EFL Students' Attitude towards Online Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The situation of COVID-19 pandemic in Libya has made all teachers, educators, researchers, and students work from home doing all the teaching and learning online. The study aims at examining the attitudes of EFL students towards online learning which to some of the students are not accustomed to learning online. The sample of the study was 8 EFL students who have used online learning for at least two semesters in their classrooms. Data was collected through depth interviews using the Zoom application. The data was analysed thoroughly using the thematic analysis method which included coding and categorizing the information. The findings reveal that the students tend to be bored learning from home. A number of the students prefer to have conventional teaching and learning activities. It is suggested that the teachers should vary the techniques when performing online classes.

Keywords: Online Learning, Covid-19 Pandemic, and Learning Management System (LMS).

ملخص الدراسة

أدى الوضع الراهن لوباء كوفيد19 في ليبيا إلى جعل جميع المعلمين والمعلمات والباحثين والطلاب يعملون من منازلهم ويقومون بجُل عمليات التدريس والتعلم من خلال الإنترنت. تهدف الدراسة إلى فحص اتجاهات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية نحو التعلم عبر الإنترنت حيث أن بعض الطلاب غير معتادين على التعلم عبر الإنترنت. وبذا تكونت عينة الدراسة من عدد ثمانٍ طلاب للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وذلك باستخدام التعليم عبر الإنترنت لمدة فصلين دراسيين فيما لو كانوا في فصولهم الدراسية، وتم جمع البيانات من خلال مقابلة مكثفة باستخدام تطبيق زووم. وتم تحليل البيانات بدقة باستخدام طريقة التحليل الموضوعي والتي تضمنت ترميز المعلومات وتصنيفها. وخلُصت الدراسة إلى أن الطلاب يميلون إلى الشعور بالملل أثناء التعلم من المنزل إذ أن عدداً من الطلاب يفضلون ممارسة أنشطة التدريس والتعلم بالطريقة التقليدية لكونها أفضل بكثير من التعلم عبر الإنترنت وهنا يقترح الباحث بأن يقوم معلمو وأساتذة اللغة بتغيير التقنيات عند أدائهم عملية التدريس لطلابهم.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the uncertain situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the teaching and learning activities are now fully done online, for over two semesters. The idea of learning and teaching activities is not a new way to do. What happens to the students who get bored when everything should be done online? Many lectures also assign them to do the exercises/tasks or projects to work on and submit online. Such a situation may lead to a boredom activity, when it is conducted for a long time considering its success in learning may not depend on one aspect (Male, 2017).

Over two decades, the use of the Internet has become increasing among educational communities (Paris, 2004). On one hand, learning online or e-learning can be very interesting for some students, living in the era of technology. On the other hand, not all students have become familiar with online learning. Yet, the learning as social interaction might be done unconsciously (Dakhi et al 2019). Therefore, it creates problems both with the learners and the teachers when the teachers deliver the learning or study material. Another problem is that the current situation is uncertain and no one knows when the situation of learning activities returns to a normal situation. Nobody knows when the coronavirus will be gone so they can meet up face to face and traditionally have social interaction. Learning online without having a human touch can be boring. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is very interesting to find out the undergraduate students' attitudes.

This study attempts to investigate whether or not the students have problems with learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic and also to find out whether they enjoy learning through online e-learning compared to traditional classroom learning as well as to find out their attitudes towards online learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19

New coronaviruses (COVID-19) attack the immune system and can cause death. The rapid spread of the virus also leads to anxiety, resulting in behavioral and social effects such as short breathing and dizziness (Tarista, 2020).

Online Learning

Online learning (e-learning) refers to any form of teaching carried out using digital technology. These methods include visual graphics, text, animation, video, and audio. In addition, online education can also promote group learning and support for instructors in a specific field (Wan Aziaris, 2015). In this study, online learning is defined as the teaching and learning process between teachers and students through various digital media such as WhatsApp, Zoom Google Classroom, and many other free applications used as Learning Management Systems (LMS). In addition, online learning is not only a direct learning experience. Any assignment or activity provided by the teacher online is considered part of online learning.

