

Emergency Remote Teaching during COVID-19: Saudi Male English as a Foreign Language Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

This study investigates Saudi male English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perceptions of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research aimed to explore how students experienced online learning, the challenges they faced, and the perceived impact on their language development. Data were collected through a mixed-method design comprising an online questionnaire and three focus group interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. Findings reveal a mix of positive and negative perceptions: students appreciated flexibility and improved communication but reported significant technical, pedagogical, and social challenges, including limited interaction and inadequate teacher training. The study concludes that while ERT provided continuity of learning, its effectiveness was constrained by insufficient preparation and lack of interactive materials. Recommendations include integrating robust teacher training and designing pedagogically sound online resources to enhance future emergency teaching practices.

Keywords: emergency remote teaching, online learning, language learning, English as a foreign language, EFL

1. Introduction

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted all aspects of life, including education. In Saudi Arabia, like other countries, curfew, social distancing, lockdown, and strict rules were placed on individuals for months at a time to control the spread of COVID-19. Other regulations, such as working from home and remote learning, were introduced and enforced. Consequently, the government of Saudi Arabia forced schools, institutes, colleges, and universities to implement remote teaching and learning. The English Language Institutes had to implement emergency plans to continue the delivery of teaching and learning, such as conducting face-to-face classroom sessions using virtual online environments.

Prior to COVID-19, blended learning and the use of technology outside the classroom in the Saudi EFL context to support students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in preparation for further studies in higher education settings were still in their infancy. COVID-19 was unexpected which required EFL teachers to immediately make changes to how they taught English. The educational learning approach has shifted from face-to-face delivery to remote delivery via online platforms, including Zoom meetings or Blackboard Collaborate, which is one of the tools in the Blackboard learning management system (LMS). EFL teachers have changed their teaching strategies and learning materials to enable students to learn remotely. They were forced to use different types of online learning tools, including their institution's LMS, language applications, online learning games, and videos to teach English. The shift in the delivery mode was swift due to the emergency conditions, and hence, there was little, if any, preparation on what this shift meant for teaching practices or the learning of the students. They implemented Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) which is "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 6).

This study investigated the practices of using or integrating technology to improve Saudi EFL learners' outcomes in an intensive English program at an English Language Institute in a Saudi university during COVID-19 to understand the perceptions of EFL students' learning and to improve the online delivery of EFL courses.

The paper begins with a review of the literature, followed by details of the methodology employed. The results are presented under three main themes and sub-themes, ending with a discussion of the results in relation to the literature.

2. Literature Review

Online courses delivered in reaction to a crisis or natural disaster are meaningfully different from well-planned online learning experiences (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Hodges et al. (2020) state that "the design process and careful consideration of different design decisions have an impact on the quality of the instruction. And it is this careful design process that will be absent in most cases in

these emergency shifts" (p.3). COVID-19 circumstances were not typical of how teachers would transition to virtual learning environments and online teaching and thus should not be considered the same (Oskoz & Smith, 2020). As Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) note "it would be unfair to put online distance education and emergency remote teaching in the same equation."(p. ii). Thus, it is very important to clarify what differentiates ERT from online learning, as ERT delivered in online mode is not the same as online learning.

Online teaching "includes careful instructional design and planning, using a systematic model for design and development" (Hodges et al., 2020), while teaching online means moving face-to-face classes online to be taught at a distance (Oskoz & Smith, 2020). In order to clarify this terminological distinction, Oskoz and Smith (2020) proposed the term "crisis teaching" to identify what occurred during COVID-19, while Hodges et al. (2020) suggest the term "emergency remote teaching" (ERT). These attempts to identify the unprecedented situation that resulted in the remote delivery of teaching and learning illustrate the importance of understanding how rapidly a transition to virtual learning environments was required during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Hodges et al. (2020), ERT has recently emerged as a popular alternative term used in the field of online education and professional practitioners to distinguish it from high-quality online education. According to Hodges et al. (2020), because the shift to ERT was unexpected and changes had to be made rapidly, educators were not taking "full advantage of the affordances and possibilities of the online format" (p.2).

ERT entails the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction that would ordinarily be delivered face-to-face or through blended modes and that will return to those formats once the emergency has ended. According to Hodges et al. (2020), the primary objective of ERT is to provide a temporary and dependable source of education during a crisis in an efficient and manageable manner.

