

## Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Virtual Classes and the effectiveness of Virtual Classes in Enhancing Communication Skills

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### Abstract

The use of the Internet is increasing the possibilities for language learning and teaching (Sallbego & Tumolo, 2015). Virtual classes use computer-mediated technology to facilitate learning, teaching, and communication processes. The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers' and students' perceptions of English as a foreign language (EFL) virtual classes. Moreover, it also aims to highlight the effect of this kind of class on enhancing communication skills. Therefore, the main research question is about the perceptions that students and teachers have of EFL virtual classes. This study conducted in the Female English Department at King Khalid University in Abha. The participants were thirty teachers and students who were divided into two equal groups (fifteen in each group). Regarding that, participants answered a particular questionnaire. The results show that the majority of the students and teachers possess positive attitudes toward teaching and learning through EFL virtual classes. Moreover, they also agree with the significant role of virtual courses in enhancing communication skills. Thus, implementing EFL virtual classes can be recommended as beneficial. This study states some recommendations in light of its findings.

*Keywords:* communication skills, perceptions, virtual classes

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## Introduction

According to Sarica and Cavus (2008), learning via the Internet is an alternative way to learn English. They state that new technology and powerful Internet connections provide a wide range of opportunities for the development of educational processes and enhancing language skills. Also, technological advances in computer systems have supported various possibilities in comparison with traditional classroom settings (Danesh, Bailey & Whisenand, 2015). Using computer-mediated communication can improve communication skills and has a positive influence on learning (Balaji & Digant, 2010, as cited in Danesh, Bailey & Whisenand, 2015).

Generally, the widespread use of the Internet in teaching and learning assists the progress of communication among learners, teachers, and sharing resources for knowledge (Cakiroglu, 2014). Distance learning settings have begun to be used all over the world and used various types of technologies such as videoconferencing, videotape, satellite broadcast, TV broadcast, Internet, virtual classes, and so on (Sarica & Cavus, 2008). "Virtual classrooms are one of the main components of synchronous settings that share certain similarities with real classrooms" (Cakiroglu, 2014, p. 1). It defined as an "electronic classroom" that can be expandable in time, space, and content" (Beatty, 2010, p. 171). It is called virtual because "it can relax the spatial constraints (users at different locations no matter how far about) and the temporal constraints (users interacting overtime via asynchronous communications)" (Beatty, 2010, p. 171).

This study aims to achieve three objectives. The first one is to obtain the perceptions of students and teachers on (EFL) virtual classes. The second one is to attempt to discover the effectiveness of using virtual classes in enhancing communication skills from the experiences of teachers and students with virtual courses. The third objective is to offer some recommendations for virtual courses in learning and teaching. It conducted in the English Department at King Khalid University.

The term communication skills refer to the messages passed between the learner and the instructor through electronic media (Gikandi, Morrow & Davis, 2011; Piccoli, Ahmad & Ives, 2001; Wilson, 1996; as cited in Wijesooriya, Heales, & Clutterbuck, 2015). Interactions' types often occur in virtual classes. For example, learner-content interaction where the learners gain intellectual information from the session, learner-learner interaction during the exchange of information, ideas and dialog, and learner-instructor communication, which involves feedback and dialogue between the teacher and learner (Danesh, Bailey & Whisenand, 2015).

### *The statement of the problem*

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia utilizes computer technology widely in various fields. As a result of the positive findings of numerous of empirical studies that aim to investigate the effectiveness of Internet technology in EFL teaching and learning, Saudi universities use this technology in teaching and learning EFL (AbuSeileek, 2007; Almekhafi, 2006; Laufer & Hill, 2000, as cited in Al-Tale, 2014). According to Al-Tale (2014), King Khalid University (KKU) used the e-learning program in 2005. The e-learning system includes the Blackboard program that facilitates e-learning system for learners and teachers. The virtual classroom is a kind of learning and teaching tools available in the Blackboard program. Virtual classes include a variety of learning and teaching facilities, such as chat, whiteboard, break-out rooms, application sharing, synchronized

web browsing, and feedback (Cakiroglu, 2014). Many types of research state the advantages of using virtual classes in learning and teaching, such as removal of geographical barriers, facility to record the session, and its activities may reduce anxiety and enhance motivation, it has a significant effect in improving communication and collaboration (Yadav, 2016). Additionally, previous researches conducted in the field of blended-learning have indicated the benefits that students and teachers can obtain through online communication.

