Online Learning is a City without Police: Influence of Proficiency on Libyan EFL Learners’ Perceptions

Aliakbar Imani
Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
Corresponding author: aliakimani1@gmail.com

Mohammed Abulqasem Mohammed Elasfar
Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
&
Department of English Language, Faculty of Languages, Sebha University, Libya

Received: 02/14/2023 Accepted: 05/04/2023 Published: 07/24/2023

Abstract
With the spread of COVID-19 and the replacement of face-to-face classes with emergency online learning, many studies have investigated English as a Foreign Language learners’ perceptions regarding their experiences of emergency online learning. However, the influence of EFL learners’ proficiency levels on their perceptions is still a neglected area. Conducting in-depth interviews with a group of Libyan EFL learners (n=18) by employing the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, this study investigated their metaphorical perceptions regarding emergency online learning across the three proficiency levels of Basic, Independent, and Proficient Users according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Considering the large number of EFL learners around the world and the felt literature gap, this study investigated the relationship between EFL learners’ proficiency levels and perceptions. The three main features of online learning reflected in the participants’ metaphors were (i) lack of the teacher’s physical presence, (ii) lack of peers’ physical presence and (iii) lack of nonverbal communication cues. Furthermore, this study reveals a significant relationship between the learners’ language proficiency levels and perceptions. For instance, Basic Users perceived the lack of a teacher’s presence by metaphors of ‘unsafety’ and ‘fear’, while Independent and Proficient Users respectively perceived it by metaphors of ‘freedom’ and ‘power’. Accordingly, the learners reported different class behaviors and learning strategies in response to these features.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, Libyan EFL learners, online learning, perception, proficiency, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique

Cite as: Imani, A, & Elasfar, M.A.M. (2023). Online Learning is a City without Police: Influence of Proficiency on Libyan EFL Learners’ Perceptions. Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on CALL (9) 147-160. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call9.10
Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 has changed every aspect of our lives, especially education. The transition of face-to-face classes to fully online classes – in an emergency response to the pandemic – has been one of the most researched subjects over the last three years with discrepant results. Some studies argue in favor of online learning such as its flexible and individualized nature (Gacs, Goertler & Spasova, 2020) or the positive home atmosphere reducing stress and fostering self-learning (Davis, Gough, & Taylor, 2019); while some studies report its negative impacts such as the existence of ‘family distraction’ (Dost, Hossain, Shehab, & Abdelwahed, 2020) or increased anxiety among students (Russell, 2020). One of the reasons for this discrepancy seems to be the wide range of the factors influencing online learning as well as the broadness of its research settings. The area of foreign language learning and teaching is by no means an exception. For instance, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners’ perceptions regarding their online learning experiences, as an important factor influencing their acceptance of online learning, has been subjected to many studies (e.g. Alavi, Dashtestani & Mellati, 2021; Cancino & Avila, 2021; Derakhshan, Kruk, Mehdizdeh & Pawlak, 2021; Barnhart, Li & Thompson, 2022; Laachir, El Hilali, Moubtassime, & El Karfa, 2023). However, the relationship between EFL learners’ language proficiency levels and their perceptions regarding online learning has not been given sufficient attention in the literature. For instance, Chinnathambi, Orabah, Rani, and Anandan (2023) in a survey on Omani EFL students noticed a significant relationship between the participants’ studied levels and their perceptions regarding online learning tools. However, further detailed insights into the nature of this relationship seem to be missing in the literature. Hence, this study was motivated to contribute to this field of study by investigating EFL learners’ perceptions regarding their online learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic across various proficiency levels to answer the following research questions:

1. How is the emergency online learning experience perceived by Libyan EFL learners through metaphors?
2. What is the relationship between EFL learners’ proficiency levels and perceptions?

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the influence of proficiency level on the perception among EFL learners regarding online learning as an existing literature gap. This paper continues with a review of the literature followed by explaining the methods of the study, a presentation of the findings and discussion, and finally ends with the conclusion of the study.

