Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by EFL Learners

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Abstract
COVID-19 has disrupted most of the industries in the world. Education is the only industry that is completely transferred to online mode in most countries around the world. Online learning was the best solution for continuing education during the pandemic, especially in tertiary education. This study aims to determine the challenges and obstacles confronted by English language learners (EFL) in Science and Arts College, Alula, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia, during switching to online learning in the second semester of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The contribution of this study is to evaluate the learners' new experiences in online education and to assess the feasibility of the virtual methods of learning. This is achieved by analyzing 184 learners' responses to the survey-based questionnaire. A descriptive statistical method was used to test the validation of the study. It is found that the main problems that influence and impact online EFL learning during COVID-19 are related to technical, academic, and communication challenges. The study results show that most EFL learners are not satisfied with continuing online learning, as they could not fulfill the expected progress in language learning performance.
Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, EFL learners, learning challenges, Online learning, Taibah University

Introduction

The need for education updating was required because of the fast advances in technology. They need to learn at any time, and any place was in its way to be achieved. (Wolfinger, 2016). Over the past two decades, online learning has been activated in some global institutes. However, most schools, colleges, and universities do not use this education mode, and their staff does not know what is involved in e-learning. MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) has facilitated and increased academics' awareness of online learning and its involvements (Lynch, 2004). The utilization of guidance for students to be motivated in virtual learning depends on practical orientation on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement (Hartnett and Louwrens, 2015). The transition to a new environment of education, learners need special social care to improve their concentration and motivation to online learning in such a crucial crisis (Eccles et al., 1993; Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992; Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks, 1995; Roeser & Eccles, 1998).

The global decision to close the educational institutes was rational to keep social distancing to stop its spread. Some countries switched to online learning immediately because they were already prepared for online learning. In Saudi Arabia, all the universities used the Blackboard tool for distance education and taught some elective and general courses.

This research focused on university EFL learners' challenges and obstacles during the current global pandemic and the possible facilities and solutions that can be delivered to overcome these problems in the future. The significance of the present study is to explore the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the EFL learning process. The shape of the hazardous change in the post-Covid-19 crisis will occur in all societal institutions and mainly in the educational sector[1]. These changes need wise leaders to make guidelines for reshaping the future of all the sectors. Higher education will play a vital role in this process, starting from education, then healthcare sectors, economic, sport, etc. Otherwise, an unguided plan will lead to failure and confusion. It has been noticed that the remarkable responses and efforts of the academic and medical sectors in most countries globally during the novel coronavirus crisis, and Saudi Arabia is one of these countries. The transition to online learning was the only option during the situation's gravity because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Most states apply the lockdown to prevent society from the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Taibah university was able to launch online learning on 2nd March 2020. The university's previous experience with blended learning before COVID-19 facilitated the rapid transition to e-learning during the pandemic. Blended learning in all university colleges was activated with some general or elective courses using the Blackboard platform before the coronavirus outbreak. That enabled some faculty members to have good experience in using the Blackboard tool in teaching online. Those faculty members organized training sessions for other colleagues in their colleges about using Blackboard in online teaching. The university's training and development unit vigorously conducted online training sessions for all the faculty members in different university colleges and branches.

There are some advantages and disadvantages of online learning; the accessibility of online education globally, saving time, money, and efforts are advantages of online learning. In teaching, the lecture's recording is one advantage of online learning when students ask teachers to record the classes. The teachers are reviewing and preparing well for recording, which certainly improves

teaching strategies and methods. Students can access the lectures anytime and can understand better. Some difficulties were in English language skills and other English courses, such as writing challenges, speaking challenges, and reading challenges. For linguistics courses such as phonetics and phonology challenges where the teacher needs to teach phonemes, allophones, morphemes, etc. face to face. Not all learners have good internet connectivity. Some learners suffered from network problems, lacking high-quality learning devices.

Nowadays, the challenges to access online learning are less because both learners and teachers have been experienced the excellent opportunity of knowing and interacting with educational technology tools such as mobile-based learning, computer-based learning, and web-based learning (Pellegrini, Mirella, Vladimir Uskov, & Casalino, 2020; Byun, Sooyeon, & Slavin, 2020). According to Prensky (2001), today's learners are entirely different from their predecessors because they are native speakers of the technological language. Their interaction with the virtual and digital world is more. The interactions of today's' learners with different sorts of technology for various purposes enabled them to be active recipients of e-learning (Vai, Marjorie & Sosulski, 2015; Mohalikand & Sahoo, 2020; Ko & Rossen, 2017).
The role of information technology (IT) and COVID-19 pandemic in hastening current and future e-learning entrepreneurship activation are considered a panacea at the time of crisis and difficulties.