Online remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was typically poorly planned because of rapid shifts to virtual learning environments (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Online language instruction has prompted the need for new teaching approaches and skills that are different from those used in face-to-face language instruction (Hampel & Stickler, 2005). However, there has been little research to determine the perceptions of EFL students about their experiences of ERT, nor what the changes were made and how effective they were for students learning English.

Studies on ERT have been undertaken that demonstrated positive outcomes in EFL teaching in a range of countries, including Saudi Arabia (Agung et al., 2020; Alwehebi, 2021; Amin & Sundari, 2020; Fitria, 2020; Hazaymeh, 2021; Karataş & Tuncer, 2020; Rahim & Chandran, 2021; Rahman, 2020). Alwehebi (2021) found that a new learning environment enabled Saudi EFL students to improve their language skills. However, she also found that teachers needed more technological training to provide an effective learning environment for EFL students. Likewise, Fitria (2020) found that an online learning system has the potential to improve the teaching and learning process in Indonesia. However, EFL teachers need to improve their technical skills and teaching strategies.

Karataş and Tuncer (2020) studied the impact of ERT on the language skill development of Turkish pre-service teachers. They found that online education provided free time for focusing on skill development, a comfortable home atmosphere where students felt free from stress, represented time and cost efficiency, and offered the use of online tools and resources. Rahman (2020) also found that online learning provided flexible time for EFL students in Indonesia to learn and fostered their autonomy and confidence.

Online learning offers a communicative tool through which teachers and students can interact. Hakim (2020) examined technology-integrated classrooms in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic. She used a survey and interviews to collect data. She found that most teachers had a positive attitude towards remote teaching and learning. Similar to Karataş and Tuncer (2020) and Rahman (2020), she also found that remote teaching and learning proved to be able to offer students an opportunity to engage in learning from a distance, in their comfort zone, and under secure conditions and keep up with their lessons.

Amin and Sundari (2020) investigated Indonesian EFL students' preferences for digital platforms during ERT, in particular their use of video conferences, Learning Management Systems (LMS), or Messenger Applications. They found that the student participants had positive attitudes and felt that much learning and improvement occurred, though it was in an unprecedented situation. Students also found that the platform they used was beneficial and improved their language learning. Agung et al. (2020) examined students' perceptions of their online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Sixty-six students of the English Language Education Study Program at Pamane Talino College of Education participated in the survey. They found that most students were actively involved in online learning during the pandemic.

In the United Arab Emirates, Hazaymeh (2021) found that online learning enhanced students' digital communication and collaboration skills by interacting in a digital environment. Indeed, online learning helped improve students' critical thinking, creative thinking, their ability to construct knowledge, develop innovative assignments and tasks, use digital tools, and explore alternative solutions for authentic problems. Moreover, the students revealed positive perceptions of using technology to achieve the efficient learning of English skills.

Some studies have also investigated students' engagement in EFL during ERT (Fuentes Hernández & Flórez, 2020; Hanifah et al., 2022). Hanifah et al. (2022) investigated Indonesian students' engagement during ERT in a tertiary EFL setting. Questionnaires, interviews, and artefacts were used to collect the data. They found that the choice of digital platform had no meaningful effect on student engagement, and the principle of good teaching must always be applied to both face-to-face and online learning to build engagement.

Fuentes Hernández and Flórez (2020) study examined the students' engagement, the challenges, and opportunities in an online EFL class during the COVID-19 pandemic. They discovered that synchronous interactions and access to information regardless of location could have

a positive effect on students' motivation levels.

However, the nature of student engagement could relate to their perceptions about learning EFL during ERT in COVID -19. As noted in Fredricks and McColsky (2012), the concept of "engagement" has three interrelated but separate dimensions: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. The term "behavioural engagement" refers to a variety of instructional and learning activities in which students participate actively and voluntarily. Emotional engagement emphasises the extent of positive (and negative) responses to teachers, peers, academics, and school. Finally, cognitive engagement is defined as the level of investment in learning demonstrated by students. It involves being deliberate, strategic, and willing to exert the necessary effort for the comprehension of complex concepts or mastery of challenging skills (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2016).

The importance of investigating the experiences of Saudi EFL students' perceptions of their learning and ERT approach led to the following research question:

What are male students' perceptions of learning English online during COVID19?