Literature Review

Online Learning

Shifting from face-to-face classes to fully online classes during the current pandemic has not been a smooth and challenge-free process in many countries (e.g. Russell, 2020; Alavi, Dashtestani & Mellati, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Laachir et al., 2023), even though online learning is not a recent phenomenon and had been practiced in many developed countries before COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Chen, Lou, and Luo (2001) noticed that “more than half of the colleges and universities in the U.S. are offering at least some of their classes over the Internet” (p. 38). However, it can be argued that the current pandemic has opened a new chapter in online education. Online learning before the pandemic was the result of the development of the necessary infrastructures and was offered based on the student’s needs (e.g. Chen, Lou, & Luo, 2001; Horspool & Lange, 2012). However, the transition to online learning during the pandemic has been
an emergency response to the need for continuing teaching and learning and at the same time maintaining the safety of students and educators even when the necessary infrastructures and preparations were lacking (Gacs, Goertler & Spasova, 2020; Payne, 2020).

Even though a large body of research has been dedicated to emergency online learning, considering the vastness of its educational settings and influencing factors, research in this area is still scarce. One of the areas of interest to the researchers is the area of foreign language learning as it is highly dependent on classroom interaction. In this regard, the majority of the studies agree on the limited nature of online interaction as compared to face-to-face interaction. For instance, Russel (2020) has argued that one of the main challenges faced by Georgian EFL learners in online classes is ‘anxiety’ resulting from feeling isolated and disconnected from their teachers and peers. Cancino and Avila (2021) in another study also found poor interactions among peers and a lack of peer rapport as one of the major challenges among Chilean EFL learners. Derakhshan et al. (2021) found out that from Iranian EFL learners’ perspectives, online learning was mainly a boring experience due to a lack of peer interaction, teacher-student interaction, and interpersonal relationships. Laachir et al. (2023) regarding the challenges of online learning among Moroccan students reported: “The majority of respondents chose the lack of motivation and engagement as the main drawback of e-learning (59.1%), and the lack of physical interaction with instructors as the second most frequent challenge (56.8%)” (p. 43).

These and other studies have provided valuable insights into EFL learners’ perceptions of their online learning experiences; however, the influence of the student’s proficiency levels, as an important factor in EFL classes, seems to have been marginalized in the literature.

**Metaphor Analysis**

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used to introduce another word or phrase by implying some similarities between them when they are not in reality comparable. The use of metaphors in social sciences research was triggered by Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) book ‘Metaphors we live by’ introducing Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) asserting that metaphor both reflects and shapes our worldview, or the way we see the world. Since our worldview is the underlying factor influencing our behavior, analyzing metaphors enables us to have a clear understanding of people’s perceptions and behaviors making metaphor analysis a popular research methodology in various areas of social sciences and humanities, one of which is foreign language learning and teaching.

**Metaphors and Foreign Language Learning and Teaching**

CMT soon found its way into research on EFL learners’ perceptions regarding various aspects of their learning experiences such as their English teacher (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Wan, Low, & Li, 2011), their motivation (Jin et al., 2014), and their language learning process (Fang, 2015). In this regard, CMT has provided the researchers with a strong theoretical background to understand EFL learners’ experience of language learning.

One of the mostly employed approaches in the literature is to elicit metaphors from the respondents such as employing the semi-structured prompt ‘A is like … because …’ – when A is the topic of the study (e.g. De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Wan, Low, & Li, 2011; Jin et al., 2014; Fang, 2015). However, as reported by many of these studies, this method has the following limitations: (1) using a one-sentence prompt does not provide an in-depth analysis of the responses, (2) some of the replies are not acceptable and need to be excluded due to lack of researcher’s
control on the data collection process, and (3) verbal prompt is not desirable for all participants as not all participants have a clear understanding of what metaphor is or own the necessary verbal skills to express their perceptions in the form of appropriate metaphors. Thus, this study employed Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique as an appropriate replacement for this approach (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

**Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique**

Unlike most of the studies on the metaphor that are only based on verbal communication, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) uses pictures to elicit metaphors. ZMET is based on the idea that a large part of communication occurs nonverbally. There is a lot of information that the respondents are not able to provide verbally either because a lot of our knowledge and understanding is in our subconscious mind, or many of us are not able to express our thoughts effectively and precisely. Since many of the factors influencing our behavior are below our level of conscious awareness, and since eliciting these factors is not simply possible by relying on verbal interviews, ZMET, by encouraging thinking about and searching for images related to the topic under study, brings these hidden thoughts to the surface (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