### ***The significance of the study***

Many universities and colleges around the world now engage online classes and programs to allow access to higher education without geographical barriers (Butner, Murray, & Smith, 1999 as cited in McBrien & Jones, 2009). The use of the computer considers as a part of the curriculum in schools and universities. The integration of Internet technology into EFL learning and teaching becomes widely used in Saudi Arabia's universities. Virtual classes allow teachers and students to interact online synchronously by using many features such as communicating orally, exchanging texts through typing, audio chat, upload PowerPoint presentations, transmit video, and more (Yadav, 2016). As virtual classes use and integrate into learning and teaching, the author of this study feels it is essential to shedding light on perceptions of teachers and students regarding EFL virtual classrooms and its contributions in enhancing communication skills from the experiences of teachers and students on this site.

### ***Research questions***

- 1- What are the perceptions do students and teachers have on EFL virtual classes at the female English department in KKU?
- 2- Based on teachers' and learners' experiences, do EFL virtual classes play a role in enhancing communication skills?

### ***Review of related literature***

Many researchers have made numerous studies on virtual classes and their roles in learning and teaching. Researchers from different parts of the world conducted studies about engaging virtual classes in the education process. In this part, the researcher presents some of these related studies. Some studies relate to investigating teachers' and students' reflections on their experiences with virtual classes, and some relate to engaging learners through virtual environments. Others are about the advantages and disadvantages of virtual classes.

### ***Students and teachers perceptions of online classes***

Conrad (2004) investigates teachers' perceptions of their experiences with online teaching. He uses the term *online learning* to refer to computer-mediated, web-based learning environments like virtual classes. The writer focuses only on asking the participants in the study to reflect on their roles as online teachers. He interviewed five instructors who were engaged in online teaching for the first time in a graduate program at a Canadian university. In the result of his study, he followed Collins and Berge's work (1996) in categorizing online instructional roles into four general areas: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. According to pedagogical issues, some of the teachers are happy and interested in that internet technology allows them to present information to their students clearly, and strengths their passion for the subjects. Others disagree on the side of content delivery by commenting that online structure does not give them enough

time on specific topics and a lack of physical presence like in face-to-face settings. On the side of managing the process of learning online, the instructors mention that each new instructor enters his virtual classroom with knowledge of the cohort model. The cohort model refers to collaborative learning and preparation to teach online and incorporating new technologies.

Additionally, Salbego and Tumolo (2015) investigate students' and teachers' reflections on their experiences with synchronous online classes in Brazil. They aim to obtain the perceptions of students and teachers on Skype language classes in relation to face-to-face classes. The results of this study point out that teachers and students consider that Skype language classes create possibilities for language learning opportunities and their advantages outweigh and more than the disadvantages. All the participants in this study assure that speaking and listening are in advantage of online classes' platforms when compared to face-to-face classes. The results also suggest that it is possible to increase the development of student language through Skype classes.

Cakiroglu (2014) evaluates students' perspectives about virtual classrooms according to seven principles of good practice. Chickering and Gamson (1987, as cited in Cakiroglu, 2014) assert that effective teaching practices encourage seven principles, namely student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. In this study, the researcher assesses distance learners' perceptions about the quality of course delivery in virtual classrooms at the Faculty of Education in Turkey. The researcher focuses on investigating the quality of distance learning setting in three dimensions (teaching, learning, and interaction) by a questionnaire based on seven principles of good practice (SPGP). After analyzing the questions that relate to interaction dimension, the researcher came up with the following results, student-faculty contact considers as effective element in the virtual classroom, and he got highly satisfactory responses on this side. The researcher also finds that cooperation among students rarely practices in online instruction. In the context of analyzing questions that relate to teaching practices, the researcher finds learners' overall assessments of time on task shows that the students satisfied. Most of the learners indicate that the course is organized in such a manner as to allow them to complete assignments effectively and sufficient time provided for learning activities. The mean response is ( $M = 3.58$ ) regarding technical problems, especially when the line is busy, negatively affect the lesson time. The researcher states that the feature of lessons recording consider as an important advantage of synchronous sessions and assessed by students as excellent. The researcher receives some negative opinions about the delays in timely feedback. The results of student assessment of the high expectation questions through the virtual classroom are rated as highly satisfactory (from  $M = 3.33$  to  $M = 3.99$ ). According to the results of students' responses about questions of learning, most of the students agree that the instructor successes in coordinating the learning activities through the virtual classroom. The participants evaluate the item that the instructor uses different kinds of instructional materials as highly satisfactory. This is convenient for learners to present their talents and is rating as excellent. The researcher in his study presents some of the potential of virtual classrooms for teaching, learning, and interaction, and some suggestions for instructors who wish to use virtual classrooms in their teaching.

