

The Impact of Virtual Classes on Second Language Interaction in the Saudi EFL Context: A Case Study of Saudi Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study was performed to investigate the impact of the virtual classroom on second/foreign language (L2) interaction. A total of 90 Saudi female undergraduate students participated in this study. All participants were enrolled in an English language course in the Preparatory Year Programme (PYP) at a Saudi English Language Centre (ELC), with the English language being taught as a core module in this course. The English language proficiency level of the participants was equal to beginner or low intermediate, which was determined to be the A2 language level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). A quantitative research method, a questionnaire was developed with 19 statements to test the hypotheses of this study, which sought to determine whether virtual classes had an effective impact on language interaction and L2 learning, and whether participants had a positive attitude towards interaction and learning via virtual classes. The study revealed that there was a good degree of communication and interaction among Saudi students specifically in virtual classes. Also, participants showed a positive attitude towards using online classes for L2 learning. Thus, implementing virtual classes for language learning and teaching is highly recommend not only in this particular Saudi learning environment, but also across other EFL contexts. The study aspired to answer the following research questions:1. How effective are virtual classes for promoting interaction through the English language in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia? 2. To what extent can Saudi students use virtual classes for learning English?

Keywords: Interaction, Saudi Context, Second language, Virtual classes

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Introduction

Interaction plays a crucial role in facilitating language learning input. The success of the learning process relies on some way or another on extent to which a comprehensive interactive system for second/foreign language (L2) learners is provided. Learners and teachers need to strike a balance between (a) exchanging thoughts and ideas, and (b) ensure that there is an effective communicative learning process (Sari, 2018). In order to enhance interaction through language input, the learning process should embrace verbal and non-verbal communication to achieve the learning output in an L2 language class. Thus, implementing the right patterns of interaction is considered fundamental in an L2 language class to accomplish the intended learning objectives. However, due to the current global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the education system throughout the world has been forced into a kind of closure, and instruction has been converted from face-to-face learning in real classrooms to e-learning classes to ensure some measure of educational continuity. The development of e-learning has expanded to a great extent to include a variety of online learning approaches such as virtual classes, video conferencing and blended learning. Although virtual classes have different tools that are designed to offer effective content, reinforcement, interaction and real-time feedback to learners through online sessions, it is often difficult to compare their effectiveness to that of traditional classes, especially with respect to language learning as the latter needs a comprehensible input, direct interaction and constructive feedback to enhance the learning process.

Saudi Arabia has been among those countries whose education systems have been affected by the pandemic; all the education initiations in all stages (schools, colleges, universities, ..etc) with no exception, have been closed and transitioned to remote learning to ensure learning continuity through the rest of the academic year. Accordingly, all English language classes for Saudi undergraduate students have been delivered online through virtual classes to catch-up with the English language syllabus and stay on course with the pacing plan for the preparatory year. Also, it was mandatory to prepare all students to enrol in the preparatory year final online exam, which includes English language modules. Thus, one of the challenges faced through teaching the English language to Saudi students through virtual classes has been ensuring that there is some level of interaction. Therefore, this study focused in the effectiveness of virtual classes on learners' interaction.

The potential value of e-learning and distance learning has been studied extensively. Nevas (2010), for instance, examined his students' performance and involvement in blended learning such as combining face to face classes and online learning. The findings revealed that there was a good degree of communication in different activities among students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. In addition, Sanders (2012) conducted a study of the use of e-learning such as online learning management system tools to enhancing students' communication using the target language (English in this study). The findings here showed that the use of different e-learning tools (on line learning) outside the classroom promoted students' engagement in the learning process. Likewise, Hariri and Bahanshal (2015) investigated L2 interaction through e-learning and blended learning in EFL classes in Saudi Arabia, finding that there was a positive correlation between students' English proficiency and the implementation of e-learning in addition to face-to-face classes.

Thus, the area of investigation in this study was whether or not virtual classes are effective in assisting students' L2 interaction based on an online-only format without any face-to-face classes, and whether virtual classes could facilitate students' interaction and language learning. To answer these questions, a quantitative research method was employed, and data were collected through questionnaires to determine students' own views on e-learning and their capabilities to interact in the L2 via virtual classes. Overall, positive responses were observed with respect to students' levels of interaction through virtual classes and their English language learning and performance. It is expected that this study could contribute to our

understanding of the impact of virtual classes on L2 interaction, not only in Saudi Arabia but in EFL classes in other contexts as well.