ZMET was initially introduced to investigate customers’ perceptions regarding advertising/marketing campaigns (e.g. Coulter, Zaltman, & Coulter, 2001). However, later it entered other areas such as education. For instance, Arunasalam (2018) used ZMET to study the ‘lecturer’s role’ both from students and the lecturers’ perceptions. In terms of online learning, Shearer et al. (2019), just a few months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, conducted a study on the students’ perceptions regarding future online learning to find out that students desired (i) a “personalized and adaptive learning experience,” which is sensitive to their needs and preferences” and that they can be “highly autonomous,” and “in control of their own learning”; and (ii) “a collaborative and constructive process of learning” (Shearer et al., 2019, p. 12). Wu and Chen (2012) studied students’ perceptions regarding e-learning and the effects of their perceptions on their willingness to use e-learning. They found out that ‘perceived social interaction’ (i.e., communicating with peers and teachers) and ‘perceived least effort’ (easiness of e-learning) were among the desirable key features of online learning for the participants. Hence, considering the effectiveness of ZMET in providing valuable insights into students’ perceptions, it was employed to answer the following research questions to address the felt literature gaps.

**Methods**

This study was qualitative research due to the qualitative nature of the study which was an in-depth investigation of the respondents’ perceptions. The selected method for this study, as will be explained in Research Instruments, was the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, due to its effectiveness in providing in-depth insights into the participants’ perceptions.

**Participants**

In total, 18 Libyan EFL learners were selected by employing purposive sampling. The participants were enrolled in a language institute in Libya in the academic year 2021-2022. The selection of the participants was based on their proficiency levels regardless of age and gender, which were not distinguishing factors in the study. The participants’ proficiency levels were: six participants studying at A1/A2 level (Basic Users); six participants studying at B1/B2 level (Independent Users); and 6 participants studying at C1/C2 level (Proficient Users) (ref. Council of
Europe, 2022, for the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels descriptors). The participants’ ages ranged from 27 to 43 years old, of whom 13 were males and five were females.

**Research Instruments**

A semi-structured one-to-one online interview was conducted with each participant using ‘Google Meet’ after explaining the purpose of the research and obtaining their consent. The interview sessions, which lasted for about one hour, were recorded and transcribed. One week before the interview session, the participants were asked to bring five pictures of their own choice that represented their thoughts and feelings about online learning. Adapting the ZMET procedure (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995), the interview comprised the following steps:

1. **Storytelling**: participants described the content of their selected images and how these images were associated with online learning.
2. **Sorting task**: participants were asked to sort their images into meaningful groups and to provide a label or description for each group.
3. **Sensory metaphors**: participants were asked to use other senses to describe what is and what is not a good sensory representation of online learning.
4. **Construct elicitation**: the laddering technique was used to elicit basic constructs and their relationships.
5. **Most representative image and attribute**: participants were asked to indicate an image which was the most representative of online learning, as well as the most representative attribute assigned to online learning.
6. **Verbal description of missing images**: participants described pictures that were opposite of the topic (i.e., what is not online learning, which in this case would be face-to-face learning).

**Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively based on an adaptation of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis with the following levels: (1) Familiarization; (2) coding; (3) generating themes; (4) reviewing themes and generating a thematic map; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) choosing extracts and producing the report. Data analysis was conducted by both the author and co-author to reduce the subjectivity of data analysis and to assure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. In this regard, we discussed our differences until we reached an agreement of 100%. Table one shows a sample of data analysis with reference to a few extracts from the participants’ replies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Participant/Proficiency level</th>
<th>Extracts from the participants’ replies</th>
<th>The image used</th>
<th>The generated theme/the feature of online reflected upon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>C/ Basic User</td>
<td>Sometimes, it is just like being in a dark tunnel. There is no light, and I am not sure where I am. I hear teacher’s voice in the deep darkness, but I cannot focus on it because I cannot see his face or actions. In face-to-face classes, we could see the teacher’s face and actions. When I cannot see him, sometimes I cannot know what he wants me to do.</td>
<td>A dark tunnel</td>
<td>Lack of communication cues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So, I don’t answer him. I just ignore him and bring up the excuse of the internet connection.