Bolstad and Lin (2009) investigate the experiences of a large sample of students learning in virtual classrooms across New Zealand. Virtual classrooms establish in New Zealand to enable

students (particularly those in rural, remote areas, and small schools) to overcome issues of distance and resourcing. In these classes, students learn through videoconferencing with teachers, emails, contact management systems and relevant websites. The research includes both qualitative and quantitative data collection and was carried out over one year. Overall, the survey data suggests that students have different experiences (some positive and others less positive) with learning in virtual classes. Most students indicate that they are learning more useful study skills, and the learning is enjoyable through virtual classes. The findings suggest that students experience different degrees of success, and comfort in the virtual classroom environment. In the survey data of this research, four key themes selected. These are independence and support, shared learning, e-learning, and personalizing learning. In the analysis of independence and support data, the researchers found that 61% of students think they learn more independently in virtual classrooms than face-to-face classes. Other teachers see that they have a significant role in supporting learners through virtual classrooms. This occurs by adapting their teaching approaches and using different pedagogical strategies to keep students active and engaged. On the side of shared learning analysis as a feature of virtual classrooms, the researchers indicate that shared learning rarely occurs in the virtual classes environment. According to the use of e-learning materials in virtual classrooms, the researchers found that more than half (53%) of students search the Internet for useful websites through virtual classrooms. Only 58% use their own virtual classroom websites, or other websites recommend by their teachers. The researchers notice that virtual sessions focus largely on communication between teachers, students, and less between students to communicate with each other. In analyzing personalizing learning, the researchers came up with these findings, the most common activities during virtual classes sessions are the exchange of questions between teacher and students where teachers direct questions to their students rather than vice versa, so exchanges between students were less frequent.

Moreover, McBrien, Jones, and Cheng (2009) conduct a study at the University of South Florida. The study aims to collect students' reflections about their experiences with virtual classes. Elluminate Live is the software that employs in the virtual classroom. The researchers constructed a short, open-ended survey to collect students' responses to virtual courses. Questions design according to transactional distance theory that consists of three elements: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. Overall, the students get positive attitudes toward their learning experiences using virtual classes. In analyzing dialogue aspect in the virtual classroom, the researchers find that 91% of students' comments were positive in terms of the quantity and quality of the dialogue experienced. Structure refers to the course organization and its impact on students' participation (Moor, 1993, as cited in McBrien, Jones, & Cheng, 2009). They found that students reveal the need for clear and consistence structure, expectations, and roles in virtual classroom sessions to reduce their experience of distance. Most students agree that synchronous online classes offer convenience. In the findings, the researchers mention some limitations of virtual classes such as confusion that result from too many simultaneous interactions, lack of non-verbal communication, and technology issues.

On the other hand, Iqbal, Neittaannmaki, and Kankaanranta (2010) conduct a study of engaging learners through virtual worlds. They try to explore how virtual worlds could support the engagement for learning. They review the results of studies that utilized the virtual world to engage learners and for education. The researchers state the effectiveness of the use of educational virtual

worlds or technologies on facilitating the learning of different subjects and improving students' behavior. For example, several researchers reported the development of learning outcomes in relation to the use of virtual worlds in science classrooms. Based on the literature review, the researchers define *engaged learning* as a situation in which learners are active, and it has five aspects: learner activeness aspect, cognitive aspect, socio-collaborative aspect, behavioral aspect, and emotional aspect. They mention that a virtual environment in education should include three elements, namely education, entertainment, and social commitments, to make sure that learning through the virtual world is meaningful, engaging, and understandable. They state that the virtual world has many benefits or affordances for learners, such as enhancing interaction between students and communication materials. They also mention that a virtual world is fundamentally social and enables collaboration between the learning community in many ways. It also can provide practical ways to create authentic and challenging tasks that are contextual as well. The researchers suggest that virtual classes also offer many new ways to evaluate and assess the progress of students, such as performance-based assessment for engaged learning. They conclude that learning through a virtual world can be engaging for learners and can affect their test scores as well as their attitude and motivation toward it.

### ***The advantages and disadvantages of virtual classes***

Yadav (2016) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of using computers and the Internet in education and discusses the role of teachers in Internet education. Yadav states how the use of the Internet and web lead to the significant changes in educational models and in communication tools that are adapting easily with learning methods. He mentions that virtual classes are a new term of E-learning, where the students will be present with their professor and fellow learners in a classroom via the Internet. He also states that the availability of different communication materials between teachers and students in virtual classes considers as a beneficial role is of synchronous online classes. It plays an important role in maintaining interaction. Moreover, he points out the interaction capability of the synchronous virtual classroom and the importance of learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-interface interaction within the virtual classroom. He also concludes with the need for training and technical problems consider as disadvantages of virtual classes.