The study answers the following questions:
- Q1. What are the challenges of online EFL learning and what will be the provided facilities to students during online learning?
- Q2. Can students in remote towns get a good quality of internet connectivity during online learning?
- Q3. How to make online English classes more engaging, motivating, and innovative during e-learning?
- Q4. Will EFL learners become familiar with online platforms and get enough experience and confidence to continue online learning?
- Q5. Do the recent social media applications facilitate students' technical skills needed for online education?

The objectives of this research are as follows:
- Identify the challenges and obstacles of e-learning during the COVID-19 crisis encountered by EFL learners.
- Understand and utilize the best methods and modes to engage and motivate the EFL learners in e-learning.
- Familiarize the EFL learners and teachers with the currently used platforms and applications that can assist in enhancing and reinforcing education during pandemics.
- Explore the reflection results of the mass movement by the university to the online learning process.

Literature review

The following section presents the previous studies conducted in online learning during the COVID-19 crisis and some studies related to online learning challenges and educational technology in general. A study was conducted to evaluate students' views about the future of mobile learning after the current pandemic in basic education college in Kuwait. The study concluded with a good impression from the student in utilizing mobile learning in higher education. The advantage of the study is the recommendation for developing and teaching courses about m-learning use and application. This study's disadvantage is that the sample (52 participants) is insufficient to generalize m-learning in higher education (Alanezi & AlAzwani, 2020). Another study explored online learning challenges in medical education during the COVID-19 outbreak (Rajab, Mohammad, Gazal, & Alkattan, 2020). The study engaged 208 participants: learners and faculty members in the college of medicine of Alfaisal university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The study's reported that the challenges were communications, assessment, online education experience, technology use tools, time management, anxiety, and coronavirus disease stress.

However, students reported positively the effectiveness of online learning during the pandemic. A meta-analysis study was conducted by Yildiz (2020) about recent trends in educational technology during 2015-2020. The study paid attention to several factors in the field. The findings of the study displayed that using educational technology in teaching and learning was appropriate. An article published by editorial board Liguori and Winkler (2020) is about the pandemic's impact on entrepreneurship education. They called for more studies and resources on the challenges regarding online entrepreneurship education. Another study explored the importance of online learning and investigated the analysis of weaknesses, strengths, challenges, and opportunities of online education in the time of the pandemic (Shivangi, 2020). The study provided some guidelines for dealing with online learning challenges at natural disasters and epidemics. A case study for features of adolescent online learners was investigated in Pennsylvania by Wolfinger (2016). The study focused on the achievement of fully online virtual schooling through middle school. The research paid attention to academic, social support, learners' characteristics, and educational support. The results revealed the importance of teachers' role in virtual learning, and parents' involvement could promote their academic achievements. A survey was conducted by the International Association of Universities 2020 about the impact of COVID-19 globally on the higher education institutes. The findings of the study indicated that all the activities of the participated institutes have been affected by the COIVD-19 crisis. The results also showed that a negative influence on the quality of activities and the inequity of education opportunities. A study by Ali (2017) focused on Blackboard utilization as a motivator in English language learning and teaching. The study found out that some learners were motivated to work harder in learning English using the Blackboard platform, and some other learners were demotivated to learn using Blackboard. Alturise (2020) conducted a study about learners' and teachers' satisfaction in the online learning model using the Blackboard platform at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The study concluded that e-learning mode is an advancement in education, but significant works are needed to improve online learning applications. Some researchers investigate challenges and obstacles in e-learning during COVID-19 according to their educational environment and provided facilities by different institutes. The focus of this study is

to identify university students' obstacles during the current global crisis and the possible solutions that can improve the learners' performance and overcome these problems in the future.