Statement of Research Problem

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers and students were faced with a sudden and complete switch to virtual classes from teaching regular classes and meeting students face-to-face. More specifically, some challenges arose while teaching students in the ELC, at a Saudi University, especially those in the preparatory year. This difficulty might have been a result of the limited ability of those students to interact effectively with their teachers and classmates in English classes. Virtual classes were mandatory to use via university blackboard and Microsoft teams. 16 hours of English virtual classes were delivered per a week. Students were provided with language material and learning recourses online and they were offered technical support as well. Thus, this study attempted to examine the effectiveness of virtual classes in L2 interaction. Also, it sought to find out to what extent Saudi students are capable of using virtual classes for learning EFL in the Saudi context. The researchers aimed to involve Saudi students in this study to test whether virtual classes have a positive or negative impact on L2 learning, and to investigate whether there are any limitations with respect to the L2 learning process when teaching students online.

Literature Review

Second Language Learning in Virtual Classrooms

English is a *lingua franca*; it is used by people all over the world to communicate and has become essential for business, international trade, diplomacy, tourism, education, science, medicine, and entertainment (Hamouda, 2020; Rao, 2019). Because of its global importance, EFL is an essential subject in countries all over the world. Finding effective ways to teach EFL remains one of the most important modern educational challenges (Hamouda, 2020).

One particular challenge in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is creating environments in which learners can interact in English. Interaction in the L2 is highly valued because, in addition to understanding language utterances, research shows that regular interactions in the L2 result in greatly improved language learning outcomes (Mackey & Goo, 2007; Plonsky & Glass, 2011). However, in some language classes, learners rarely interact with each other. A lack of practice, specifically when there are limited opportunities to interact in English, is perhaps one reason why many researchers have found that EFL learners' speaking abilities are often quite low compared to their listening, reading, and writing skills (Al-Jabry, Salahuddin, & Al-Shazly, 2014; Hamouda, 2020; Hussein 2016). Hussein (2016) and others (Al-Jabry et al., 2014) have suggested that the limited opportunities for learners to practice speaking may be one of the explanations for learners' relatively low speaking abilities

Virtual EFL classrooms and online learning (also known as e-learning) offer a potential solution to these and other challenges. Virtual classrooms can enable learners' interactions with teachers as well as between the learners themselves. Indeed, much of the recent research in the EFL domain has attended to the possible benefits of virtual learning environments for English learners (Bianchi, Yyelland, Yang & McHarg, 2019; Hamouda, 2020; Hussein, 2016; McBrien, Cheng, & Jones., 2009). Nevertheless, along with the potential utility of e-learning environments, it is also important to carefully consider whether online learning environments can be as effective as traditional classrooms (Hamouda, 2020).

This review examines the research with respect to the utility of virtual classrooms for learning EFL. It first provides a review of the reported value of virtual classes and distance learning in general, and then demonstrates how they have been useful for teaching EFL in particular. The review then examines the extent to which it has been determined that virtual classes can facilitate interaction between L2 speakers in an EFL classroom.

Distance Learning and Virtual Classes

The potential value of computers and digital technology for education has been examined over the past few decades as technology (and, more specifically, its application to educational environments) has dramatically proliferated (Khoshsima & Sayadi, 2016). Technology and computers are now commonly used as teaching aids in classrooms as well as for the distribution of information, class resources, and extra class materials outside of class. The widespread use of a number of other digital technologies has also emerged in addition to developments in the internet to aid in learning, including videoconferencing, TV broadcasting, satellite broadcasting, and videotaping (Khoshsima and Sayadi, 2016). Since the 2000s, we have also seen the emergence of more online learning and virtual classrooms (Balcikanli, 2012; Dalgarno, 2002).

A virtual classroom is a type of “electronic classroom that can be expandable in time, space, and content” (Beatty, 2013, p. 156). They are synchronous, meaning that they are “live,” and students engage in them at the same time (Çakýroglu, 2014). Hussein (2016) emphasised that virtual classrooms have many of the same characteristics as physical classrooms but without the same limitations. They allow interaction between students and teachers through several media, including oral communication, texts, video conversation, audio chat and PowerPoint presentations (Yadav, 2016). Depending on the particular virtual classroom platform used, students and teachers may also share content via whiteboards, break-out virtual rooms, shared web browsing, feedback and even the sharing of applications; different online tools (Cakiroglu, 2014; Hamouda, 2020). Virtual classrooms have the advantage that they can be accessed in different places and at different times. As students are increasingly considered to be digital natives and prefer to interact and socialise online, virtual classrooms may be an especially effective way to engage them in education (Hamouda, 2020).

Since their emergence, educational researchers have taken very seriously the question of whether virtual classrooms can be as effective as physical classrooms in terms of facilitating productive learning environments and educational outcomes of students. Notably, researchers have found somewhat conflicting results. For example, Ng (2007) collected qualitative data from interviews with both students and tutors on the use of a virtual classroom (Interwise) for tutoring at the Open University of Hong Kong. Students and tutors were overall very positive about the platform and believed it was an effective learning environment. However, the informants reported several technical difficulties, and they also revealed that student-to-student interaction was minimal on the platform (Ng, 2007). Rather than seeing the virtual classroom as a replacement for tutorials, both the students and the tutors saw it as a useful complement to face-to-face tutorials (Ng, 2007).