2. H/Independent User
Online is boring. Looking at a screen for two hours is not fun at all. I constantly daydream and miss what my teacher is saying. I feel like there is no one with me, I cannot see others. So, I am not sure even if my classmates are there behind their laptops. Usually, pair work takes much less time than a face-to-face class.

A man who is alone on an island looking at the ocean
Lack of peers’ physical presence

3. O/Proficient User
In online classes, I am free to do the class exercises faster, or even to skip the whole exercise if I find it boring. I don’t have to follow the class most of the time… Our teacher does not see us and cannot check on our every move.

A bird flying out of a cage
Lack of teacher’s physical presence

The research procedures in this study included: the selection of the participants, preparing them for the interviews, conducting the interviews, and transcribing the interviews at the data collection stage. Then, at the data analysis stage, the transcribed interviews were subject to a close analysis to identify patterns across the participants.

Findings
The 18 participants altogether brought 90 images to the interview sessions. However, as mentioned in Data Collection, Step Five, the participants were asked to indicate an image which was the most representative of online learning as well as the most representative attribute assigned to online learning (ref. Data Collection, Step five). Overall, three key features of online learning were reflected upon by the participants: (1) lack of teacher’s physical presence, (2) lack of peers’ physical presence, and (3) lack of nonverbal cues for communication. Table two (ref. Appendix A) illustrates the most representative image, the most representative attribute of online learning, and the most highlighted feature of online learning for each participant.

As Table two shows, significant patterns can be identified across the participants. Firstly, the only attribute of online learning across all levels was ‘loneliness’ due to a lack of peers’ physical presence. It seems that the participants at all proficiency levels enjoy the presence of peers in the class, the lack of which leads to negative experiences such as loneliness. Secondly, in terms of the lack of a teacher’s physical presence, there were more similarities between Independent and Proficient Users (representing intermediate and high proficiency levels) who respectively found the lack of a teacher’s presence more liberating and empowering, while Basic Users reported negative attributes such as ‘unsafety and fear’ for the same feature. This indicates Basic Users’ high dependence on the teacher’s presence. Finally, in terms of lack of nonverbal communication cues, there seem to be more similarities between Basic and Independent Users; however, as will be discussed, Independent and Proficient Users employed more similar problem-solving strategies to address this challenge.

Discussion
In answering the first research question, the findings of the study showed that emergency online learning was perceived variously by the EFL learners’ metaphors such as metaphors representing negative feelings of confusion (e.g., a dark tunnel); fear (e.g., an empty seat of a lifeguard on the beach); and loneliness (e.g., an empty room) as well as positive feelings of
empowerment (e.g., the Poseidon Trident, or an eagle with open wings); and freedom (e.g., a bird flying out of a cage).

In answering the second research question, further analysis of the findings of the study revealed a significant relationship between the student’s perceptions and proficiency levels. In this regard, negative feelings were mainly observed among the students with low proficiency levels; whereas positive feelings were mostly reflected by the students with higher proficiency levels. For instance, for Basic Users, the lack of their teacher’s presence in online classes was conceptualized by metaphors of ‘unsafety’ and ‘fear’, while Independent and Proficient Users respectively perceived the same feature by metaphors of ‘freedom’ and ‘power’.

According to the images provided by the participants and their verbal accounts of the images, online learning came with three main features (a) lack of the teacher’s physical presence; (b) lack of peers’ physical presence; and (c) lack of nonverbal communication cues, each of which will be discussed below.