Theoretical framework

The application of technologies and digital literacies have been developed and improved (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008: p.4). The pedagogical theories and teaching approaches need to respond to the novel methods of using technology and how it can be integrated into learners' education effectively.   Many theories are involved in educational processes, techniques, and approaches. However, they still adhere to traditional methods of learning. The theoretical perspective which reinforced the development of the new pedagogies is the activity theory (Mwanza & Engeström, 2005). In this theoretical approach, the focus is on the interaction between humans and computers. It played an essential role in learning expansion using instruments, tools, mediation, etc. this theory highlights the potential impact on teaching and learning using new tools as vehicles for modernizing, contextualizing, and transforming activity procedures (Engestrom, 1987).   Vygotsky (1978) focused on learning development and social interaction, (Cole & Wertsch, 1996). Attwell (2010, a) explored Vygotsky's ideas in terms of technology-enhanced education and personal contextual learning. Coffield (2008) said there is no " convincing evidence that learners can be divided by their learning preferences into four groups: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic or tactile" he added (p.32) "this movement allows its disciples the pretense of student-centered teaching, and it neatly transfers the responsibility of students' failure to learn to tutors, e.g. 'You didn't match your teaching style to their learning styles".

The Covid-19 Pandemic transformed the whole education process to online, especially ELE (English language education), which has been transited to e-learning in most universities worldwide. In our case, it is the first time for EFL learners to be engaged in e-learning officially. So, this study focuses on the online challenges and obstacles encountered during the pandemic and what needs to be done to support avoiding these problems. As other issues of using technology in traditional teaching and learning have been investigated and covered by several studies and projects.

Methodology

The purpose of the current study is to find out the challenges confronted by learners in Taibah University, Saudi Arabia, during the transition to online learning in the second semester of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and explore possible solutions and suggestions for future virtual learning.

Participants

The study was conducted at the undergraduate level for English language learners in the Faculty of Science and Arts–Alula, Madinah, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia. It was performed after completing online teaching classes and during the final examinations in the second semester of 2020. The sample comprised 184 students: 85 male and 99 female students in all bachelor's degrees with English majors. Students in the English department form the highest number of college students whereas other departments have few students. Most of the students do not have any previous experience with online learning. One or two Arabic general courses were conducted online on the main campus before the recent crisis, and it was optional. The students choose to opt

for the online courses offered, but the examinations were conducted face-to-face. The following figure displays the percentage of the participants.
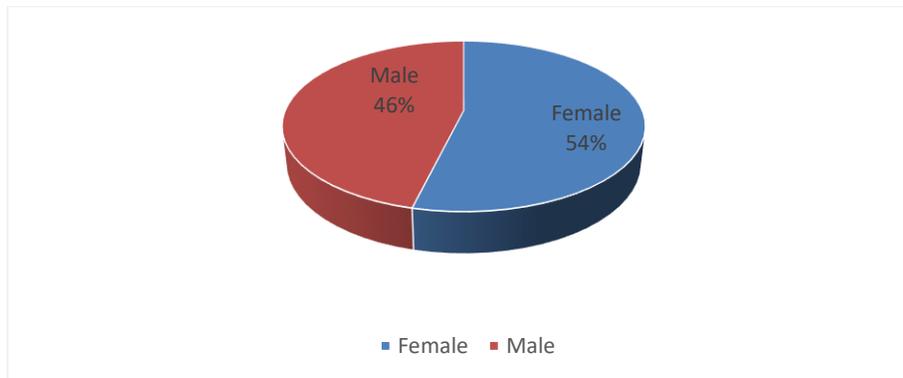

Figure1. Sample structure distribution

Research Instrument

For the investigation and data collection, an online survey-based questionnaire was designed to estimate the EFL online learning challenges during the unprecedented health and economic crisis. The survey-based questionnaire contains 23 multiple questions (yes/no, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions), which covered the study's objectives. It was designed via Google Forms and distributed among students using WhatsApp groups at the end of the 2nd semester 2020. The questionnaire consists of different parts; the first part is about students' demographic information, the second part includes a set of questions about learners' experiences with online learning platforms (Blackboard, and other platforms) and the facilities which they could use, the third part is about the problems which they encountered during online learning, the fourth part is about their satisfaction with online learning, and finally, open-ended questions to get any extra information about online education -during the crisis- students want to add or mention. The questionnaire was checked for validity and reliability fulfillment.

Results

The study adopted descriptive research methods for the analysis of the obtained data, and its findings focus on four main factors:
- The use of available activities and services in the Blackboard tool.
- The alternative tools used during online learning other than Blackboard.
- The challenges and obstacles encountered during online English learning classes.
- EFL Learners' satisfaction with face-to-face virtual learning during COVID-19.