McBrien et al. carried out another qualitative study on the use of Elluminate Live! for teaching undergraduate and graduate college classes to students in an American college (McBrien, et al., 2009). The classes were held in the departments of special education and psychology. Students tended to perceive the online classes as facilitating student engagement; they perceived greater student engagement through online classes than in face-to-face classes as well as increased learner autonomy. However, some students also thought that the chat could become a little overwhelming, and that they missed the non-verbal communication that came from in-person interactions. They also noted that difficulties with the technology, like signing on and microphone issues, were real barriers to participation (McBrien, et al., 2009).

In a review of the impact of online colleges on student success, Bettinger, Fox, Loeb, & Taylor (2017) found that fully online courses tended to have lower levels of student success and lower grades. They also found that the students taking online courses made less progress in college than students who attended in-person classes, and they were also less likely to remain in university (Bettinger et al., 2017). Together, the research seems to suggest that virtual classrooms have some promise as an effective teaching tool, but there could also be some real drawbacks, especially when an entire class is delivered online for EFL subjects.

Virtual Classes in EFL Learning

While virtual classrooms have become widely implemented in many educational domains, they have become particularly popular for teaching English. John Knagg of the British Council suggests that there are 1.5 billion English learners around the world, with many of those engaging in some form of online learning (as cited in Beare, 2019). He also notes that there is generally a lack of qualified English teachers. This is consistent with the experience of many global English-teaching institutions insofar as it can be difficult to find qualified language teachers who are also native speakers. This is part of the reason why virtual classes are so appealing to language learners: virtual classrooms break down geographic barriers and provide access to native speaking teachers. In other words, they open up opportunities to connect with native speakers around the world (Hamouda, 2020). Since they enable a variety of activities, virtual classrooms also make it easy for learners to practice each of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Alhawiti, 2017). Many see great promise in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) to improve the effectiveness of EFL programmes (Belcher, 1999). Nevertheless, while virtual classrooms are widely used to teach English, the question remains as to whether or not they are effective. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, many studies have found that virtual classes can be successfully used to teach EFL.

In one study, researchers in a Saudi Arabian university assessed the effectiveness of virtual classes for teaching English speaking skills against traditional face-to-face classes (Hamouda, 2020). EFL learners were split into two groups: 35 in an experimental group that was taught English speaking using a virtual classroom, and 35 in a control group that was taught with the traditional face-to-face method. The researchers found that students in the virtual classes scored significantly better on a speaking test than those in the traditional classroom (Hamouda, 2020). In fact, the students in the virtual classroom scored better on each aspect of speaking tested: pronunciation, comprehension, grammar, fluency and vocabulary. This study also found that students generally liked the virtual classes, could use them easily, and found them to be effective (Hamouda, 2020).

This study corroborates the findings reported by several other researchers. For example, Satar and Ozdener (2008) reported that secondary students found both text chat and voice chat to have improved their English proficiency. Similarly, Al-Qahtani (2019) and Mathew, Sreehari & Al-Rubaat (2019) proved that most of the EFL teachers and students in their samples agreed that virtual classrooms can be effective for improving the communication skills of students. Alhawiti (2017) further found that students in an experimental group who studied EFL in virtual classes obtained higher scores on English evaluations than a control group who studied only in traditional, in-person classes. Video chatting may be especially valuable for EFL learning environments; it has been found to increase L2 production and also foster more sophisticated output (Chun, 1994, Kern, 1995, Kern et al., 2004). In general, students seem to perceive virtual classrooms for EFL learning positively and report good experiences using the platforms (Herrera, 2017).

Researchers have identified several reasons for why virtual classes may be more effective than traditional face-to-face classrooms (Al-Qahtani, 2019; Alhawiti, 2017; Hamouda, 2020; Mathew et al., 2019; Satar & Ozdener, 2008). They attribute the success of online classes in part to them being interesting, easy to access and featuring direct feedback for the EFL learners (Hamouda, 2020). Some researchers also note that there are extensive opportunities for the students to interact and communicate among themselves as well as with the professor (Hamouda, 2020). This may provide more practice opportunities than are typically available in a face-to-face learning environment. Also, some suggest that the context may also lessen the anxiety and stress that students feel about speaking in a classroom environment, which also may contribute to the improvement in speaking skills (Satar & Ozdener, 2008). Others argue that online environments enable and facilitate a greater variety of forms of discourse and interaction between students than physical classrooms can afford (Kern, 1995).