In recent years, online education programs such as e-learning and online learning have become increasingly popular with new terms. Rapid technological development and innovations have made e-learning more interesting and fun, as it can combine visual, audio, and animation effects to make it a more promising platform (Shyamlee and Phil, 2012).

There are three main areas in the e-learning system, Newton (2003) stated that the e-learning system has three main areas such as to develop the quality of teaching and learning, improve access to education and training, and maintain competitiveness in higher education.

In recent years, several researchers have conducted research into the attitudes of undergraduates towards electronic learning (online learning). Sanders and Morrison-Shelter (2001) studied the attitudes of students toward web-enhanced teaching in introductory biology courses. The results of the study show that there is an influence on the learning of students, they become more critical and understand how to solve problems. Similar studies (Knowles and Kerkman, 2007; Sen,2013; Erarslan and Topkaya, 2017) have shown that students' attitudes towards online learning are negative.

In terms of the student's engagement in online learning, a few researchers, Omar, Hassan, and Atan (2012) also conducted such a study. The study focused on the learners' attitudes towards e-mentoring and one of the results was the learners' attitudes played a role in predicting e-mentoring. Other researchers (Smith, Caputi, Rawstorne, 2000; Govindasamy, 2001) have also conducted similar studies. They found that students had negative attitudes towards online learning. Students' behavior and attitudes vary

depending on the use of the technology itself. One of the positive aspects is that they can significantly improve students' achievement.

Furthermore, Elfaki (2019) the results of the final examination (experimental) obtained by students in e-learning groups are statistically significantly higher than those obtained in traditional groups, and the main results of this study indicate that, in addition to the positive attitudes of online and traditional students, there are significant differences in learning outcomes, which may be an effective alternative learning method for higher education. The use of e-learning activities and materials influences the level of motivation and academic performance of students. These materials, especially those used in electronic learning, can capture students' attention and connect them with students, thereby increasing students' confidence and ensuring that they are satisfied with positive reinforcements and rewards (Kew Si Na, 2020).

Methodology

A phenomenological methodology was selected for the nature of the research problem. The semi-structured interview was used to collect the data because the study is qualitative. Therefore, eight interviews were conducted. In the selection of the participants, a purposive technique was used for the reliability of the study and for gaining insight into the matter under investigation. Moreover, the participants of the study were online learners for at least three semesters.

Objective and Research Question of the Study

The study aims to explore the students' attitudes toward the effectiveness of online learning on their academic performance. To achieve the aim, this study intends to answer this research question:

Q1- What are the students' attitudes toward online learning?

Participants

The participants of this study were eight students, two of them were male and six were female. All the participants are the fourth Semester students in the English department at the Faculty of Languages in Surman. This study was conducted during the academic year 2021-2022.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews were employed to collect the data for this study. The questions of the interviews were formed based on previous studies in the literature reviews. The questions covered various aspects like participants' overall opinions and suggestions of online learning during the pandemic, the difficulties of using the LMS, online classroom activities, and preferences on learning online or traditional way.

Prior to the interviews, a consent form was given to the participants to the purpose of the study, and approval of the Ethics Committee was attached. They were also informed that they could choose not to answer any of the formulated questions. After obtaining their consent, the interviews were scheduled at their convenience. All the interviews were conducted in the faculty office of the participants. The duration of the interviews was an average of 25 minutes. The interviews were conducted, primarily, in Arabic Language and translated into English language.

All the interviews were recorded on a mobile application "Voice Recorder Pro". At the end of the interview, the researcher thanked the participants and informed them that a follow-up interview might be scheduled to triangulate data.