The first research question was about the learners' ability to use all the Blackboard facilities to perform online learning activities. The results revealed that 69.80% of learners could use all the Blackboard services for online learning. They could join the online classes, participate effectively, submit their assignments, and perform the examinations. 10.50% only could attend classes, 7.80% attend and participate during the lectures, they could not submit their assignment and could not complete the examinations online, 4.50% of learners attended, participated, and submitted the projects, and 7.20% they could not perform the mentioned activities using the Blackboard

platform. Figure two below displays the percentage of used facilities of the Blackboard tool in online English learning during COVID-19.
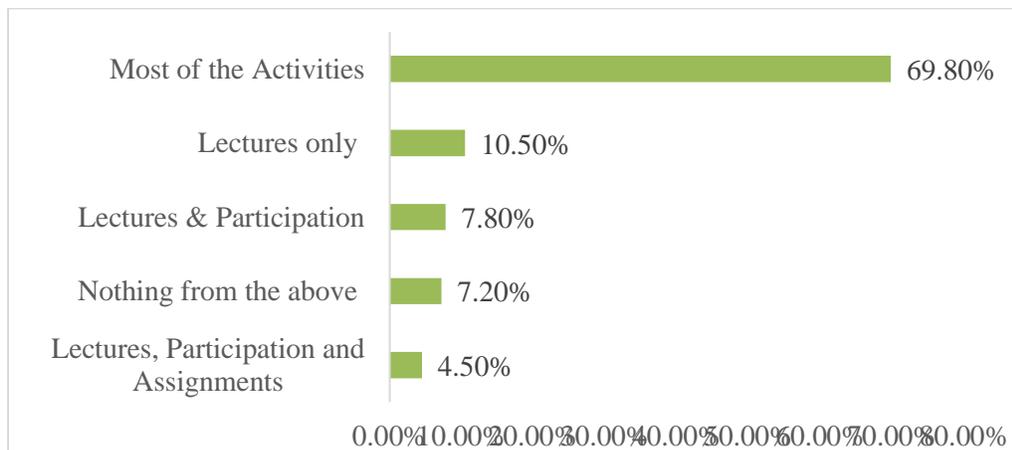

Figure 2. Activities carried out using Blackboard Platform

The second research question was about the alternative tools used by some EFL learners when they failed to use the Blackboard tool. WhatsApp was used to send and receive homework and other assigned tasks. Some teachers used WhatsApp for conducting classes; the highest percentage was in using WhatsApp with a ratio of 72%, the second alternative platform is emails with a ratio of 53.60%. The third platform was Zoom, with a percentage of 33.50%. Other platforms like google classroom and Microsoft team etc., were used with 24%. The percentages of operating platforms and tools other than Blackboard in online learning during the COVID-19 outbreak are shown in figure three below.
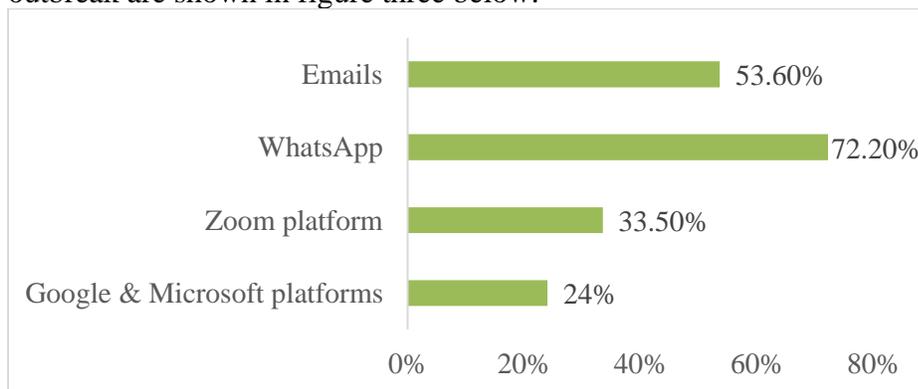