Similarly, Danesh, Bailey, and Whisenand (2015) highlight the role of technology in interaction and communication as relates to distance education. They state that many universities in higher education are expanding their online course. They focus on technology and media as its relation in collaboration, interaction, and communication. They also mention that the increasing interest in distance education attributes to two significant factors. These factors are the progress of computing and telecommunication technologies, the second is the change in the demographic population of college students. They also assert that communication plays a significant role in the success of distance education and is a collective activity. Effective communication is possible when participants share a similar ground relates such as mutual knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions in a conversation. According to extending the interaction model by Moore's interaction model in 1989, Danesh et al. (2015) point out that there are three essential types of in distance education interaction. Learner-content communication occurs where the learners obtain intellectual information from the session. The learner-learner occurs through exchanging information, ideas, and dialog among students about the course. The learner-instructor interaction

involves the feedback and dialogue between the teacher and learner. To determine the impact of various interaction methods use in distance education on the success of the educational outcome, the researchers constructed a questionnaire. The courses were from both Master of Business Administration, and Management Information System disciplines and all classes use a mixed-mode format, combining face-to-face and online classroom discussions. The results reveal that sixty-two of students showed that learner-instructor and learner-learner interactions as useful discussion modes and play an essential role in the success of the class when use synchronously and asynchronously. Sixty-four of the students mention that they participate more in synchronous sessions. Secondly, the students participates more in online sessions than in face-to-face discussions. Thirdly, the combination of face-to-face and online classrooms discussion is preferable to understand the materials better.

Bower, Groom, and Cram (2010) define virtual worlds as an electronic environment that minimizes sophisticated physical space, where people can interact with each other via virtual objects. They also describe a blended reality as a combination environment where the physical and virtual combined in the service of interaction goals and communication. Their study investigates the use of a blended reality environment for learning and teaching in a tutorial setting. In their study, a virtual classroom includes a live video stream of activity that is occurring in the face-to-face classroom. The face-to-face classroom includes a projection of virtual classroom space. Through that, they could examine issues and potentials associated with the use of blended reality classes. Their project evaluates how people participate in physical and virtual worlds. The participants were three researchers, students, and seven volunteers associated with the department of education at Macquarie University by using several items of equipment. Their study point out to some advantages for learning and teaching, such as enhanced remote access to face-to-face classes, increased online interaction, and the influence of both worlds within the one learning environment depending on needs.

### **Methodology**

This study uses a quantitative methodology. The quantitative method can be easily validated (Liebscher, 1998, as cited in Ahmad, Shah, & Al Ghamdi 2009). This study focuses on teachers' and students' reflections on their experiences with EFL virtual classes and the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills. To answer the two research questions of this study, two paper-based questionnaires designed for data collection. The participants are fifteen EFL teachers and fifteen EFL students who have experience in teaching and learning via virtual classes. The following parts explain the employed methodology in detail.

#### **3.1 Participants**

The study designs to elicit responses from at least fifteen students and fifteen teachers who have experienced using EFL virtual classes during their learning and teaching. In total, the participants of the study are thirty female Saudi teachers and students in the English female department, KKU, Abha, Saudi Arabia, in 2019. All of the participants are English learners and teachers at the female English department in KKU. Participants divided into two groups, (a) students who have had an experience with virtual classes, and (b) teachers who have a sustained involvement with teaching virtual classes. The students and teachers participated voluntarily in the study. The students are

undergraduate students of different levels, including master students. All participants have experienced virtual classes in many EFL subjects.

### ***Design and materials***

The researcher used two paper-based questionnaires. These questionnaires aim to obtain the students' and teachers' experiences and attitudes towards teaching and learning through virtual classes as well as to investigate the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills. The two questionnaires are the same, and the only difference is the substitution of the word "learning" for "teaching" in the questionnaire for teachers. The questionnaires consisted of ten questions. Six of them design to answer the first research question. To elaborate, four of these six questions are structured questions where the respondents have to choose one of two choices. These questions are 1, 2, 3, and 5. See Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for a sample of both the students' and teachers' questionnaires, respectively. The other two questions are open questions that aim to allow the respondents to elaborate on their views, to comment or to provide examples of their answers. These questions are 4 and 10; see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2. Question number four aims to list the major difficulties that the participants have encountered in virtual classes, and question 10 asks about the advantages and disadvantages of a virtual class.

The remaining four questions investigate the effectiveness of virtual classes in enhancing communication, based on the experiences of English students and teachers within the virtual class environment at KKU. These questions are 6, 7, 8, and 9. See Appendix 1 and Appendix 2. Question 9 is an open question that tests how do virtual classes enhance their communication skills while questions (6, 7, and 8) are two-choice questions.

