

ONLINE EFL LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN SAUDI UNIVERSITIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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ABSTRACT

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The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has changed the norms of the educational systems worldwide, including English language learning. The move from face-to-face classes to online classes has influenced English language learning. The study intends to explore the Online EFL Learning Experience in Saudi Universities during COVID19. It investigates how the online environment adopted by the universities in KSA sustains EFL online classes. The study employed the quantitative research method, as a questionnaire-based survey was conducted to collect data. The analysis method was the descriptive statistical analysis. The target population for this study were the students in the undergraduate programs. The findings revealed several positive and practical aspects of the online university environment (the Blackboard) in helping the participants learn English skills. However, despite exuding the efficiency in online teaching, some technical issues were reported, such as losing signal during sessions, communicating with the technical service center, interruption of online sessions, and delay in online texting. The study recommends to improve teachers' technical skills and adoption of teaching style suitable to the online environment, in order to enhance their performance and bring innovation in their interaction with students for a more sustainable synchronous teaching sessions.

Contribution/ Originality: The study findings revealed that the online experience was effective during the EFL online learning. The results of this study found that the online environment was potential enough to enhance student learning and facilitate interactions between students, teachers, and peers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed a new reality in all aspects of life. Siren voices sounded all over the world after the outbreak of the pandemic in Wuhan, China, which caused death of many people worldwide (Chen, Dobinson, & Kent, 2020). Since the outset of the pandemic, efforts had been made to limit its spread. Governments have taken tough decisions and framed rules worldwide to curb the spread of the pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) and other organizations have recommended preventive measures, the use of safety measures, and protocols for social /physical distancing. These measures are also known as non-pharmaceutical interventions implemented by many countries to control COVID-19, leading to partial or complete lockdown (Alshebami, 2021; Imai et al., 2020; Pei, Kandula, & Shaman, 2020). The non-pharmaceutical interventions led to social distancing, through school closures, remote working, and quarantining (Viner et al., 2020). Moreover, other measures such as hygiene and the use of masks were also adopted (WHO, 2020).

Across the globe, the pandemic also led rapidly to shut down universities, colleges, schools, and institutions in an attempt to slow the spread of the infection and reduce fatalities from this deadly disease (Murphy, 2020; Weeden & Cornwell, 2020). Consequently, Education systems around the world urged protocols for online learning to ensure learning continuity. Beteille, Ding, Molina, Pushparatnam, and Wilichowski (2020) reported that many countries had implemented e-learning systems as schools were closed. Countries worldwide implemented as many e-learning systems (digital and distance learning) as possible to prevent the spread of the pandemic and ensure education continuity for students.

At the early stage of the pandemic, the KSA officials urged for preventive precautions such as quarantine and closing schools, colleges, and universities, fearing that they would become hotspots for the spread of the COVID-19 disease as they were overcrowded with students, teachers, and professors. Social distancing is one of the crucial interventions emphasized in the World Health Organization's latest Global Influenza Strategy 2019 to 2030. Therefore, the Saudi Ministry of Education called for online learning as an alternative solution to continuing the educational process. Speaking to Al Arabiya (08 March 2020), Dr. Hamad Al Al-Sheikh, the Saudi Arabian Minister for Education, called for 'virtual schools' and distance learning during the suspension period. "... As per universities, the decision to call up administrators or faculty will be left to university directors as they will need to continue online courses and see what fits their curriculum" (Desk, 2020). Responding to this mandate, all universities, colleges, institutions, and schools in KSA quickly shifted from regular traditional classrooms to online learning (Al Shammari, 2021; Almekhlafy, 2020; Alzamil, 2021).

In addition, students started to use technological resources to take part in online classes. In cooperation with the Integrated Telecom Company, the Saudi Research and Innovation Network (Maeen) worked to improve accessibility to national digital services and the quality of virtual classrooms and learning platforms. Facilitating distance learning for students, the Ministry also worked to provide many electronic technical solutions such as the iEN TV Channel, The National iEN Portal Platform, the iEN YouTube, the Unified Education System, the Future Gate Platform, the Blackboard platform, and the virtual kindergarten platform (The Saudi MOE, 2020). This new reality changed the norms of education in general and English language learning in particular, i.e., the learning changed its mode from traditional to online or virtual (Alzamil, 2021; Fansury, Januarty, & Ali Wira Rahman, 2020). However, the situation with English language learning was different from other traditional type of teaching, as English language learning has always been an engaging activity and entails interaction and practice. The interaction of teachers and students in classrooms is very important not only for teachers' classroom organization but also for students' language learning (Liu & Le, 2012).

Previous studies have accepted the use of technology to provide a high-quality education and making a positive impact on the learning process, increasing students' learning potential, and providing the students with educational materials from various sources, organizing interaction between students, teachers and parents anytime and anywhere, and thereby resulting in life-long learning (Ahmed & Nasser, 2015; Ji, Park, & Shin, 2022; Keppell, Suddaby, & Hard, 2015). Furthermore, Laurillard, Oliver, Wasson, and Hoppe (2009) considered digital technologies as media of intellectual expressiveness and creativity with an inherent educational value.