However, despite the many positive results of individual studies, some reviews suggest that there is some reason to be cautious about immediately endorsing virtual classrooms as superior to traditional, in-person forms of instruction. One systematic review and meta-analysis of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) for English as a second language (ESL) instruction in elementary and high school environments found only slight and inconclusive evidence of a beneficial effect of CALL (Macaro, Handley, & Walter, 2012). Here it is suggested that the effects of CALL may depend on the attitudes and behaviours of individual learners. However, this study was limited to the case of teaching ESL in elementary and high school settings. A similar systematic review on the use of internet-based technology to teach second languages on a broader scale found that these technologies can be effective, but again, their success may depend on the context. (Kern, 1995). Thus, the characteristics of the students and the learning environment (grade school versus university) seem to be important factors in determining the effectiveness of CALL in language learning.

L2 Learner Interaction through Virtual Classes

Part of what makes an effective language class is the engagement of the language learners with the language. Language teachers seek to create opportunities for learners to interact with each other or with native speakers since interaction has been found to be an especially effective way to acquire language (Bowles, Adams, & Toth, 2014; Mackey & Goo, 2007). Interaction between learners in a classroom is an important aspect of an effective educational environment. The opportunity for learners to interact with their peers enables effective English learning in the same way as interactions with native speakers can (Adams, 2007; Adams, Nuevo, & Egi., 2011). Their interactions provide each other with comprehensible input, and they can work together to negotiate meaning and modify output (Toth, 2008). This process has been shown to contribute to effective language learning and is an essential part of an EFL classroom. Ideally, virtual EFL classrooms, will enable this sort of L2 interaction, but whether virtual classrooms actually do this remains questionable.

Some research suggests that virtual classes do provide an environment for such interaction. In an experiment with elementary students in Taiwan, Lan (2015) found that a virtual environment could enhance students' English performance and did provide an environment that facilitated rich interaction among students. Bianchi et al. (2019) explained that EFL learners could even engage in dramaturgical interactions in virtual classrooms, and that this was a safe way for male and female students to interact with each other in places where interaction between the sexes is otherwise discouraged. Indeed, these researchers found that not only did students interact with each other and their instructors in meaningful ways, but the extent to which they could interact was actually enabled by the virtual classrooms. For example, shy students who might not have participated to the same extent in a physical classroom were found to participate much more frequently in the virtual classroom (Bianchi et al., 2019).

There have also been some studies looking at how virtual classrooms can improve EFL learner interaction in Saudi Arabia. Hamouda (2020) found that in a group of Saudi Arabian students, those assigned to a virtual classroom experienced improved interaction between learners, and this ultimately led to greater improvements in speaking test scores in comparison with those in a group that learned in a traditional in-class teaching. These results were similar to those of Alhawiti (2017) who found that an experimental group of college students that took an EFL class in a virtual classroom experienced better English results by the end of the semester than a control group that had only experienced in-person classes. In another study, Al-Qahtani (2019) found that both teachers and students tended to share positive perceptions of the effectiveness of virtual classrooms for teaching EFL, although both groups noted some challenges, like the need for extra training and technical issues. Both groups suggested that it may not be best to rely solely on virtual classrooms alone; instead, it may be better to blend virtual instruction with in-

person classes. Together, these studies suggest that virtual classrooms could be effective to teach EFL in Saudi Arabia.

Some challenges with interaction in virtual classrooms have been noted (Al-Kathiri, 2015). Some have acknowledged that one of the challenges of virtual classrooms is the opportunity for technical difficulties (Al-Kathiri, 2015; Bianchi et al., 2019; Ng, 2007; Olbertz-Siitonen, 2015). For example, in virtual learning environments that rely on video, it is common for students to experience delays or “lagging,” which can reduce the effectiveness of the interaction (Rusk & Pörn, 2019). Research on delay in video-mediated learning environments does suggest that while these types of delays are ubiquitous, learners can typically manage to maintain meaning and develop some L2 learning strategies to manage the difficulty they may face. It may also be expected that with improvements in technology and internet speed, these types of technical delays will become less and less of an important limitation. Still, technical difficulties may reduce some interaction or participation at least for some individuals.

Also, students have noted some difficulty using educational technologies, even while acknowledging that personal digital device use in education is common and increasing (Herrera, 2017). Similarly, they noted that not all educational institutions had computer laboratories or internet connections available that could support the widespread use of such technologies (Herrera, 2017). Researchers therefore suggest that any use of virtual classrooms should be accompanied by rigorous testing of the platform as well as adequate instruction for students about how to use it (Bianchi et al., 2018).

Research Questions

The study aspired to answer the following research questions:

1. How effective are virtual classes for promoting interaction through the English language in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia?
2. To what extent can Saudi students use virtual classes for learning English?