### ***Procedures***

After dividing the participants into two groups, (a) students who have had an experience with virtual classes, and (b) teachers who have a sustained experience with teaching virtual classes, the researcher started in distributing the questionnaire between students and teachers for two weeks. The author of this study started in distributing the questionnaire between students after ensuring that they have experience with virtual classes and used it in many EFL classes. In the second step, the participants took the questionnaire and handed it back to the researcher the other day. After collecting students' responses, the writer started distributing the questionnaire between teachers. Then, analyzing the obtained data of the responses of students first. This included analyzing the responses regarding the six questions about students' attitudes toward virtual classes first and then analyzing the responses of the second research question. The same process in data analysis applied to teachers' questionnaires.

### **Results and discussion**

The results are classified into two sections: results of students' and teachers' perceptions of the virtual class and the second part is about results of students' and teachers' attitudes about the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills.

#### ***Results***

The questionnaire inquires participants about their perceptions regarding EFL virtual classes. It also investigates the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills in the female English department at King Khalid University. The results in this section divides into four parts: (a)

students' perceptions of EFL virtual classes; (b) students' opinions on the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills; (c) teachers' perceptions of EFL virtual classes; (d) teachers' opinions on the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills.

### *Students' perceptions of EFL virtual classes*

Fifteen students participated from different levels, including both bachelor and master students. All students have experienced learning through virtual classes in many EFL classes. The questionnaire includes six questions that aim to obtain students' attitudes towards virtual classroom learning. One of these questions is an open question that allows the participants to mention the advantages and disadvantages of EFL virtual classes from their experiences, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *The responses of students regarding the advantages and disadvantages of EFL virtual classes*

Question	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of a virtual class?</b>	"Comfortable environment"	"Technical problems."
	"It makes the process of learning easier."	"the internet problems"
	"It saves our time and effort."	"The lack of facial expression and body language."
	"The availability of recording feature"	
	"Enhance listening comprehension."	
	"Relax atmosphere, and we can attend our classes from home."	
	"No pressure to answer."	
	"Shy students can interact easily."	
	"Ease of using educational websites during the lecture."	

Figure 1 shows that 57% of students' responses towards their experiences in virtual classes are positive. Through students' experiences with EFL virtual classes, 43% percent of students indicates that students prefer face-to-face classes in their learning. The total of respondents is sixty. Thirty-four of them point out that students possess positive feelings toward learning through virtual classes. In contrast, twenty-six of the respondents state that some students have negative perceptions of EFL virtual classes.

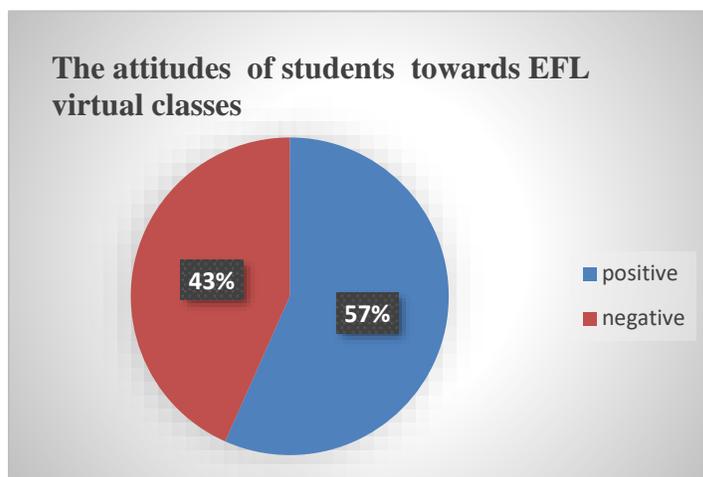


Figure 1 Students' perceptions of EFL virtual classes

### ***Students' opinions on the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills***

The researcher designed four questions that aim to investigate the effectiveness of virtual classes in developing communication skills from the experiences of students in the female English department at KKU. The results of items 1, 2, and 3 show in Tables 2, whereas Table 3 explains the open question regarding the responses of students to the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills.

Table 2. Summary of student responses to the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills

Questions	Agree	Disagree
1. Virtual classes enhance comfort and engagement in dialogue"	8	7
2. Do you believe that it is possible to develop the four EFL skills through virtual classes?	9	6
3. Do virtual classes play a significant role in enhancing communication skills?	8	7

Table 3. Summary of student survey responses to the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills.

Questions	Students' data	Contrary views
4. From your experience in learning, how does this type enhance communication skills?	"Shy students communicate easily."	"It limits my ability to communicate effectively."
	"Some students feel more confident in virtual classes because they can talk better than face to face classes without feeling embarrassed. This allows them to communicate better."	"It cannot enhance our communication skills."