Thus, it is assumed that implementing technology in e-learning enhances and motivates student interest in learning English during COVID-19. Similarly, other studies have shown how online learning has provided students with a new environment that can increase students learning potential because it is a student-centered learning method (Dhawan, 2020; Levy, 2009; Rashid & Asghar, 2016). The online e-learning experience has also given EFL learners a new experience of acquiring English during the pandemic, as they could not attend traditional face-to-face classes. Therefore, the circumstances imposed by the pandemic have placed EFL learners in reality with effects and implications that ought to be investigated by scholars and researchers.

Studies related to the EFL teaching and learning during the pandemic have been conducted in different countries and different contexts, such as China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Romania (Bashori, van Hout, Strik,

& Cucchiarini, 2021; Coman, Tiru, Meses An-Schmitz, Stanciu, & Bularca, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Han, Geng, & Wang, 2021; Ong, Lee, Teh, Magsi, & Ng, 2020; Rosyada & Sundari, 2021). However, in the context of Arab countries, few studies have been conducted tackling EFL learning during the pandemic (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020; Alqarni, 2021; Ja'ashan, 2020; Oraif & Elyas, 2021). Reviewing the existing literature, these studies, due to limitations such as the targeted population, study sample size, data collection instruments, and gender, have urged further investigations for a better understanding of EFL online experience during the pandemic.

This study, therefore, attempted to investigate the use of online classes to maintain and continue the teaching and learning process of the English language during COVID-19 in Saudi Universities. During the pandemic, online classes and communication had become the sole media for universities to carry out their academic and educational activities, including teaching/learning process, teacher-student interaction, activities and discussions, evaluation and assessment, student support, and other academic and educational purposes. More specifically, this study aimed at exploring the Saudi university EFL learners' experience during the pandemic keeping in mind the following questions.

1. What is the students' perception of the online educational environment provided by universities in the context of online learning during COVID-19?
2. What is the students' perception of the EFL online classrooms provided by universities in the context of online learning during COVID-19?
3. How does universities' online environment help sustain the EFL learning practices, interactions, and academic communication?
4. What challenges and difficulties are faced by EFL students in the online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. EFL and Technology

Over the span of sixty years, technology has seamlessly provided the educational system with a variety of educational-technological tools. In the late 1950s and 1960s, behavioral analysis, in an attempt to solve learning problems, resulted in the implementation of Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) into the teaching-learning process through programmed instruction (PI) initiated by B. F. Skinner (Cooper, 1991; Molenda, 2008). One of the original CAI projects is Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations (PLATO) which emerged in 1960 at the University of Illinois. This project is a monotonous landmark in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) development (Marty, 1981). Warschauer (1996) classified the historical development of CALL into three phases. The early phase of CALL was known as behavioristic CALL when CALL programs were a sequence of repetitive drills and the text was displayed in monochrome on a computer screen, while the role of the learner was to use the keyboard to enter the answer in letters or numbers (Molenda, 2008). The second phase in the development of CALL was Communicative CALL. This phase was marked by the advent of the microcomputer and the declined costs of computing technology in late 1970s and 1980s, and the use of CAI began to expand and led to the development of many CALL programs (Sanders, 1994). In this phase, the computer was used (a) for skill practice such as discussion, critical thinking, and writing, and (b) as a tool for spelling and grammar checkers, word processors, and concordance programs (Davies, 2006). When the World Wide Web reached the public in 1993 and became mainstream, a new CALL phase started. According to Murphy (2000) the third CALL phase was based on the previous two phases of CALL, behavioristic and communicative CALL. This phase was known as Integrative CALL and was characterized by Multimedia personal computers and the Internet (Warschauer, 1996). These two important technological developments offered much potential and played an increasingly significant role in language teaching and learning (Davies, 2006; Levy, 2009).

Moreover, with the turn of the twenty-first century, the Web shifted the conception of CALL from seeing the computer as a learning tool to a virtual learning environment that facilitated learners' interaction and collaboration with peers and a wide variety of native speakers (Schwienhorst, 2002). In this regard, many previous studies have shown the effectiveness of a virtual learning environment in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). For example, Mroz (2014) mentioned a preference for integrating a virtual language learning environment (VLLE) in a foreign language curriculum. This preference was due to the fact that virtual EFL classes helped create an environment that provided a space for interactive and collaborative learning (Bianchi, Yyelland, Yang, & McHarg, 2019). There are two modes of virtual EFL, asynchronous and synchronous; both can be creatively implemented to provide learners with more opportunities to succeed in foreign language learning (Gill, 2006). Examining the synchronous mode, Sotillo (2000) showed that the interactions in synchronous discussions were not less important than in face-to-face conversations, which was necessary for language learning. In addition, studies have reported that live texting on online platforms enhances students' writing skills (Almelhi, 2021; Batieneh, 2014).

2.2. Online Experience during COVID-19

The spread of COVID-19 has caused the classroom to be suspended, resulting in online e-learning needs (Moorhouse, 2020). Murphy (2020) considered the shift from regular traditional classrooms to online classrooms as an appropriate strategy used in this global epidemic. Thus, e-learning has become the panacea and the only possible way to ensure the continuity of education in the pandemic (Dhawan, 2020).

Studies from different parts of the world have investigated this sudden shift from traditional learning to online learning and reported many views, perspectives, advantages, and disadvantages. For example, comparing the perceptions of high school students and university students from Romania, Butnaru, Niță, Anichiti, and Brînză (2021) conclude that students' reactions to online education vary depending on their skills in using online tools, their ability to access online courses, and the manner teachers conduct the learning activities.