**Lack of Teacher’s Physical Presence**

While this feature is the direct result of online learning limitations and led to lower class participation across all participants (Akbarpour Tehrani, Abdullah, & Imani, 2011), it did not necessarily have negative impacts on all. In this regard, there seem to be significant patterns across the students based on their proficiency levels. For instance, Independent and Proficient Users found the lack of a teacher’s physical presence as a positive factor creating a more student-centered learning environment where they were in charge of their own learning. On the contrary, Basic Users were more in need of the teacher’s presence as an authoritative figure in the class not only to provide guidelines, knowledge, and instructions but also to set class rules. For instance, Participant E (Basic User), with the image of a boat in the ocean, referred to the teacher’s authoritative role as a guide who provides knowledge and instruction, or as another instance, Participant A (Basic User), with the image of a city without police, referred to the teacher’s role as an authority who sets the class rules, similar to a police officer whose lack of presence creates chaos in a city. In other words, students with low proficiency levels were quite dependent on the teacher’s physical presence. Many studies agree that the teacher’s authoritative role as the leader and the guide is highly expected and perceived by learners as one of the requirements in EFL classes (e.g. De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Wan, Low, & Li, 2011), and lack of teacher’s physical presence has been found to cause negative impacts such as anxiety among students (Russel, 2020; Laachir et al., 2023). However, this challenge has not been investigated in consideration of students’ proficiency levels. In this regard, as the findings of the study show, students at low proficiency levels required the teacher’s guidance and control because they found themselves incapable of guiding themselves or controlling their own behaviors. As Hurd (2000) argues much of the planning in classroom-based learning is conducted by the teacher providing a structure, a support system, and constant checks on learning. This classroom-based support system is missing in online learning, which puts more responsibilities on learners. Hence, learners who are not developed enough to plan and monitor their own learning autonomously will experience ‘chaos, fear, unsafety, and loneliness’. Developing this level of autonomy requires years of studying and sufficient levels of proficiency which are mainly missing among students with low proficiency levels.

While the lack of a teacher’s physical presence was a negative and preventive factor among students with low proficiency levels, it was considered a positive, liberating, and empowering
factor for intermediate and high-proficiency learners, who were satisfied to be in control of their own learning. These students seem to have achieved the level of autonomy and development that enables them to take responsibility for and be in charge of their own learning. For instance, Participant H (Intermediate User), with the image of a bird flying out of a cage, stated, “in online class, I am free to do the class exercises faster, or even to skip the whole exercise if I find it boring. I don’t have to follow the class most of the time...”. The flexible and individualized nature of online learning has been reported in a few studies (e.g. Gacs, Goertler & Spasova, 2020; Payne, 2020; Alavi, Dashtestani & Mellati, 2021); however, again it has not been fully discussed in terms of students’ proficiency levels.

In terms of class behavior, the participants generally reported that class participation was reduced. Based on Akbarpour Tehrani, Abdullah and Imani (2011), it can be argued that it is the teacher’s presence that simply makes class participation compulsory, lack of which turns it into an optional activity. However, what the findings of this study add to Akbarpour Tehrani, Abdullah and Imani’s (2011) findings is that under non-compulsory conditions, the students avoided class participation for various reasons, which seems to be highly influenced by their proficiency levels. For instance, Participant E (Basic User) avoided class participation as she could not understand the instructions, “I cannot go further and so I have to stop there”; Participant A (Basic User) expressed constant distractions during the class, “I am constantly checking my Instagram and Facebook”. On the other hand, Participant N (Proficient User), with the image of a flexed arm, stated avoiding parts of the class to do something that he finds more useful such as “watch a short video about a word or check Google images when I am not sure exactly what it means such as ‘shortbread’, without the teacher stopping the class and asking me what I am doing on my phone,” or Participant M (Proficient User), with the image of Poseidon Trident, expressed being highly selective in doing class exercises, “I am free to do the class exercises faster, or even to skip the whole exercise if I find it boring.”. Hence, it can be argued that the lack of a teacher’s physical presence led to reduced class participation as compared with face-to-face classes; however, with different intentions across the proficiency levels.