<p>"This through the beneficial features in virtual classes that enhance communication skills like typing easily and sharing content and other educational sites easily and the availability of recorded lectures."</p>
<p>"It allows everyone an opportunity to talk."</p>
<p>"The student can use the internet to learn and get information which helps them to communicate with teacher easily."</p>
<p>"The student can do their homework and attend the class any time, so I can relax."</p>

**Teachers’ perceptions of EFL virtual classes**

As shown in Figure 2, 62% of teachers’ responses indicate that the majority of teachers, in the female English department in KKU, prefer teaching through virtual classes, and they have positive attitudes towards this kind of class. Table 4 shows teachers’ responses about the advantages and disadvantages of virtual classes. The researcher received 38% of responses that point out that some teachers possess negative feelings towards teaching through virtual class.

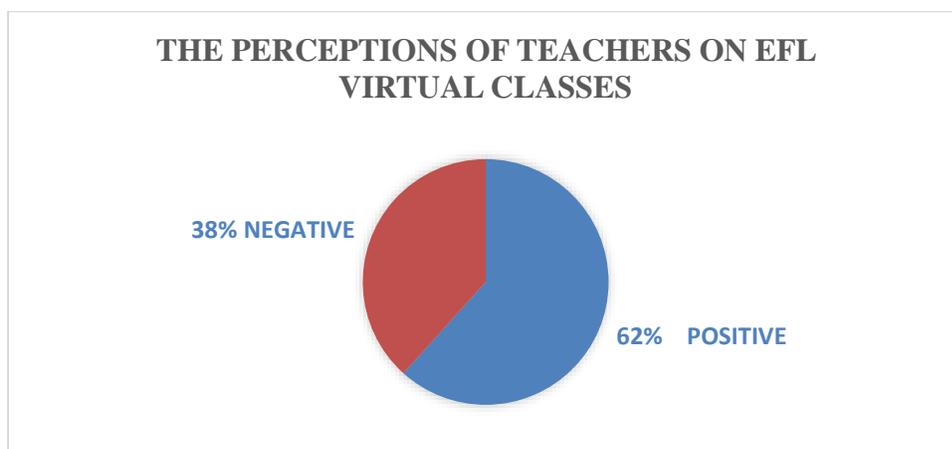


Figure 2 Teachers’ perceptions on EFL virtual classes

Table 4 The responses of teachers regarding the advantages and disadvantages of EFL virtual classes.

Questions	Advantages	Disadvantages
In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of a virtual class?	"The chances provided to the teachers to use multimedia and sensory-rich environments which are very motivational for the students."	"Technical problems that could occur."

"Increased convenience, effective time management, sharpened digital skills, immediate feedback."	"The need for extra training."
"Facilitating tool to enhance the overall learning."	"We cannot depend on virtual classes totally, and blending is a good way."
"Share more information. Can be accessed anytime anywhere."	"Difficult to check students 'comprehension."
"Implementing new technologies rather than the old one."	"Students are not serious about punctuality."
"Equal chances for students to learn."	"It is not enough alone."
"Remove the limitations of time and place."	

### *Teachers' opinions on the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills*

The questionnaire includes four questions designed to shed light on the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills. Table 5 explains teachers' responses regarding these questions. They provided many examples of how this type of class can support communication skills. Five of teachers realize that virtual classes have no vital role in enhancing communication skills, and they preferred face-to-face classes on this side. Table 6 shows teachers' responses regarding the open question in this regard.

Table 5 Summary of teachers' responses to the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills.

Questions	Agree	Disagree
1. "Virtual classes enhance comfort and engagement in dialogue"	9	6
2. Do virtual classes play a significant role in enhancing communication skills?	10	5
3. Do you believe that it is possible to develop the four EFL skills through virtual classes?	6	9

Table 6 Summary of teachers' responses to the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills

Questions	Teachers data	Contrary views
4. From your experience in teaching, how does this type enhance communication skills?	"It provides me plenty of time, so I can discuss with students in detail all that they need to know. Moreover, the students who feel shy in a face-to-face class can participate easily." "It can enhance listening and speaking skills." "By using blogs, discussion, and chats."	"It does not enhance communication skills at all."

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By providing timely feedback and doing many activities."

"There are many options provided for both teachers and students to enhance communication skills and this kind of class is very motivated for students."

"It gives them the opportunities to speak and ask questions and enhance critical comprehension."

"Activating all students 'participation and giving time and chance for all."

"The students will feel relax, talking and communicating."