A study conducted by Bataineh, Atoum, Alsmadi, and Shikhali (2021) examining the effectiveness of online education in Jordanian universities amid COVID-19, revealed that the majority of students were not satisfied with the online learning experience, as most of the students faced obstacles such as technical difficulties and the content design. In Argentina, Coolican, Borrás, and Strong (2020) investigated the impact of the novel pandemic on four educational and technical colleges. The study concluded that although teachers and educators could move from face-to-face learning to online teaching, they faced many challenges, including the lack of technology and the inability to use e-learning platforms to get the tasks done. Similarly, Byun and Slavin (2020) investigating responses to school closures in South Korea during COVID-19, stated that despite the situation bringing some challenges such as lowering the quality of education, distance learning had been an effective alternative for South Korean schools.

However, Jacques, Ouahabi, and Lequeu (2020) seeking to assess the learning tools that were taken up during the COVID-19 crisis to ensure continuity and quality in higher education at the University of Tours, France, concluded that online classes did not downgrade the learning experience or students' performance. In the same way, Chen et al. (2020) examined the students' perceptions at the Open University Australia. Their study revealed that students' perceptions were positive as online learning tools helped in learning engagement, interactions, knowledge sharing, feedback exchange, and virtual community building. Finally, examining the response to the administrative decisions of the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago regarding preventive measures, closures, and the transition to online learning during COVID-19, Kalloo, Mitchell, and Kamalodeen (2020) discovered that the process of switching to online learning and quick adaptation of instructions during the crisis were smooth and easy. In addition, their study showed several factors that facilitated effective learning during the crisis period, such as connectivity through technological readiness, creativity as the ability to respond, and a sense of belonging to the community based on observations, documents, and informal discussions with faculty members.

Saudi Arabia, like other countries globally, called for virtual classes and online education since the beginning of the pandemic to sustain learning continuity and protect communities from the disease (Alzain, 2021). Thus, all public universities were closed during the suspension period, and educational activities were shifted to online platforms (Desk, 2020). Consequently, all public universities in Saudi Arabia put Blackboard as the leading learning management system (LMS) in the context of the crisis (Al-Nofaie, 2020; Al Shammari, 2021). Furthermore, Elsamanoudy, Al Fayz, and Hassanien (2020) noted that online classrooms via the Blackboard successfully substituted face-to-face classrooms during the lockdown and concluded that the virtual classes were beneficial as students could join using their devices anytime, anywhere. Other studies also reported how information technologies contribute to Saudi universities' teaching/learning process during the global health crisis caused by COVID-19 (Almelhi, 2021; Khafaga, 2021). However, despite the positive role achieved by online learning, a number of studies indicate that some students' perceptions of the Blackboard were negative (Al-Nofaie, 2020; Almekhlafy, 2020; Moawad, 2020). However, Alturise (2020) conducted a study on the Blackboard platform by learners and teachers at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The study results indicated that e-learning was an advancement in education; however, the study recommended still the need to improve online learning applications.

2.3. EFL Online Experience during COVID-19

Many studies have been carried out on the role of e-learning and online EFL classes during COVID-19. Investigating the impact of the pandemic on EFL Saudi learners in a high school, a high level of engagement among EFL learners was noticed (Oraif & Elyas, 2021). Virtual EFL classes and online learning enable learners to interact and communicate with peers and teachers (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020). At the higher education level, Almelhi (2021) reported that the Blackboard platform had been successfully implemented in EFL online classes: creating effective instructor-students interaction, facilitating students' understanding, engaging them in interactive learning, boosting their motivation, and establishing instructor-student rapport due to easy convenience of use, availability, and system quality.

Similarly, Khafaga (2021), examining students' perceptions on the language teaching tools used during COVID-19, mentioned that the online tools proved their effectiveness in maintaining learning/teaching process continuity and motivating students to improve language acquisition. However, investigating EFL online class challenges, Hazaea, Bin-Hady, and Toujani (2021) sought to explore the unprecedented challenges that EFL teachers had faced in online classes during the pandemic and how they managed to make online learning learner-friendly. Finally, Al Shlowiy (2021) reported that though students faced several problems and ambiguities with online learning during the pandemic, they gradually acquired experience to overcome their frustration.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to explore the online EFL learning Experience in Saudi Universities during COVID-19 Pandemic. The study employed a quantitative research approach and a questionnaire to collect data. The analysis method was a descriptive statistical analysis, where the SPSS version 26.0 was employed. The target population for this study were the students in the undergraduate programs majoring in English in four Saudi University.

3.1. Participants

This study was concerned with the online environment provided by the public higher education universities in KSA, namely the Blackboard. The sample for the study comprised 605 students: 254 male and 351 female students at the undergraduate level majoring in English. Due to the study restrictions, four universities were selected: King Faisal University, Northern Border University, Taibah University, and King Khalid University. Table 1 summarizes the participants' details.

Table 1. The participants' profiles (N=605).

