforms. However, the English language learning challenges are still problematic in e-learning (Alshehri & Cumming, 2020).

What are the possible solutions to enhance the adoption of e-learning at Saudi universities?

EFL students should be prepared to move to online learning (Abbasi et al., 2020). Engagement in online classes is the first task of EFL teachers who must be well trained and aware of the benefits of the platforms (Hakim, 2020). Teachers should well design their online classes with more attractive technologies and facilities in order to engage the emotions of their students (Rahim & Sandaran, 2020) and maximize the interaction chances (Layali & Al Shlowiy, 2020).

Conclusion

This study examined the perspectives of Saudi EFL students with regard to e-learning during the pandemic and the challenges encountered. The significance of this study stems from the importance of integrating e-learning into language learning in a methodological way with the proper planning of activities, technologies, and tutors and students' skills. The results showed that Saudi EFL learners had positive perceptions of online learning applications during the COVID-19. They had good experiences and felt convenient in operating online learning applications. The learners expressed that e-learning made their leaning easier and enhanced their interaction with their teachers and classmates. On the other hand, learners experienced some challenges such as their insufficient command of technological skills, technical problems during the sessions, the cost of technology, lack of social relations, and that the students may go lost during the online sessions. Therefore, lecturers should keep on using and maintaining the most popular and favorable online learning applications during distance learning so that all learners feel motivated and enjoyable, and they can keep having positive perceptions of taking online learning. It is recommended that further research should be undertaken to understand the teachers' views and experiences towards online English language teaching during the pandemic.

Recommendations

Since the results of the study showed that e-learning is an important mode of instruction for EFL students, it is recommended to integrate e-learning into the EFL programs to be part and parcel of the learning process and not a supplementary element. EFL teachers should be trained on the designing of online learning classes, activities, assignments, and tests to be able to interact effectively with their online learners. EFL students need to be fully aware of the online platforms

and all their components and facilities in order to know how to present their materials, make their assignments, interact with their teachers and peers, and to perform their tests. On the other hand, the universities must have the necessary infrastructure such as language labs and virtual classes and internet connections in order to facilitate the e-learning process.

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Thamer Binmahboob is specialized in teaching English as a second language for more than 18 years. His participation in conferences was related to applying technologies in the learning environment. His belief in the importance of integrating technologies with learning led him to develop an application on smartphones for learning writing.

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