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### Discussion

In this study, one of the research questions is intended to address students' and teachers' attitudes towards using virtual classes in learning and teaching in the female English department at KKU. Six items in the questionnaire design to elicit respondents regarding the perceptions of the participants on EFL virtual classes. In general terms, regarding the first two questions in the questionnaire that directly intended to ask participants about their attitudes and what kind of classes they prefer in their learning and teaching, virtual classes seem to raise positive attitudes concerning learning and teaching. Similar results find in the study conducted by Salbego and Tumolo (2015), the participants possess positive perspectives towards their experiences with online classes. The other three questions in this part aim to ask participants about the difficulties of virtual classes that may handicap their learning and teaching process and the difference between face-to-face classes and virtual classes in facilitating learning and teaching. The majority of respondents realize that virtual classes facilitate their learning and teaching process in the same manner when compared to face-to-face classes and do not cause difficulties that may handicap the educational process. Eighteen of participants agree that there is no difference between virtual classes and face-to-face classes in facilitating the process of learning and teaching. This finding confirms Cakiroglu's (2014) belief that virtual classrooms are one of the main components of synchronous settings that share certain similarities with real classrooms. Similar results find by Hampel and Stickler (2012), as cited in Sallbego and Tumolo's study (2015), online classes offer a variety of similarities to face-to-face classes in presenting the same contexts of language learning and the ease of negotiation of meaning and social conversations. Some of the participants mentioned that technical problem is the main problem that they usually face in using virtual classes. Similar findings found in the study conducted by Cakiroglu (2014). The researcher stated that technical issues, especially when the line is busy, it is negatively affected the lesson time and caused occasional limitations and influence the time management of the course. As shown in Tables 2 and 4, the majority of teachers and students enjoy the experiences of virtual classes, and they mentioned many advantages of using virtual classes in the learning and teaching process. Some of the participants point out that the absence of body language, the lack of training, and the difficulty of checking comprehension as the main disadvantages of virtual classes. Similarly, in Conard's study (2004), most participants expressed that virtual classes do not offer them visual

access to their learning. They state that the absence of physical presence influences the success of teaching process.

On the other hand, the second research question in this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills. The questionnaire includes four questions to extract how this type of class can enhance communication skills from the experiences of teachers and students. The first questions ask participants about their opinion about the role of virtual classes in enhancing comfort and student engagement in dialogue. Seventeen of respondents agree that virtual classes enabled them to increase their engagement in conversations. In the study conducted by McBrien, Jones, and Cheng (2009), they found that the majority of comments about comfort and student involvement in dialogue were positive (91%), both in terms of quantity of dialogue and the quality of dialogue experienced. The second question asks about the possibility of EFL virtual classes, in developing EFL skills. The majority of students believe that they could improve their EFL skills through EFL virtual classes whereas only six teachers agree with that. The majority of the teachers mention that only speaking and listening skills can improve quickly and efficiently through virtual classes. Similarly finds in Cakiroglu's study (2014), he assures that virtual classes enable instructors to use presentations, documents, code pieces, and video and other formats of contents synchronously that encourage learners to develop EFL skills. Besides, the study conducted by Sallbego and Tumolo's study (2015) about Skype classes, they found that all the participants highlight that speaking and listening are an advantage when compared to face-to-face classes. According to the last two questions that ask participants about their reflections on the role of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills. Ten of the teachers realize the significant role of virtual classes in enhancing communication process. Tables 5 and 6 illustrate teachers' data related to the position of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills and demonstrating the range of responses, with the main trust being positive. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, eight of the students agree and provide several examples of how teaching through virtual classes support communication skills. The results in this aspect show that more than half of students believed that using virtual classes in their learning enhanced their communication skills, particularly in the following aspects: increasing confidence, the helpful features of virtual classes that develop their communication, and the availability of participate chances.

Similar findings are found in research conducted by McBrien, Jones, & Cheng (2009). The researchers state that the synchronous online system offers different modes of communication that increase the amount of interaction and enhance communication. In addition, the study conducted by Cakiroglu (2014) about evaluating students' perspectives about virtual classrooms found that in the aspect of assessing communication between teachers and students, he received a highly satisfactory percentage.

## Conclusion

Nowadays, technology has been used widely in education, and it has changed the way of learning and teaching delivery (Wijesooriya, Heales, & Clutterbuck, 2015).

This paper aims to shed light on students' and teachers' perceptions of their experiences with learning and teaching through virtual classes in the Female English Department at KKU. It also

had another goal that is trying to investigate the effectiveness of this type of class in enhancing communication skills from the experiences of the teachers and students.

The findings of this study reveal that the majority of teachers and more than half of students have positive feelings toward their experience with virtual classes.