Participants' Profiles		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	254	42.0
	Female	351	58.0
University	King Faisal University	167	27.6
	Northern Border University	156	25.8
	Taibah University	147	24.3
	King Khalid University	135	22.3

3.2. Research Instrument and Procedure

A preliminary questionnaire was prepared based on an extensive literature review (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Almelhi, 2021; Alqarni, 2021; Alzain, 2021; Coman et al., 2020). The questionnaire was sent to three experts who suggested some minor changes. Later, it was piloted upon 30 respondents to ensure appropriateness. All experts had agreed that the research instrument was valid for measuring what it was meant for—Online EFL Learning Experience in Saudi Universities during COVID-19. Section one contained items related to demographic data, i.e., gender and the university. Section two (consisting of eight items related to opinion toward the online educational environment provided by universities during COVID-19) was meant for the first research question. For the second research question, section three consisted seven items related to opinion towards the EFL online classrooms provided by universities during the pandemic. Section four contained six items related to opinion towards the EFL Online English Materials. For the third research question, section five contained six items related to the frequency of using the online tools for EFL learning during COVID-19. Section six comprised seven items related to the frequency and condition of the teachers' technical skills of the online tools for EFL learning during COVID-19. Section seven contained six items related to the frequency of the teachers' /students' interaction during the online EFL learning. For the fourth research question, section eight comprised five items related to challenges and difficulties faced by EFL in online classes. The questionnaire's statements were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale.

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 24. First, Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the study questionnaire's reliability and verify the overall reliability of its items. The correlation of the questionnaire axes was also measured. Table 2 shows the stability coefficient of the questionnaire's axes. For data analysis, descriptive statistics method was used (mean and standard deviation).

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha.

Axis	Number of items	Alpha Cronbach
Online Environment	8	0.805
Online English Learning	7	0.947
Online English Materials	6	0.865
Online Platform Tools	6	0.772
Teachers' Technical Skills	7	0.796
Interactions	6	0.844
Challenges and Difficulties	5	0.807
Total	45	0.944

4. RESULT

4.1. What is the Students' Perception of the Online Educational Environment Provided by Universities in the Context of Exclusively Online Learning?

During the last two years, universities have experienced online learning and teaching. While the universities in Saudi Arabia used online platforms as complementary tools, not all the students were aware of those platforms before COVID-19. Finding the results for research question one, a low score (mean = 2.95, SD = 1.34) regarding using the E-learning platform suggests that the online learning environment was a new experience for most students in universities. However, Table 3 and Figure 1 show that the students utilized the online learning

environments provided by the universities. The weighted mean of this section is high as the mean score is (3.89), with a standard deviation of (0.77). The results also showed the majority of the students considered the online environment provided by the university an appropriate environment for learning; easily accessible (mean = 4.34, SD = 0.88), easy to navigate (mean = 4.32, SD = 0.84), and flexible (mean = 4.00, SD = 1.25). Students also preferred online classes (mean = 3.75, SD = 1.33) or blended courses (mean = 3.33, SD = 1.37). Figure 1 shows that most participants responded ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ for all aspects of this part of the study questionnaire.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the online environment.

	Section Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
1.	Online learning is enjoyable.	3.99	1.36	5
2.	I like the flexibility that comes with online learning.	4.00	1.25	4
3.	The university provides an online platform that is easily accessible.	4.34	0.88	1
4.	The online platform is easy to navigate.	4.32	0.84	2
5.	I have used online platforms before the pandemic for learning.	2.95	1.34	8
6.	Gained experience in learning in a new online environment.	4.25	0.95	3
7.	Prefer to have courses delivered using online mode only.	3.75	1.33	6
8.	Prefer a combination of online and face-to-face courses.	3.33	1.37	7
	Weighted Value	3.89	0.77	-

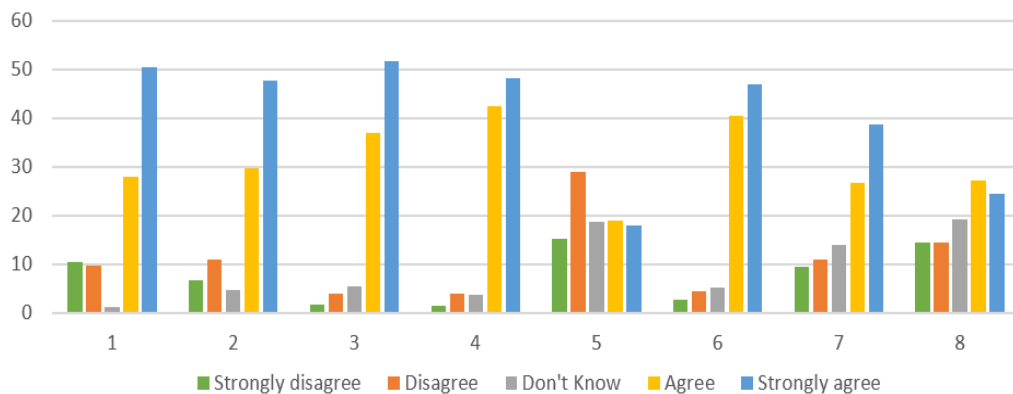


Figure 1. The online environment.

4.2. What is the Students’ Perception on the EFL Online Classrooms Provided by Universities in the Context of Online Learning During Covid-19?