Methodology

A quantitative research method was adopted in order to collect data and answer the research questions. According to Creswell, (2014) quantitative research is “an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables” (p. 4). Furthermore, a common data collection method in quantitative research is a “questionnaire.” For this study, a questionnaire was designed by the researchers and distributed to students by their instructors. A questionnaire is considered to be “the most common data collection instrument in applied linguistics” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 95). A questionnaire measures three different types of data about participants: factual, behavioural and attitudinal (Dörnyei, 2007). For the aim of this study, attitudinal statements were employed, which “are used to find out what people think, covering attitudes, opinions, beliefs, interests and values” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 102). In addition, the statements were closed-ended which requires participants to choose one of the given answers and not add or produce any comments (Dörnyei, 2007).

The questionnaire consisted of 19 closed-ended statements. Consequently, the authors used a 4-points Likert scale for each response, which indicated to what extent participants agreed or disagreed with the statements by choosing one of the given responses ranging from strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree (Dörnyei, 2007). The questionnaire included statements related to the effectiveness of interaction and virtual classes on learners’ learning.

The statements were divided into four different sections. The first section covered the data on the effectiveness of virtual classes with respect to interaction using English in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia. The second section included the Saudi students (participants) attitudes towards the use of virtual

classes in learning English (positive statements). The third section illustrated the participants' attitudes towards speaking English in virtual classes (negative statements), and finally, learners' opinions towards interaction in regular classes (neutral statements). Furthermore, the statements were given in both English and Arabic. Translation of the questionnaire statements was crucial to ensure that the students understood the statements and to avoid any confusion that may occur.

Participants

The sample of this study was selected after the complete switch to virtual classes due to the Pandemic. The sample were chosen based on their English proficiency level. The level of the participants was A2 based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The language level of all participants was beginner to low intermediate, and they were studying the English language in their preparatory year. They had been assigned to the A2 level based on their results on the placement test which was held at the beginning of the academic year by the English Language Centre (ELC). The selection of participants was based on "non-probability sampling" (Dörnyei, 2007, p.98). The researchers followed "convivence or opportunity sample" in carrying out this research as all participants in the researchers' institution (Dörnyei, 2007, p.99). Furthermore, the data were collected from three different classes with the same level of language proficiency and the questionnaires sent to the selected students online via google forms after taking their permission to participate in this study. Thus, 90 female undergraduate students participated, and all of them were in the PYP studying English via virtual classes.

Instruments

As quantitative research includes numerical data (Dörnyei, 2007), the analysis of the questionnaire data was carried out by using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software. The key reason for choosing SPSS was because, as Dörnyei (2007) has stated, SPSS is the most common software in educational and applied linguistics research. SPSS was used to determine the frequencies, percentages, and mean scores of the responses. In this research, the frequencies and percentages of the participants responses were calculated by using transform/compute variables. In addition, the statements were closed-ended which requires participants to choose one of the given answers and not add or produce any comments (Dörnyei, 2007). The weighted means and the standard deviations (SD) for all responses related to the first and second research questions were calculated by using descriptive statistics.

Procedures

The procedures for conducting this research were divided into three main stages. The first stage involved writing the questionnaire statements based on the objectives and the research questions. The second stage involved the distribution of the questionnaire to the target participants to collect the data. The final stage involved analysing the data in terms of numbers by using SPSS software and then discussing the findings in order to answer the research questions and draw the final conclusions.

Analysis of the Questionnaire

As indicated above, the researchers used a quantitative method to collect and analyse the data, and then to answer the research questions. The research questions were established to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Virtual classes had a positive impact on language interaction and learning.

Hypothesis 2: Participants held a positive attitude towards interaction and learning in virtual classes.

Data Analysis

In this study, the frequencies and percentages of the participants responses were calculated by using transform/compute variables and the results from the SPSS. Results of the data collected are shown in

Tables one, two, three, four and five. In addition, the weighted means and SDs for all responses related to the first research question were calculated by using descriptive statistics. In order to answer the research questions, the analysis of the data was divided into five tables according to the results found.

As the questionnaire was examined and based on Likert scale scores to extract the means and the deviation, it is worth mentioning how the answers of the students were analysed through a 4-point Likert scale

Table 1. Illustration of the 4-Point Likert Scal

Likert-scale	interval	Difference	Description
1	1.00 - 1.74	.74	Strongly disagree
2	1.75 – 2.49	.74	Disagree
3	2.50 – 3.24	.74	Agree
4	3.25 – 4.00	.75	Strongly agree