3. Methodology

The current study employed a mixed-methods case study design that included a nested case study for the qualitative component. The study included male Saudi undergraduate students who studied English as a foreign language at a Saudi Arabian English Language Institute (henceforth the Institute) attached to a university during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Institute provides a one-year intensive English Program for undergraduate students. Approximately 3,000 students participate in the intensive English Program each year. EFL students at the institute are streamed according to their English language proficiency. The language of instruction in the Institute was English. The intensive English language program has four independent levels (A1, A2, B1, and B1+) which follow the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Convenience sampling was employed to recruit male participants for the quantitative phase of this study. Convenience sampling is a non-probability technique used to recruit a representative set of participants for a study, based on their availability and accessibility (Etikan et al., 2016). For the qualitative phase of the study, purposive sampling was employed to recruit male participants from the quantitative phase to participate in the focus group interviews.

3.1 Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two phases: (i) a quantitative phase, where a questionnaire was administrated to collect male students' perceptions of integration and use of technology in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia during COVID-19, and (ii) a qualitative phase, where focus group interviews with students were undertaken to gather data on students' perception of using technology inside the EFL classroom. Each of these is described in detail below:

3.2 Students' Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained 18 items and five open-ended questions. The first set of questions (5 items) collected background demographic information about participants, including their age, current academic level, and their experience of using technology to learn or practice the English language. The second section (13 items) was drawn from a previous study to measure EFL students' perception of technology integration (AlZumor et al., 2013). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly disagree). The scale has already been tested for validity and reliability by the original author (AlZumor et al., 2013). The third section of the questionnaire included five open-ended questions for participant responses. Three hundred ninety-one (391) students responded to the online questionnaire. Qualitative data were collected from 118 students who included responses to the open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed and delivered in Arabic and English to all students via Qualtrics software to ensure that participants understood the statements and responded as accurately as possible.

3.3 Focus Group Students' Interviews

A focus group interview was conducted with selected students who completed the online questionnaire and provided email contact details so that arrangements could be made about participating in a focus group. The focus group interviews included a set of guiding questions to allow participants to talk about their experiences of learning English in an online learning environment during COVID-19. Students were initially contacted via email by the researcher. WhatsApp was then used as an alternative mode to contact students because WhatsApp is a more effective way to communicate with students. The participants were provided with a participant information sheet, a consent form, and a link to the Zoom meeting. Thirteen students who were either currently enrolled or had recently completed the English A2 level course participated in one of the three focus groups. These sessions were conducted during the first quarter of the second semester (July–September 2020). After selection, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the three focus groups. All interviews with the students were conducted in Arabic. The transcriptions of the focus group interviews were translated into English by the researcher. The translation was not "word for word", but instead considered the context. This is important for cross-cultural translation so that meaning is not lost when transcriptions are changed from one language to another. To ensure accuracy in the translation process, the researcher requested the help of an expert from the same language background to check the transcripts and translations.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to examine and analyse the numerical data from the questionnaires. Descriptive statistics are numbers that summarise the data to describe what occurred in the sample (Thompson, 2009). The goal of descriptive statistics is to collect a global view of the current practices used in the online environment and technology to support students learning English at the Institute. The descriptive data show students' experience of learning English online during COVID-19. This was measured by the sum of their responses to the nine questionnaire items. These items were analysed descriptively by presenting the mean scores, the standard deviation, and the percentage frequency distribution.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data from the interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data by identifying the main themes. This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework because it presents a clear framework for undertaking thematic analysis in a systematic manner. These steps were: (1) become familiar with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes, (5) define themes, and (6) write up. The goal of thematic analysis is to identify common themes that are important, and to use these themes to address the research.

3.5 Participants

The majority of the male students were aged 18-20 years old (81.1%) with those aged 20-23 years old represented by 17.4% of the participants and only 1.6% were over 23 years old. Ninety% of the students had studied English during COVID-19, whereas 10% of the students had not studied English at the time of the research. When this study was conducted, 3.6% of the students were in level A1, the majority of students (50.9%) were in level A2, 25.3% in level B1, and 20.2% in level B1+. With regard to using technology, roughly half of the students (49.1%) had never used technology to learn or practice English, while 50.9% of the participants had experience of using technology to learn English.

4. Results

Four main themes were evident across the quantitative and qualitative data: students' experience of learning English online during COVID-19, their experience of using an online learning platform, English online learning activities, and online learning challenges. Each theme is addressed in this section, covering related sub-categories.