The questionnaire sections three and four were analyzed for research question two to investigate the students’ perception of universities’ EFL online classrooms during COVID-19. It was found that the EFL online environment adopted during online learning was useful and practical at a high level. Table 4 and Figure 2 show the participants’ responses to EFL online classrooms. The weighted average of this section is high (3.90) with a standard deviation of (1.06). The responses reveal several positive and practical aspects of the university platform (the Blackboard) in helping the participants learn English skills. The weighted average of this section is high (mean = 3.90, SD = 1.06). Most participants stated ‘Strongly agree’ and ‘Agree’ with almost high mean scores in all aspects, proving it to be a suitable alternative to the traditionally-based learning (mean = 4.15, SD = 1.04), well-designed online courses (mean = 4.01, SD = 1.07), provided with multiple tools (mean = 3.90, SD = 1.23), and useful to motivate, practice and improve language learning.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for online English learning.

Section Items		Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
9.	The platform has multiple tools that help EFL learners.	3.90	1.23	3
10.	E-learning helps me to improve my English skills.	3.83	1.24	6
11.	Online classrooms allow me to practice English better.	3.84	1.23	5
12.	Online classroom motivates me to learn English.	3.88	1.23	4
13.	Online lectures are more effective than traditional/live classroom lectures.	3.67	1.41	7
14.	EFL courses help keep pace with the online environment.	4.01	1.07	2
15.	Online classrooms are a suitable alternative for students who have difficulty learning in the traditional classroom.	4.15	1.04	1
Weighted Value		3.90	1.06	-

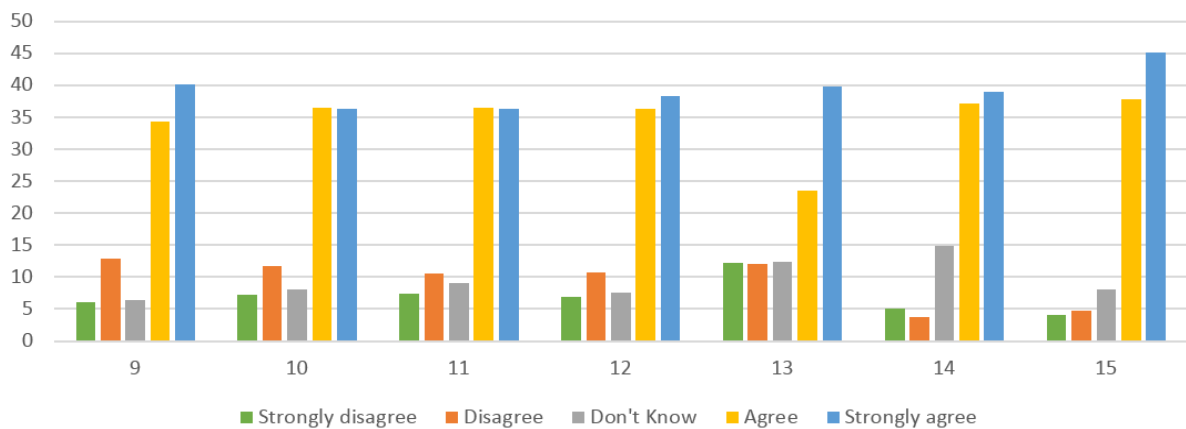


Figure 2. Online English learning.

Table 5 and Figure 3 also show that the online study material with a high mean score (mean = 3.96, SD = 0.81) provided during courses and materials were generally useful and suitable for online learning. Most students chose ‘Strongly Agree’ and ‘Agree.’ The responses also suggest that online learning helps learners to review learning materials repeatedly (mean = 4.19, SD = 0.97), to manage time (mean = 4.08, SD = 1.07), and to receive the teachers’ comments faster (mean = 4.07, SD = 1.08).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for the online English materials.

Section Items		Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
16.	English language courses in e-learning meet students’ needs.	4.05	0.99	4
17.	The English language courses in e-learning are more theoretical.	3.66	1.05	6
18.	English language courses in e-learning combine theory and practice.	3.70	1.15	5
19.	The online course format helped me manage time and pace myself to meet required deadlines.	4.08	1.07	2
20.	Online learning allows me to review learning materials repeatedly.	4.19	0.97	1
21.	Online learning allows me to receive teachers’ comments faster.	4.07	1.08	3
Weighted Value		3.96	0.81	-

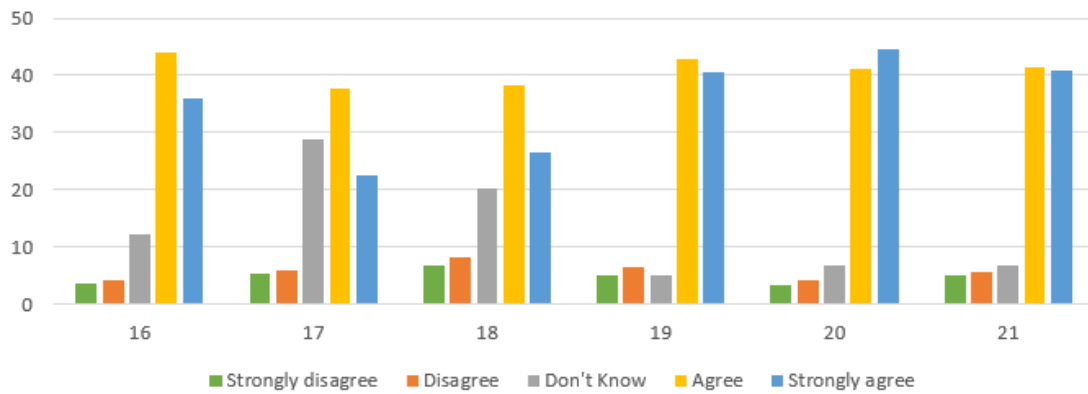


Figure 3. Online English materials.