Figure 3. Alternative online educational platforms

The third research question was about the reported challenges and obstacles; the first issue is internet speed, where about 48% of learners face this problem. The learners who did not encounter any problem during e-learning is 18% only. Online access and the material downloading score is 14%. Issues in conducting online exams score 13% as some students could either not access the online examinations or have internet connectivity problems. No lab session score is 8%. Figure four below addresses these online learning-related issues:
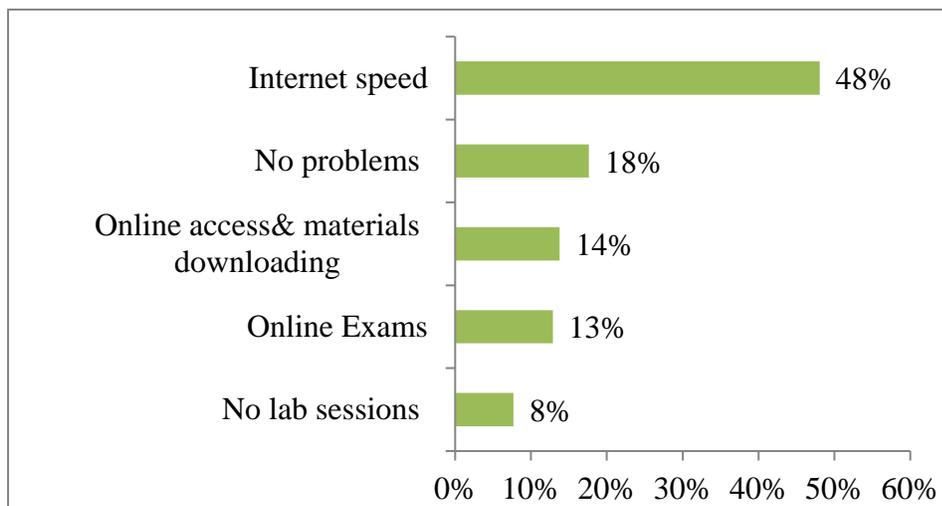
Figure 4. Issues encountered during online learning

The last research question discusses the learners' satisfaction with online learning during the pandemic. 43.20% of learners were satisfied with online learning, whereas 42.90 were somehow satisfied with some preservations. 13.80% of learners were not happy with online learning.

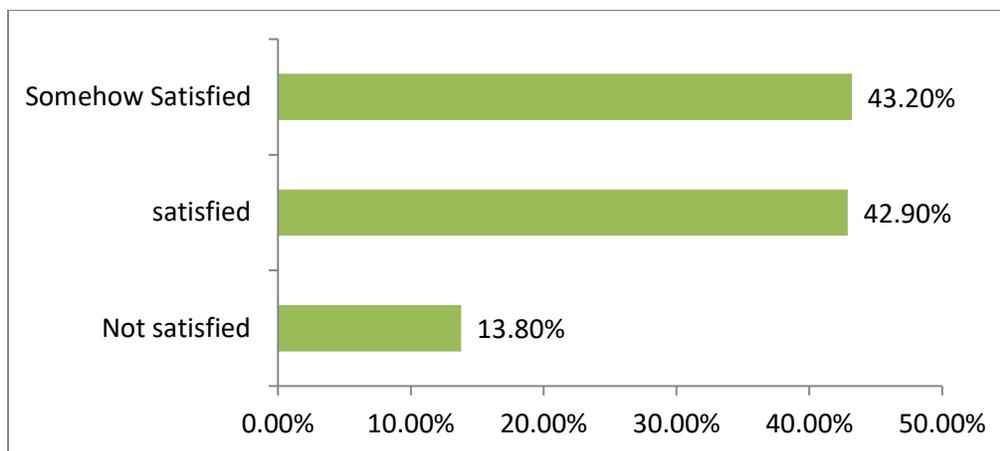The following figure indicates the learners' responses to their satisfaction with online learning.

Figure 5. General Satisfaction with online learning

Table one summarizes the descriptive statistical analysis of the study. It is noticed that the highest scores of all the statistical measures (Mean, Standard Deviation, Sample Variance, Kurtosis, Skewness, and Confidence Level (95.0%)) are listed in the challenges and related online issues in online English language learning during the pandemic. The mean score is 3.65 in the challenges variable whereas other variables' scores are less than one as it is depicted in the table below, Blackboard facilities' mean score is 0.199, the alternative used platforms' mean score is