Students' Experience of Learning English Online during COVID-19

The questionnaire data (Table 1) provide key insights into students' experiences with learning English online during COVID-19. It highlights both sides of the students' responses, indicating both positive and negative views. The level of agreement in the data refers to the percentage of students who expressed positive views or satisfaction regarding specific elements of online English learning. Levels of agreement can be determined by students' responses to particular topics in the questionnaire, utilising options such as "Agree" or "Strongly Agree." For instance, the highest mean score was 3.11 for item 3, indicating that students largely agreed that online learning improved communication between students and teachers, with 43% agreeing or strongly agreeing. However, other items, such as item 1, which received a mean rating of 2.48, showed that while 45.5% of students agreed that Blackboard materials helped improve their English skills, 38.1% disagreed, reflecting mixed experiences regarding the platform's effectiveness.

The measure of disagreement in the data represents the percentage of students who expressed negative views or dissatisfaction with various aspects of learning English online. This was captured through several items on the scales that received mean rating of from 2.27 to 2.65 with measures of disagreement from 28.4% to 33.8 % (Table 1) indicating that many students were not satisfied with aspects like learning effectiveness, engagement and confidence in learning English online. For example, item 4, "Online learning makes learning English more effective because it integrates all forms of media," showed a substantial degree of disagreement, indicating that students were sceptical of the overall influence of online learning on language acquisition.

According to the results of the questionnaire, the students had different opinions about learning EFL online. Students found some advantages in online learning, such as improved communication and convenience, while many students had reservations about its effectiveness in improving their English skills or enhancing their learning experience. Therefore, it cannot be said that they overwhelmingly preferred to learn EFL online. The responses reflected a balance of agreement and disagreement, showing a range of opinions.

Table 1. Student Experiences of Learning English during COVID-19

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I think that online learning materials on Blackboard help me to improve my English skills.	35.5%	10.7%	15.6%	25.8%	12.3%
2. Learning English online is more convenient for me than face-to-face learning.	12.5%	22.0%	13.8%	25.6%	26.1%
3. Online learning improves communication between students and teachers.	19.7%	23.3%	15.3%	18.9%	22.8%
4. Online learning makes learning English more effective; because it integrates all forms of media, print, audio, video, and animation	22.5%	18.9%	18.2%	28.4%	13.0%
5. I find learning English online interesting and useful.	23.3%	14.3%	19.7%	28.4%	14.3%
6. I like learning English online because I can work according to my own pace.	22.3%	14.8%	16.4%	32.2%	14.3%
7. I feel more confident when I use English online than when I use it in the class.	21.7%	16.9%	14.3%	32.0%	15.1%
8. I have benefited from the feedback given by my instructor through Blackboard.	32.2%	9.2%	16.1%	33.8%	8.7%
9. Online learning gives me access to authentic second language materials.	27.1%	11.0%	23.5%	29.7%	8.7%
10. Learning English online is difficult to handle and therefore frustrating to use.	14.8%	16.4%	12.3%	24.3%	32.2%
11. I prefer to learn English from the book rather than from the course website.	30.7%	21.2%	15.6%	14.8%	17.7%
12. Both synchronous and asynchronous interaction through Blackboard are less effective than face-to-face interaction in English classroom.	24.3%	14.1%	11.3%	21.7%	28.6%
13. The instructions provided on Blackboard are difficult to follow.	20.5%	15.3%	19.7%	32.0%	12.5%

The students' views from the interviews consisted of two categories: (i) students' learning preference and (ii) material accessibility. The following sections detail the findings under each of these categories, as perceived by the participants.

Students' Learning Preferences

Students had different views on their online learning experience. The different views are categorised into two sub-categories: (i) students who prefer online learning and (ii) students who prefer in-class learning (Table 2).

Table 2. Different Views of Students' Learning Preferences

Online Learning Preferred	In-class Learning Preferred
Improved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning • Communication • Language skills • Confidence 	Online learning is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stressful and Distracting • Lack of time • Not useful

Students' comments related to the online learning environment were either positive or negative and will be reported under these two perspectives.

(i) Online Learning Preferred.