4.3. How Does Universities' Online Environment Help Sustain the EFL Learning Practices, Interactions, And Academic Communication?

The results for research question three elicited from sections five, six, and seven of the study instrument reveal that several useful and practical features of online environment provided by universities help in sustaining the EFL classes, i.e., the online platform tools (mean = 4.17, SD = 0.81), teachers' technical skills (mean = 4.20, SD = 0.79), and interactions (mean = 4.46, SD = 0.71). Table 6 and Figure 4 present the participants' responses that most students stated 'Always' in all features of the online tools and with high mean scores; audio conferences (4.63), live video sessions (4.51), documents posted (4.24), creating chat and discussion sessions (3.90), and creating forum discussions (3.81).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for the online platform tools.

Section Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
22. English language courses are presented in live video sessions.	4.51	1.04	2
23. The courses were carried out in audio conferences.	4.63	0.88	1
24. Documents posted on the platform (Word, Pdf, PowerPoint)	4.24	1.08	3
25. Forum discussions are created to share ideas.	3.81	1.38	6
26. Chat and discussion sessions are created in the e-learning platform.	3.90	1.37	5
27. A list of English vocabulary and terms is created in the e-learning platform.	3.93	1.29	4
Weighted Value	4.17	0.81	-

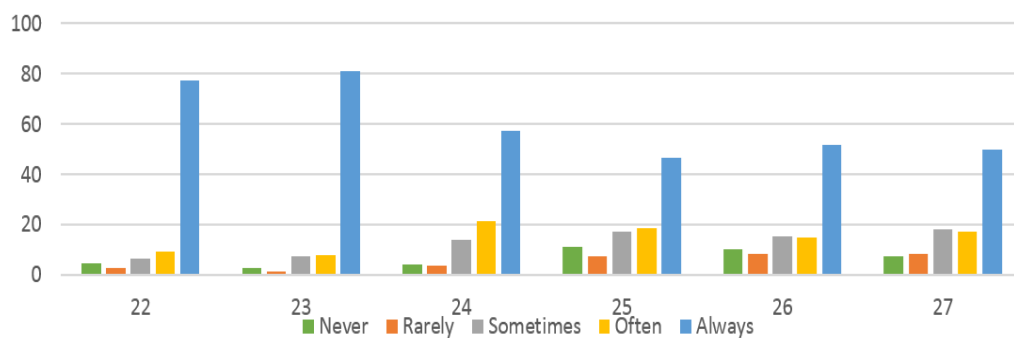


Figure 1. Online platform tools.

Regarding the teachers' technical skills, Table 7 and Figure 5 show that most students reported almost the same high mean scores that teachers 'Always' present topics through screen sharing (mean = 4.78, SD = 0.71), use

synchronous chat (during presentations) (mean = 4.46, SD = 0.97) (4.46), use the video conference, (mean = 4.41, SD = 1.20), and encourage the teamwork among students (mean = 3.98, SD = 1.32). Moreover, the students asserted that teachers post various links on the platform (mean = 3.73, SD = 1.36) and make short videos for certain sessions (mean = 3.63, SD = 1.47) to enhance language learning.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for the Teachers' Technical Skills.

Section Items		Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
28.	Teachers present topics through screen sharing.	4.78	0.71	1
29.	Teachers use video conferences.	4.41	1.20	3
30.	Teachers use synchronous chat (during presentations).	4.46	0.97	2
31.	Teachers offer students the possibility to work in teams during sessions.	3.98	1.32	4
32.	Teachers post various links on the platform to enhance language learning.	3.73	1.36	5
33.	Teachers make short videos for certain sessions and post them on the platform.	3.63	1.48	6
34.	Teachers use tools available on the platform.	4.41	1.01	3
Weighted Value		4.20	0.79	-

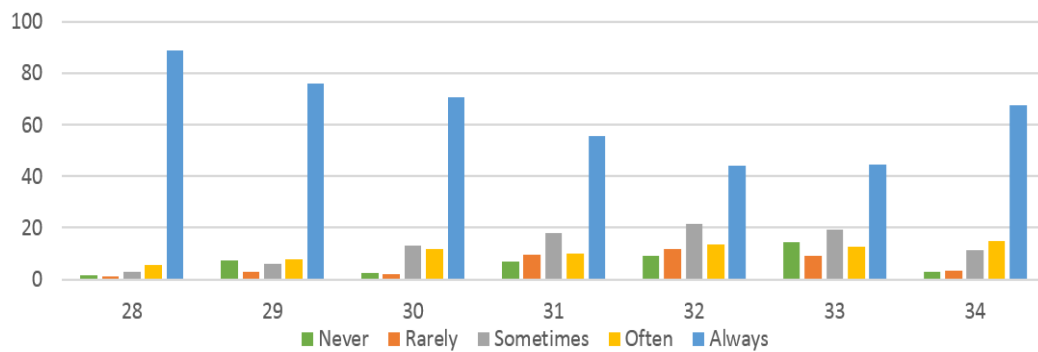


Figure 2. Teachers' technical skills.