**Lack of Peers’ Physical Presence**

The second feature of online learning was the lack of peers’ physical presence. Obviously, language learning is not an isolated activity as the main purpose of language learning is to communicate with others. Thus, one of the basic principles in language learning, which is the interactive nature of the classes, is compromised in online classes (Russel, 2020) mainly because online learning is generally marked with less interaction as compared to face-to-face classes (Horspool & Lange, 2012). Cancino and Avila (2021) found out that in online EFL classes, poor interactions with peers and lack of peer rapport negatively influenced the social presence of students. Similarly, in this study, according to some participants, their peers’ cameras were mostly off, and they did not feel their presence. For instance, Participant I (Independent User) stated, “It is like a dead city, there is no action here. The teacher is the sole speaker. You cannot hear or see your classmates. Face-to-face classes used to be vibrant like a big market. But now everyone is quiet, like a dead city”. Lack of peers’ physical presence was the only online learning feature which led to similar responses across all participants regardless of their proficiency levels. In this regard, all participants expressed negative feelings, particularly ‘loneliness’ and ‘boredom/lack of fun’ as the two main feelings assigned to the lack of peers’ presence.
In terms of class behavior, the lack of peers’ presence reduced class participation. It seems that students at all proficiency levels preferred peers’ physical presence for the interaction to make sense. For instance, Participant P (Proficient User), with the image of an island, stated, “The interaction does not feel real. Group work is not effective. Like you are shouting to or waving at the shadow of someone miles away”. Derakhshan et al. (2021) reported boredom as one of the main issues among EFL Iranian students in online classes, which was particularly due to a lack of peer interaction, teacher-student interaction, and interpersonal relationships. Barnhart, Li and Thompson (2022) also reported that 79% of students admitted to getting drowsy and/or falling asleep during their online classes. Hence, peer interaction seems to be necessary for EFL classes, a limitation that needs to be addressed in online EFL classes.

### Lack of Nonverbal Communication Cues

Lack of nonverbal cues was the third feature of online classes which was found to be connected with the students’ proficiency levels. In this regard, the resulting ambiguity and confusion led to reducing class participation among low-proficiency students (Basic Users); however, it led to the development of some other language learning skills among intermediate and high-proficiency students (Independent and Proficient Users).

Listening comprehension is one of the most challenging skills in EFL classes, and students actively try to understand the messages (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). One of the critical components of EFL classes to aid comprehension and interpretation of spoken language is a reference to nonverbal communication cues, the lack of which has proved to cause ambiguity and confusion (Chua et al., 2015; Batty, 2021).

Many studies have reported relationships among ambiguity tolerance, language learning strategies, and students’ proficiency levels. For instance, Batty (2021) argued that high ambiguity tolerance is a significant predictor of language competence and the use of learning strategies. Similarly in this study, students with low proficiency levels (Basic Users) were prevented from participating in the class as they simply could not follow some of the instructions for a lack of nonverbal communication cues. For instance, Participant C (Basic User), with an image of a dark tunnel, stated, “When I cannot see him [the teacher], sometimes I cannot know what he wants me to do. So, I don’t answer him. I just ignore him and bring the excuse of the internet connection”. On the contrary, Independent and Proficient Users showed employing various strategies such as “making some preparations before the class such as reviewing the next session’s lesson” by Participant J (Independent User); “trying to listen more attentively” by Participant K (Independent User); or “guessing the missed information” by Participant Q (Proficient User), as some of the strategies employed to compensate for lack of nonverbal communication cues in online learning. Hence, it can be argued that if the ambiguity in the class is within the students’ tolerance, it can yield good results and lead to students’ further development; however, if the ambiguity is beyond students’ tolerance, it will negatively impact their learning process.

In sum, firstly, the findings of the study reveal a significant relationship between proficiency level and perception Chinnathambi et al., (2023). In this regard, online learning was a more challenging experience for Basic Users causing anxiety (Russell, 2020), while it was a more liberating and empowering experience for Independent and Proficient Users due to its flexible and individualized nature (Gacs, Goertler, & Spasova, 2020) reducing stress and fostering self-learning (Davis, Gough, & Taylor, 2019) as well as encouraging student autonomy (Shearer et al., 2019). Secondly, in terms of classroom behaviour, at the first glance, online learning led to reduced class
participation among all the participants (Akbarpour Tehrani, Abdullah, & Imani, 2011); however, the nature and influence of this reduced participation on the EFL learners’ development were quite different across their proficiency levels. Basic Users avoided class participation due to the embarrassment of not being able to follow the instructions, while Independent and Proficient Users merely avoided unnecessary class tasks to focus more on what they found to be more useful to them. Thirdly, the only challenge which was similarly perceived by and influential on all the participants was the lack of peers’ physical presence, which led to feelings of loneliness and boredom (Cancino & Avila, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Barnhart, Li, & Thompson, 2022).