The Results of the Interview

The data gained from the semi-structured interviews were analysed qualitatively by using the thematic analysis method. Only five themes have been presented and discussed. These themes are presented below:

Students' opinions about online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

- *I have to stay at home during the pandemic. And about my opinion of online learning is not OK. I mean, I have some problems with online learning, for example, the new application. I need time to adjust myself. (student 1)*

- *To me, I am really afraid of the pandemic. I always learn and follow my teachers to attend online classes. I don't want to go out. (student2)*

- *I am scared of the Coronavirus, that's why I stay at home. In my opinion, online learning is sometimes fun, but sometimes it's also boring because online learning is not very effective. Many obstacles occur such as poor signal, so the lessons conveyed are not very clear. (Student3.)*

- *About the COVID-19 pandemic, of course, I am scared. And I think online learning is just like one type of distance learning that we can learn through wherever we are, for example, I can study from home as long as the internet is available. (student 4).*

- *I am scared of the Coronavirus, that's why I stay at home. In my opinion, online learning is good and I don't have any problems with it, it's great.* (student 5).

- *I am really afraid of the pandemic and online learning is something new to me. (student 6).*

- *In my opinion, online learning is good and I don't have any problems with it, it's great.* (student 7).

- *It's fun and boring at the same time. (student 8).*

Students' difficulties of using LMS

The following are the excerpts of the participants:

- *I don't find any difficulties in learning to use the LMS application because so far, I can use the application and I'm used to using it. (student1)*

- *I think I'm not because it's not a difficult thing to use, but it could be difficult the first time I used all these applications as it gets a little bit difficult and a little confusing. But I can handle it because I can ask my friend questions about the app or even I learned it by myself. Now I can use it properly. (student2)*

- *No, because I have understood the way to use this application. (student 3)*

- *I think it is not difficult, because now is the age of technology, and can understand the subject matter provided through the application. (Student 4)*

- *It's not a difficult thing to use. I learned it by myself. (student 5)*

- *I do not find any difficulties in using the LMS. (student 6).*

- *I learned it by myself. It's not a difficult thing to use. (student 7).*

- *It's not a difficult thing to use. (student 8).*

Students' enjoyment of doing online learning

- *Yes, I do, because if we don't take advantage of these applications, we can't learn as usual and can't follow the discussion there. (student 1)*

- *Sometimes I enjoy it but sometimes I don't. It has been a month or more that we have been doing online learning with technology without interacting directly, which makes it really boring. (student 2).*

- *Yes, I really enjoy it. Because I can do it just by using my mobile phone at ease while I am in bed, and of course, I can do online learning while relaxing and enjoying my favorite food and drinks. (student 3).*

- *Yes, I enjoy it, because besides being able to learn online, I can also do other activities as well. (student 4).*

- *I enjoy doing online learning. (student 5).*

- *Yes, I enjoy it. It is amazing. (student 6).*

- *Yes, I enjoy it. (student7).*

- *Yes, I love it. I can do online learning while relaxing and enjoying my favorite food and drinks. (student 8).*

Students' opinion about time management and activities on online classroom

- *I think it was good, even though we couldn't meet face to face, we can still do learning between lecturers and students (student 1).*

- *Yes, I can. I usually make a plan for my activities, so I must finish all of my activities well. (student2).*

- *In my opinion, online classroom activities are not going well. There are some teachers who only give assignments without explanation every week. So far I can manage my time for online learning. (student 3.)*

- *I think the online classroom activities in their actual way is when the teacher and students are separated. And I can accept this class well, as long as I have a good internet connection and my space. Yes, I can manage my time properly. (student4).*

- *I think I can understand the material better and I can do everything when there are online class activities. About the time, yes, I can. (student5).*

- *I can do the online classroom activities well and I can manage my time as well. (student6).*

- *I think I can understand the material better and I can do everything when there are online class activities. About the time, yes, I can. (student7).*