Platforms are powerful applications that have emerged to enhance student learning and facilitate interactions between students, teachers, and peers. In Table 8 and Figure 6, the students' responses explored high mean scores in online learning interaction, as students 'always' receive their teachers' tasks' and assignments' feedback and comments (mean = 4.59, SD = 0.88), teacher/students' interaction is active (mean = 4.56, SD = 0.88), and teachers urged concentration during the online classes (mean = 4.49, SD = 0.92). Students also were encouraged to and participated during the online sessions (mean = 4.46, SD = 0.93), and to text answers using the chatting box (mean = 4.29, SD = 1.03).

Table 8. Descriptive statistics for interactions.

Section Items		Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
35.	Teacher/students interaction is active.	4.56	0.88	2
36.	Students answer live during a videoconference.	4.46	0.93	4
37.	During online sessions, answers are provided on the forum/chat.	4.29	1.03	6
38.	Teachers urge concentration in the online environment.	4.49	0.92	3
39.	Teachers offer them support for their problems concerning English language learning.	4.39	1.04	5
40.	Teachers upload the tasks' and assignments' feedback and comments to the platform.	4.59	0.88	1
Weighted Value		4.46	0.71	-

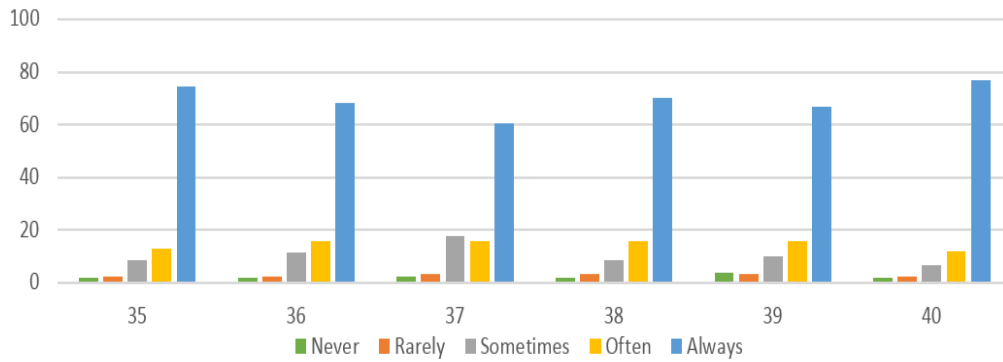


Figure 6. Interaction.

4.4. What Challenges and Difficulties are Faced by EFL Students in the Online Classes During the COVID 19 Pandemic?

Moving to the fourth research question, Table 9 and Figure 7 show that students experienced moderate and low challenges that hindered the online classes (mean = 2.66, SD = 1.05). These challenges were related to technical issues such as losing signal during session (mean = 2.87, SD = 1.29), communicating with the technical service center (mean = 2.87, SD = 1.67), interruption of sessions (mean = 2.64, SD = 1.29), and delayed in online texting communicated on the platform (mean = 2.27, SD = 1.35).

Table 9. Descriptive statistics for the challenges difficulties.

Section Items		Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
41.	Difficulties while connecting to the platform.	2.63	1.38	3
42.	Losing signal during the session.	2.87	1.29	1
43.	The sound is not clear (there are interruptions).	2.64	1.29	2
44.	Delay in online texting communicated on the platform.	2.27	1.35	4
45.	Difficulties in communicating with the technical service center.	2.87	1.67	1
Weighted Value		2.66	1.05	-

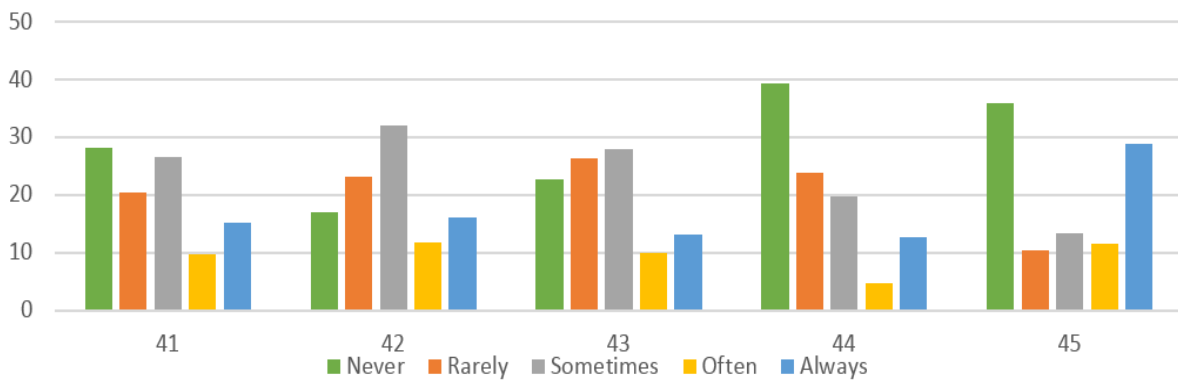


Figure 3. Challenges and difficulties.

5. DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many changes in the domain of education. One of the most prominent of these changes is the reliance on e-learning platforms, which in turn has contributed greatly to the continuation of the educational process in various fields of education despite all challenges. The e-learning platform supported not only the learning process, but also engaged students in scholarly communication (Alzain, 2021; Murphy., 2020; Rosyada & Sundari, 2021). Though a few previous studies have focused on various dimensions created due to the

sudden shift from face-to-face classes to online education as the only way to continue the education process, this study aimed to explore how the Online EFL Learning Experience of students in Saudi Arabia and how the universities sustained that experience throughout the period of pandemic. The result presents that the online educational environment provided by the universities in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic was appropriate, and the EFL students appreciated its benefit and flexibility. A majority of students enjoyed learning in virtual classes and preferred online classes or a combination of online and face-to-face classes. This finding is consistent with [Han et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Khafaga \(2021\)](#) who also found that EFL learners showed positive attitudes towards online learning experience.

Regarding Online English Learning, current study's results revealed several positive and practical aspects of online learning platform (e.g., Blackboard) in helping the EFL learners practice and improve language learning. This goes in line with [Almelhi \(2021\)](#) that digital platforms used during the pandemic prove beneficial and useful in language learning. Furthermore, the results also indicate that the move toward online classes help sustain the EFL classes by successfully utilizing the affordances provided in the online environment. Likewise, [Khafaga \(2021\)](#) mentioned that the online environment (e.g., Blackboard) adopted during the pandemic proved its effectiveness in maintaining learning/teaching process continuity and motivating students to improve language acquisition.

The current study's findings also revealed the benefits of online classes in helping enhance student learning and facilitate interactions between students, teachers, and peers. These findings are commensurate with [Alahmadi and Alraddadi \(2020\)](#) that Virtual EFL classes and online learning enable learners to interact and communicate with peers and teachers. Likewise, [Almelhi \(2021\)](#) also finds online classes create effective instructor-student interaction, facilitating students' understanding and engaging them in interactive learning.

The results also showed that the online environment supported EFL learners by getting the course materials and other supplementary materials (e.g., slides, audio/video materials, or online websites). This result is consistent with [Al-Nofaie \(2020\)](#) and [Alzain \(2021\)](#) that all learners can access the platform anytime and anywhere to get the materials accordingly. A further result of the current study was students' utility of the practical features of the online environment, such as audio conferences, live video sessions, and creating chat and forum discussions. These features helped increase their engagement, motivate them, and strengthen their language learning abilities. The study results seem to be in line with the conclusion by [Ji et al. \(2022\)](#) that online facilities such as providing language learners with additional materials and session recordings increased their engagement, and with [Chen et al. \(2020\)](#) conclusion that online classes enhance students' learning.

The result also showed that online classrooms are a suitable alternative for EFL learners who have difficulty learning in the traditional classroom. This reconciles with [Alqarni \(2021\)](#) that EFL learners tend to be more willing to communicate during online classes than face-to-face ones. Similarly, [Bashori et al. \(2021\)](#) found that learners' in online learning settings faced reduced learning anxiety and thus their learning levels were significantly improved.

Concerning the shortcomings of the online environment, findings indicated that students experienced some challenges that hindered the online classes. These challenges were related to technical issues such as losing signal during online sessions, lack of communication with IT service center, frequent interruption of sessions and online texting delays. These negative findings seemed to be in line with the conclusion by [Bataneh et al. \(2021\)](#) that students faced some obstacles such as technical difficulties, and with [Al Shlowiy \(2021\)](#) that students faced several technical problems and ambiguities.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to explore the Online EFL Learning Experience in Saudi Universities during COVID-19. The results showed that the EFL learners were aware of the benefits of the online learning environment and considered it appropriate for learning; easily accessible, easy to navigate, and flexible. The findings revealed several positive and practical aspects of the online learning platform environment (e.g.,

Blackboard) in helping participants learn English skills. It proved a suitable alternative to the traditionally-based learning, provided with multiple tools, and useful to motivate, practice, and improve language learning. Furthermore, the findings showed that the online platform enhanced student learning and facilitated interactions between students, teachers, and peers. Though the students' responses showed several useful and practical features of the online environment provided by universities that helped in sustaining the EFL classes, students experienced a few issues that hindered the online classes, such as losing signal during sessions, communicating with the IT service center, interruption of online sessions, and delay in online texting.

This study came up with findings that could have useful implications for higher education policymakers, faculty members, and students. These implications will enhance and increase the quality of education in the online environment. Though the officials in Saudi Arabia have responded quickly to the pandemic by shifting from the regular face-to-face classroom to online learning, the new online learning culture still needs more actions that can promote and facilitate its use. In this regard, policymakers in higher education could develop training programs for helping teachers stimulate their performance and develop strategies for helping students cultivate independent learning. The study's positive findings show how the learners utilized the affordances provided by the online university environment; however, they need to recognize that the success of the online classes depends mainly on their role as independent learners.

Furthermore, it is advisable to provide and implement training programs that include technology skills to meet the faculty members' needs and help them improve their technical skills and adapt suitable teaching style to the online environment. Improving teachers' technical skills and good knowledge of online teaching style would develop teachers' performance and help teachers find creative ways to interact with the students to achieve active learning and sustain synchronous teaching sessions. Finally, the online learning environment showed efficiency in online education; however, there are some technical issues that distract the learners and may lead to demotivate them. Therefore, technical issues should be addressed in order to enhance the efficiency of online education and its quality.

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