Conclusion
This study was an investigation of a group of Libyan EFL learners’ metaphorical perceptions regarding COVID-19 emergency online learning using ZMET interviews across the three CEFR proficiency levels of Basic User, Independent User, and Proficient User (respectively low, intermediate, and high proficiency levels) to see whether their proficiency levels had any impacts on their perceptions as a noticed literature gap. Firstly, as the findings of the study revealed, three features of online learning were significant to the participants: lack of teacher’s physical presence, lack of peers’ physical presence, and lack of nonverbal communication cues. Secondly, the participants showed significant patterns across their proficiency levels. The lack of a teacher’s physical presence was conceptualized negatively among students with low proficiency levels to show how dependent they were on the teacher’s presence not only as a knowledgeable guide to provide instructions but also as an authority to control the class and impose rules. However, High-proficiency students showed sufficient levels of autonomy and independence and even considered the lack of a teacher’s presence as a positive feature so that they could determine their own learning based on their own needs. In terms of peers’ presence, all students needed their classmates’ presence so that peer interaction becomes meaningful to them making the lack of peers’ presence a negative feature for all. The lack of nonverbal communication cues was conceptualized by metaphors of confusion among all students; however, the impact of this confusion was different across the students. For students with low proficiency levels, this confusion created a feeling of helplessness to reduce their participation in the class and affect their learning process. However, for Independent and Proficient Users, it led to the development of some language skills and learning strategies such as increasing ambiguity tolerance, listening more attentively, and preparing before the class. As a result, it is not easy to argue whether online learning has positive or negative impacts on EFL learners without taking into consideration their proficiency levels and other respective factors such as their autonomy levels. Hence, more research is suggested in this regard.

About the Authors
Dr. Aliakbar Imani, Ph.D., is a senior lecturer at Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). His research interests are Critical Discourse Analysis, Health Communication, and Language and Communication in society. In particular, he investigates the role of metaphor in discourse and as a research tool. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2110-5659

Mohammed Abulqasem Mohammed Elasfar is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). He
is researching Apology and Request Strategies among Arab Postgraduates with their Supervisors. He is also an assistant professor of English at the Department of English Language, Sebha university, Libya. His research areas are ESL, Semantics, Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, and Language and Communication.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5777-9551

References


Appendices

Appendix A: Online learning features

Table 2. The most representative image, the most representative attribute, and the most highlighted feature of online learning for each participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proficiency level</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>The most representative image of online learning</th>
<th>The most representative attribute of online learning</th>
<th>The most highlighted feature of online learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low (Basic User)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A city without police</td>
<td>Chaos</td>
<td>Lack of teacher’s physical presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>An empty seat of a lifeguard on the beach</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Lack of teacher’s physical presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>A dark tunnel</td>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Lack of nonverbal communication cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>A dark room</td>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Lack of nonverbal communication cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>A boat on the ocean</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Lack of teacher’s physical presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>An empty room</td>
<td>loneliness</td>
<td>Lack of peers’ physical presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate User</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>A boat on the ocean</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Lack of teacher’s physical presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H</td>
<td>A bird flying out of a cage</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Lack of teacher’s physical presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>A city of the dead</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>Lack of peers’ physical presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>J</td>
<td>A series of connected roads with no signboards</td>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Lack of nonverbal communication cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K</td>
<td>A silhouette of a head with entangled threads inside</td>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Lack of nonverbal communication cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L</td>
<td>A row of cages</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Lack of peers’ physical presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (User)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Poseidon Trident</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Lack of teacher’s physical presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>A flexed arm</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Lack of teacher’s physical presence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>A man who is alone on an island looking at the ocean</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Lack of peers’ physical presence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>An island</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Lack of peers’ physical presence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>A wavy ocean</td>
<td>Struggle for survival</td>
<td>Lack of nonverbal communication cues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>An eagle with open wings</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Lack of teacher’s physical presence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>