Statements		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	Std. deviation	Rank
1.English language instructor can interact effectively with the students.	N	59	29	2	0	3.36	.529	5
	%	65.6%	32.2%	2.2%	0%			
2.Virtual classes provide balance Students Talk Time (STT) VS (TTT) Teacher Talk Time.	N	42	41	5	2	3.37	.694	4
	%	46.7%	45.6%	5.6%	2.2%			
3.The English language instructor can respond efficiently when I interact.	N	58	29	2	1	3.60	.596	1
	%	64.4%	32.2%	2.2%	1.1%			
4.I feel confident when I interact using English language.	N	43	41	5	1	3.40	.650	3
	%	47.8%	45.6%	5.6%	1.1%			
5.I think Interaction is successful through virtual classes.	N	42	35	11	2	3.30	.771	6
	%	46.7%	38.9%	12.2%	2.2%			
6.I can interact effectively with other students in virtual classes.	N	37	33	20	0	3.19	.777	7
	%	41.1%	36.7%	22.2%	0%			
7.I enjoy interacting using English language in virtual classes.	N	47	35	8	0	3.43	.654	2
	%	52.2%	38.9%	8.9%	0%			
8.I believe effective interaction is possible throughout virtual classes.	N	42	37	11	0	3.43	.654	2
	%	46.7%	41.1%	12.2%	0%			
9. Virtual classes have no difference to interaction in regular classes.	N	27	31	21	11	2.82	1.001	8
	%	30%	34.4%	23.3%	12.2%			
Weighted mean						3.34		
Std. deviation						.470		

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Effectiveness of Virtual Classes on Interaction Using L2 in the ELC

Table two illustrates the statistics for the effectiveness of virtual classes on interaction using the English language for this group of students.

Table two above shows the descriptive statistics for the effectiveness of virtual classes on interaction. We found that the highest average score was associated with the third statement (“The English language instructor can respond efficiently when I interact”) with a mean response of 3.60 and an SD of .596, followed by the seventh and eighth statements (“I enjoy interacting using the English language in virtual classes” and “I believe effective interaction is possible throughout virtual classes”) with a mean response of 3.43 and an SD of .654. The next highest average score was for the fourth statement (“I feel confident when I interact using the English language”) with a mean response of 3.40 and an SD of .650, followed by the second statement (“Virtual classes

provide balance between students' talk time (STT) and teacher talk time (TTT)”) with a mean response of 3.37 and an SD of .694. The fourth lowest average score was associated with the first statement (“The English language instructor can interact effectively with the students”) with a mean response of 3.36 and an SD of .529, followed by the third lowest for the fifth statement (“I think interaction is successful through virtual classes”) with a mean response of 3.30 and an SD of .771. The second lowest average score was associated with the sixth statement (“I can interact effectively with other students in virtual classes”) with a mean response of 3.90 and an SD of .777, followed by the lowest average score for the ninth statement (“virtual classes have no difference in interaction from regular classes”) with a mean response of 2.82 and an SD of 1.001. Consequently, the weighted mean for the responses related to the first research question was 3.34 and the SD was .470.

To sum up, the average of the responses assessing the effectiveness of virtual classes for interaction using the L2 was 3.34, which could be considered as “strong agreement” since 3.34 lies in the interval between the two responses (3.25–4.00) according to the 4-point Likert scale illustrated in table 2.

Table three illustrates Saudi students' attitudes towards the use of virtual classes in learning English.

Table 3. *The Descriptive Statistics of Using Virtual Classes in Learning English by Saudi Students in the ELC*

Statements		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	Std. deviation	Rank
1.I can participate in virtual classes as I participate in regular classes.	N	50	32	8	0	3.47	.657	1
	%	55.6%	35.6%	8.9%	0%			
2.I can easily share my ideas in the Virtual classes	N	42	35	11	2	3.30	.771	5
	%	46.7%	38.9%	12.2%	2.2%			
3.Interaction via virtual classes can improve My language skills.	N	43	38	8	1	3.37	.694	4
	%	47.8%	42.2%	8.9%	1.1%			
4.Virtual classes may help to overcome some learning obstacles such as fear when I interact in English language.	N	51	28	10	1	3.43	.735	3
	%	56.7%	31.1%	11.1	1.1%			
5.Virtual classes can motivate me to interact in English language.	N	48	34	8	0	3.44	.655	2
	%	53.3%	37.8%	8.9%	0%			
Weighted mean						3.40		
Std. deviation						.566		

Table three above demonstrates the descriptive statistics for Saudi students (participants) attitudes towards the use of virtual classes for learning English. The highest average score was reported for the first statement (“I can participate in virtual classes as I participate in regular classes”) with a mean response of 3.47 and an SD of .657, followed by the fifth statement (“Virtual classes can motivate me to interact in the English language”) with a mean response of 3.44 and an SD of .655. The third highest average score was in response to the fourth statement (“Virtual classes may help to overcome some learning obstacles such as fear when I interact in the English language”) with a mean response of 3.43 and an SD of .735, followed by the third statement (“Interaction via virtual classes can improve my language skills”) with a mean of 3.37 and an SD

of .694. The lowest average score was associated with the second statement (“I can easily share my ideas in the virtual classes”) with a mean response of 3.30 and an SD of .771. Consequently, the weighted mean for the responses related to the second research question was 3.40, and the SD was .566.