The second goal of this study is the effectiveness of virtual classes in enhancing communication skills. The findings show that the majority of teachers agree with the significant role of virtual classrooms in enhancing communication skills, especially in these aspects: the availability of time, enhancing listening and speaking comprehension, the useful features of virtual classes setting, timely feedback and enabling powerful environment for interaction and participation.

To some extent, the findings encourage the use of virtual classes in language learning and teaching in the Female English Department at KKU, particularly in the elements of a comfortable environment and facilitating communication skills. The researcher seeks further researches and studies about the attitudes of teachers and students towards the EFL virtual classes environment to determine the validity and the effectiveness of this type of class.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended to conduct studies that could highlight the perceptions of students and teachers on EFL virtual classes, especially in the Saudi context. Furthermore, because of the limited number of participants in this study, it is also recommended conducting similar research with a large number of participants. This kind of study will clarify the attitudes of teachers and students toward using virtual classes in their learning and teaching. It also could clarify the limitations of virtual classes, its role in enhancing the learning and teaching process, and the differences between virtual classes and face-to-face classes. According to many researchers in the same line, this mode of education has been growing substantially and has begun to be used all over the world (Salbego & Tumolo, 2015; Cakiroglu, 2014). There is a need for more investigation regarding synchronous online classes since it allows more access for people to learn a language (Hample & Stickler, 2012; Gue, 2013; Verjano, 2013, as cited in Salbego, & Tumolo, 2015). The following recommendations stated according to the findings discussed in this study.

First, for teachers, teachers who teach virtual classes could be encouraged to:

- Because of the main feature of EFL virtual classes that is virtual classes enhance comfort and engagement in dialogue, a teacher should try to motivate and improve students 'communication skills. This can occurs by using practices that other teachers and students find it helpful in this side.
- As many researchers confirm the role of using virtual classes in supporting collaborative learning, interaction, developing EFL skills, and knowledge exchange, teachers should use the wide variety of virtual classes features. These different types enable instructors to use presentations, documents, code pieces, videos, and other formats to meet particular student needs, interests, and aspirations.
- Share their virtual classes teaching experiences with others, including those who have not experienced the virtual classes environments.

Second, students learning in virtual classes could be encouraged to:

- Share their ideas, feedback, and attitudes toward their virtual classes learning experience with their teachers, so the teachers could help them to overcome their barriers in using virtual class.
- Talk about how they learn and how they like to learn with other students and teachers, and this could help get advantages of virtual classes learning and raise their positive attitudes toward this type of class.
- Take advantage of the opportunities that contribute to shared learning, enhance communication skills, and develop EFL skills through their virtual classes.

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#### Appendix A: Students' Questionnaire

A questionnaire regarding Students' Reflections on Their Experiences with EFL Virtual Classes and its Role in Enhancing Communication Skills at Female English Department in King Khalid University (group (a) students who have an experience with virtual classes).

1. Do you prefer using a virtual class in your learning rather than a face-to-face classroom setting?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_.
2. What kind of attitudes do you have towards virtual classes?  
Positive attitudes \_\_\_\_\_ Negative attitudes \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you think that using a virtual class can cause difficulties or problems that may handicap your learning process?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_.
4. If Yes, list the major difficulties you have encountered?
5. Rate your opinion of the statement "Virtual classes facilitate the learning process in the same manner when compared to face-to-face classes."  
Agree \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree \_\_\_\_\_.
6. "Virtual classes enhance comfort and engagement in dialogue".  
Agree \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Do you believe that it is possible to develop the four EFL skills through virtual classes?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Based on your experience, do virtual classes play a significant role in enhancing communication skills?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_.
9. From your experience in learning, how does this type of class enhance communication skills?
10. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of a virtual class?

#### Appendix B: Teachers' Questionnaire

A questionnaire regarding teachers' Reflections on Their Experiences with EFL Virtual Classes and its Role in Enhancing Communication Skills at Female English Department in King Khalid University (group (b) teachers who have experience with virtual classes).

1. Do you prefer using a virtual class in your teaching rather than a face-to-face classroom setting?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
2. What kind of attitudes do you have toward virtual classes?  
Positive attitudes \_\_\_\_\_ Negative attitudes \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you think that a virtual class can cause difficulties or problems that may handicap your teaching process?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
4. If Yes, please list significant difficulties?
5. Do you agree with statement that virtual classes facilitate the teaching process when compared to face-to-face classes?  
Agree \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree \_\_\_\_\_
6. "Virtual classes enhance comfort and student engagement in dialogue".  
Agree \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Do you believe that it is possible to develop the four EFL skills through virtual classes?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Based on your experience, do virtual classes play a significant role in enhancing communication skills?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_.
9. From your experience in teaching virtual classes, how does this type of class enhance communication skills?
10. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of a virtual class?