0.458, and Learners' satisfaction with online learning is 0.333. That means the challenges negatively influenced EFL online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. *Summary of variables' statistical descriptive analysis*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample Variance	Kurtosis	Skewness	Confidence Level (95.0%)
Blackboard Facilities	0.1996	0.279429	0.07808	4.884151	2.203594	0.346956
Alternative Used Platforms	0.45825	0.214812	0.046144	-1.95412	0.440486	0.341814
Challenges	3.6514	7.520839	56.56302	4.984711	2.231877	9.338355
Satisfaction	0.333	0.168882	0.028521	--	-1.73144	0.419525

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the online education issues faced by EFL learners during the current pandemic. Some of these issues are e-learning challenges, learners' interaction with information technology tools in e-learning, and learners' satisfaction with online learning. According to the results, many students (more than 30%) missed many tasks, duties, and communications with teachers, which are essential in the educational process activities.

The results indicated some technical issues in using the Blackboard tool, such as online class access, class materials downloading, audio, and video playing, this is in line with Alturise (2020) in his study, which reported a worry about the technical issue's solution. The study recommended that technical support is needed to enable reliability in online learning. Teachers and students were forced to tackle this issue and utilize other online education platforms for undisrupted learning during the crisis. They used platforms such as emails for submitting their assignments, Microsoft teams, Google, and Zoom platform for conducting some lectures either due to the non-availability of the course in Blackboard at the beginning of transition or students could not logging in to the Blackboard. Besides, the WhatsApp platform was used by most of the students during online learning. The availability of mobile phones helped online learning succeed because most students used their mobile phones in this context. The results of this study are in agreement with (Kaid & Bin-Hady 2019) observation, which supported the impact of using social media applications in learning and recommended activation of these applications in English language learning.

As noticed in the results section above, challenges and related online issues in online English language learning showed the highest scores of all the statistical measures. The study addressed these issues where most EFL Learners encountered during COVID-19 online learning; most of the students are coming from remote towns where the network is experiencing pressure due to the COVID-19 crisis as all the students, teachers, and most of the other sectors shifted to work online. Learners confronted some difficulties accessing online lessons, materials downloading, online exams conducting, etc., students reported these issues as the most significant issue. Some other students could not open online exams on their mobile phones because of some

format or extension not supported by their devices. There are also some other issues that the learners faced; such as, the lack of digital skills in using Blackboard platforms, the need for all online learning equipment, tools, systems, lack of real English language practice with the teachers and their classmates, etc. The findings of the current paper corroborate the findings of previous research on the same issues about online learning during COVID-19, and the results showed that students are not happy with distance education and many obstacles have been encountered (Bataineh, Atoum, Alsmadi & Shikhali 2020; Rajab et al., 2020).

The last discussion is the analysis of the general satisfaction of learners with online English language education during the COVID-19 crisis. Offering some online courses in most Saudi educational institutions before the COVID-19 pandemic has supported, facilitated, and provided an excellent opportunity for students and institutes to switch to online learning after the outbreak of this pandemic. However, in the beginning, most of the learners came online for the first time. They lacked the experience and confidence to learn online using a new medium. After some time, most learners could overcome most of the technical issues related to online learning platforms. But the English language learning challenges are still problematic in online learning during the pandemic. These findings add to the growing body of literature on the significant challenges and problems that encountered EFL learners during the sudden change to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the necessary steps are needed to facilitate the online education process and to overcome these reported issues.

Conclusion and Future Recommendations
The study aims to explore and investigate online learning challenges, and problems during COVID-19 encountered EFL learners. The synchronized e-learning was the panacea at the time of the pandemic. However, it negatively influenced the learners' performance and learning outcomes. The study found out that learners encountered difficulties in accessing the Blackboard platform. About 30% of learners missed the classes and other tasks using Blackboard, and they shifted to alternative applications during online learning. The study reveals that the major challenges encountered by EFL learners in online learning were technical issues. Some learners faced internet connectivity problems, accessing classes, and downloading courses' materials problems. Online exams could not be opened on learners' mobile phones. Regarding language communication issues, learners could not effectively interact with teachers during virtual classes of English language skills, as revealed in learners' responses to open-ended questions. EFL learners' satisfaction with online learning is low; less than 50% are satisfied with online learning, whereas 14% of learners are not satisfied with online learning, and 43 % of learners are not fully supporting continuing online education if there is no crisis. It is recommended that further research should be undertaken to understand the teachers' views and experiences towards online English language teaching during the pandemic.

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