To sum up, the average response of the Saudi students’ (participants’) attitudes towards the use of virtual classes for learning English was 3.40, which can be considered as “strong agreement,” since 3.40 lies in the interval between 3.25–4.00 according to the 4-point Likert scale shown in Table three above.

To ensure the validity of the analysis, some statements that were negative in reference to the effectiveness of virtual classes for L2 learning were analysed individually to avoid any inaccuracy in the results in the data analysis. These statements are illustrated in Table four below.

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics of Negative Statements of Participants’ Attitudes towards L2 Interaction*

Statements		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	Std. deviation
1. I don't like to speak in English Language virtual classes	N	5	13	50	22	2.01	.786
	%	5.6%	14.4%	55.6%	24.4%		
2. I lose interest in learning and interacting via virtual classes.	N	6	11	34	39	1.82	.894
	%	6.7%	12.2%	37.8%	43.3%		
	%	47.8%	42.2%	8.9%	1.1%		
3. I find many learning obstacles when I interact in English in virtual classes.	N	9	15	34	32	2.01	.966
	%	10%	16.6%	37.8%	35.6%		
Weighted mean						1.94	
Std. deviation						.688	

Table four above shows the descriptive statistics for the negative statement’s indicative of participants’ attitudes towards L2 interaction in the virtual classes, including concerns over losing interest in learning, interacting via virtual classes, and whether or not learners encountered any learning obstacles when they interacted in English virtual classes. It is clear that the highest average scores were associated with the first and third statements (“I don’t like to speak in English language virtual classes” and “I find many learning obstacles when I interact in English in virtual classes”) with mean responses of 2.01 and SDs of .657 and .966, respectively, followed by the second statement (“I lose interest in learning and interacting via virtual classes”) with a mean response of 1.82 and an SD of .894. Consequently, the weighted mean for the responses related to the negative statements was 1.94, and the SD was .688.

To sum up, the average of the responses related to the negative statements was 1.94, which can be considered as “disagreement” since 1.94 lies in the interval between 1.75–2.49 according to the 4-point Likert scale shown in Table four above.

Also, some statements in the questionnaire were asked to test the neutrality of some of the students’ responses. Therefore, these two statements were analysed individually to ensure the reliability of the results. These statements are illustrated in Table five as follows:

Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics of Neutral Statements of participants' attitudes towards L2 interaction*

Statements		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	Std. deviation
1.I interact more with my teacher in regular classes.	N	29	29	21	29	2.76	1.042
	%	32.2%	32.2%	23.3	32.2		
2.Face to face interaction is important in English language classes.	N	22	22	24	29	2.59	1.037
	%	24.4%	24.4%	26.7%	32.2%		

Table five above shows the descriptive statistics for the two statements related to learners' opinions towards interaction in regular classes. It can be seen that the mean score for the first statement ("I interact more with my teacher in regular classes") was 2.76, and the SD was 1.042. The mean score for the second statement ("Face-to-face interaction is important in English language classes") was 2.59, and the SD was 1.037, which can be considered as "agreement" since 2.76 and 2.59 lie in the interval between 2.50–3.24 according to 4-point Likert scale shown in Table 5 below.

Discussion

As the aim of this study was to determine the effectiveness of virtual classes in terms of promoting interaction, the findings showed that virtual classes were effective for learners' interaction in English classes in the preparatory year. This was evident from learners' responses to the questionnaire, as the average response was "strongly agree" (See Table two), which indicates that the learners held a positive attitude towards interaction in the virtual classes. Also, as stated in some previous studies, virtual classrooms can enable learner interaction with teachers as well as between the learners themselves, which is evident from the learners' responses insofar as they agreed with the ideas that the English language instructor could interact effectively with the students, and that virtual classes provided a balance between student talk time and teacher talk time. The findings also align with those of Hamouda (2020) as he argued that as students are increasingly considered to be digital natives and prefer to interact and socialise online, virtual classrooms may be an especially effective way to engage them in education. As most of the participants feel confident and reported that they enjoyed interacting through English in virtual classes, it can be said that learners' positive attitudes towards interacting in virtual classes could largely be as a result of their ability to interact and socialise online. This finding supports evidence from previous research conducted by Ng, (2007) in which it was reported that participants in his study believed that the virtual classroom was an effective learning environment and helped them in their L2 learning. In line with these findings, the majority of the students believed that there was no difference between interaction in the virtual and regular classes, which indicates that interaction in virtual classes may be as effective as it can be in regular classes.