- *I can accept this class well, as long as I have a good internet connection and on my own pace. Yes, I can manage my time properly. (student 8).*

Students' opinion about their preferences on learning online or traditional way

- *The traditional way is because as a human, we need to interact closely and I think if we traditionally do the learning, we can be free to express all ideas when we learn. (student 1).*

- *I prefer the traditional way because there is direct social interaction. Well, because the situation is not safe, this time we learn online. (student 2).*

- *I actually like to do them both. I like to stay at home, but I also like to meet and socialize with my friends, meet people out there, go somewhere with my relatives, and most importantly meet my lecturer to teach me in the classroom. So, I like those two things (student 3).*

- *Doing the activities online. (student 4).*

- *I prefer the traditional way. (student 5).*

- *They prefer face-to-face teaching ...the traditional way is the best [laughing.] (student 6).*

- *The traditional way, of course. (student 7).*

- *The traditional way is the best, I think. (student 8).*

Discussion of the Results

The result of the study showed that most of the students preferred to have traditional learning instead of online learning. The findings obtained from the firs theme reveal that all of the participants stated that they were afraid of covid-19 pandemic.They seemed to understand the danger of the virus. In terms of online learning, some students stated they have no problems with online learning. One of them even enjoyed learning online. However, the rest of them stated that they had difficulties and were not familiar with online learning because it was new to them. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Erarslan and Topkaya (2017). The results of their study showed that students have negative attitudes towards online learning.

The findings obtained from the second theme show that all the participants stated that they did not find any difficulties with using the LMS. Only an interviewee found it difficult at the beginning, but at the end, he could handle it. These results are online with

the results obtained by Erarslan and Topkaya (2017). The results of their study showed that the majority of the students found no difficulties in using LMS.

The findings obtained from the third theme reveal that the majority of the participants showed through their responses that they enjoyed doing online learning. One of the participants stated that she sometimes enjoyed it but sometimes she did not enjoy doing online classes. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Shyamlee and Phil (2012). The results of their study showed that e-learning is interesting and fun.

The findings obtained from the fourth theme reveal that the majority of the participants stated that they could do the online classroom activities well. Whereas only a participant stated that it didn't run well and the teachers lacked of explanation about the material given to them. Concerning time management, all of the participants stated they could manage their time allocation well. These results support the results obtained by Kew Si Na (2020). The results of his study showed that the use of e-learning activities and materials influences the level of motivation and academic performance of students.

The findings obtained from the last theme show that most of the participants preferred to have traditional learning activities to online learning. One of the participants said that she prefers to have direct social interaction. Similarly, only one participant said he could even express all things freely when traditional learning is done. Another participant demonstrated her preference for online learning classes. Another participant said she preferred to have both online and traditional learning. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Erarslan and Topkaya (2017). The results of their study showed that students have negative attitudes towards online learning.

Based on the interview results, it can be assumed that the majority of the students showed a partially positive attitude towards the current online learning although there is no direct interactive or physical communication between the student and the teacher in the virtual learning process, which in general, it is simply characterized by a lack of enthusiasm in terms of interaction and the learning process because it takes place online. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they had no other choice but to experience the learning process. Regardless of their readiness to learn online and their complaints about the expensive internet cost, the result also showed that they need to learn as if they were in a normal situation where they can interact with each other freely.

CONCLUSION

The result of the study showed that most of the students preferred to have traditional learning instead of online learning. As they mentioned, they prefer to have direct interaction with other classmates and the teacher face-to-face. However, due to the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, they must learn from home. They all expected to have the situation back to normal where they can learn at campus and have normal social interactions with others. It is suggested that the teachers should design efficient online learning material for teaching, and learning resources for the students to meet the needs of the students and also to avoid monotonous and boredom while learning online. It is also suggested that to utilize better online learning, the teachers should provide and design the course or learning material to be more effective and efficient in the hope that the teaching and learning activities may give mutual benefit so that the students' achievement may get better results.

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