Additionally, with respect to the second research question, the responses showed that Saudi students held a positive attitude towards using virtual classes for learning English as most of the participants agreed that they could participate in virtual classes as they had in regular classes. Furthermore, learners reported that they could also share ideas, and they believed that virtual classes could improve their language skills. A study by Hamouda (2020) revealed the same result and found that students generally liked the virtual classes. Learners in Hamouda's study could use

them easily, and found them to be effective. One interesting finding is that students believed that virtual classes helped them to overcome some learning obstacles, such as fear when they interact in English, while also motivating them to interact with others in English. It can be argued that the virtual classes helped learners, especially shy learners, to interact and overcome their fears of interacting in face-to-face classes. This finding is consistent with that of Bianchi et al., 2019 who emphasised that shy students who might not have participated to the same extent in a physical classroom were found to participate much more in the virtual classroom. Thus, the findings of this research corroborate and support some of the findings of previous studies conducted by Hamouda (2020), Al-Qahtani (2019), Mathew et al. (2019), Alhawiti (2017) and Satar and Ozdener (2008) in terms of demonstrating and testing the effectiveness of virtual classes on learning EFL. To conclude, responses indicating the extent to which Saudi L2 learners can interact and learn throughout virtual classes emphasised participants' positive attitudes towards the effectiveness of learning in English virtual classes. These findings are in agreement with those of Herrera (2017) who noted that students seem to perceive virtual classrooms for EFL learning positively and report good experiences using the platforms.

However, regarding the negative statements and participant opinions about speaking English in virtual classes; losing interest in learning and interacting via virtual classes; and whether or not learners encounter any learning obstacles when they interact in English virtual classes, it is clear that the majority of responses were in disagreement with these statements, which proves that learners like to speak in virtual classes; they are interested in learning and interacting via virtual classes; and they do not encounter any learning obstacles when they use English to interact in virtual classes. A possible explanation for this might be that students today are digital natives and may prefer to interact and socialise online (Hamouda, 2020).

Concerning the neutral statements related to L2 interaction in regular classes and face-to-face interaction, some of the participants agreed that they interacted more with their teachers in regular classes, but the other half disagreed. With regards to face-to-face interaction and whether it is crucial in English language classes, more than half of the participants disagreed, which means that face-to-face interaction is not as important, and they can still interact effectively in virtual classes. However, a large number (albeit less than half) agreed that face-to-face interaction is important in English classes. This result may be explained by the fact that students see virtual classrooms as a useful complement to face-to-face classroom, but not as a replacement (Ng, 2007).

The findings prove the research hypotheses and suggest that virtual classes have a positive impact on L2 interaction and learning; furthermore, participants generally held a positive attitude towards interaction and learning in virtual classes. However, due to the large number of students who study at the ELC, preparatory year at a Saudi university, which are more than one thousand students, the selected sample was less than 10% of the total number of students which may result in different results if this study was implemented on a larger number of students. Also, the sample was only for low to intermediate level of Saudi students, which is the focus of this study as low level students may face more obstacles while communicating and interacting remotely during L2 classes. Thus, the study could have different results if conducted among high level students.

Conclusion and Study Implication

This study suggests that virtual classrooms have great potential in the EFL classroom. According to the findings, virtual classes could have a positive impact on learners' experiences in L2 learning. They also encourage learners' interaction with the instructors and promote learner-to-learner interaction and collaboration. The findings of the present study indicate that virtual classrooms and learning environments are proved to be effective and actually led to better learning outcomes than traditional classrooms.

Nevertheless, other research has found that virtual classrooms may not always be effective, and there are some challenges to online learning that instructors should consider. The findings of this study prove that L2 interaction throughout virtual classes is no less effective than that of traditional classes. More specifically, it was found that Saudi learners in the preparatory year enjoyed their online experiences, and they found that virtual classes could provide sufficient opportunities for interaction with their teachers and the learning of new language skills. Moreover, virtual classes have encouraged shy learners to overcome their anxiety and participate more in online classes as illustrated in the questionnaire responses.

However, in the EFL classroom, the loss of some non-verbal communication through online learning environments could be a real limitation. Also, the technology itself can sometimes have problems, such as lagging, student difficulty using the platform, or microphone and video issues. Even as students are continuing to be defined as "digital natives," it may be important to understand the technological limitations that are built into virtual classrooms. The effectiveness of virtual classes for teaching EFL is likely to be dependent on a number of factors, including the virtual classroom platforms used, the way that the class is structured, whether it intentionally fosters interaction between students, and so on. As a result of this study, research should continue to elucidate the factors that contribute to virtual classrooms being an effective tool in L2 learning. Moreover, more studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of virtual classes in different contexts.

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