Reasons for a positive attitude included improved English language skills, increase in students' confidence, improved communication with the teacher and classmates, comfort in learning English, making students self-directed, and time for learning. First, learning English online helped students improve their English language skills. Twenty-six of the 118 (22%) students who responded to the open-ended questions said that online learning improved their language skills and communication.

Second, learning English online is considered to increase student confidence. Twenty-three of the 118 (19.5%) students who responded to the open-ended questions reported that online learning reduced their stress and improved their confidence.

The third reason given by participants coded as a positive attitude was that learning English online improved their communication with the teacher and their classmates. Eighteen of the 118 (15.2%) students who responded to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire said that online learning improved their learning and communication inside the class.

The fourth positive reason for learning English online was that it made students feel comfortable learning English. Eight of the 118 (6.7%) students who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions said that online learning made them feel comfortable learning English more than attending the actual class.

In addition, learning English online was perceived to support students in becoming self-directed learners. Seven of the 118 (5.9%) students who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions commented that they preferred online learning because it allowed them to develop self-directed learning skills to learn English during COVID-19.

Finally, learning English online provided students with the time to learn. Six of the 118 (5.8%) students who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions stated that online learning provided them with sufficient time to learn English.

(ii) In-class Learning Preferred.

In comparison, students had negative attitudes toward the experience of learning English online. Learning English online was difficult because it was challenging for the teacher to understand the lesson and focus. It also made them feel stressed and distracted, and there was a limited amount of time for them to learn. Comments were also connected to issues with the Internet that enhanced these negative feelings.

First, students could not understand or focus on learning English online. Thirty-seven of the 118 (31.3%) students who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions mentioned that they preferred in-class learning because during ERT online learning, it was hard to understand the lesson and focus with the teacher.

Second, online learning makes students feel stressed and distracted. Eight of the 118 (6.7%) students who responded to the open-ended questions mentioned that they preferred in-class learning because online learning is stressful and distracting.

Lastly, participants believed that there was not enough time for students to learn English through online learning. Six of the 118 (5.08%) students who responded to the open-ended questions mentioned that they preferred in-class learning because online learning lacked time.

Material Accessibility.

Students had different views about the use and availability of online learning materials. Thirty-three of the 118 (27.9%) students who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions commented on the materials. The participant views were categorised into two sub-categories: (i) ease of use and access and (ii) difficulty navigating the Blackboard learning management system.

(i) Ease of Use and Access.

This sub-category provides evidence about how using technology in EFL classrooms allows students to use and access different learning materials. Seventeen of the 118 (14.4%) students who responded to the open-ended questions mentioned that online learning materials were accessible and easy to use. Four of the 118 (3.3%) students who responded to the open-ended questions mentioned that online learning allowed them to repeat the lesson again.

(ii) Difficulty Navigating Blackboard.

This sub-category revealed students' struggles with using the online learning platform. Twelve (10.1%) of the 118 students who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions stated that it was difficult to navigate online learning materials on Blackboard.

Students' Experience of Using an Online Learning Platform (Blackboard LMS)

This theme is different from material accessibility associated with students' positive or negative views of learning online or in class, as it focuses on how the course was delivered. This was measured by the sum of their responses to four questionnaire items (Items 10, 11, 12, and 13) that asked about the students' experience of using the Blackboard LMS as an online platform to learn English (see Table 1).

The results showed that EFL students generally did not find it difficult to learn English online using the Blackboard platform and to follow instructions. For instance, Item 10 had a mean rating of 2.57, with 32.2% of students strongly disagreeing that they face challenges. Similarly, Item 13 had a mean of 2.68, with a 32% disagreement, indicating that students found their EFL teachers' online instructions clear. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were learning English online through a virtual classroom, an online learning platform (Blackboard), coursebooks, assessments, and audio-visual teaching aids. According to the results, seventy-two of the 118 students (61%) who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions and 12 out of 13 students (92.3%) in the focus groups mentioned using the virtual classroom called Blackboard Collaborate. In addition, nine out of 13 (69.3%) focus groups said that they used asynchronous materials on Blackboard.

The course book was another significant resource for learning English. Five out of 13 students (38.4%) in the focus groups mentioned that they used the course book along with the online learning platform to learn English. Furthermore, three out of 13 students (23%) mentioned that their teachers incorporated audio-visual teaching methods to illustrate the lesson. Teachers also employed online assessments to track students' progress, with three out of thirteen students (23%) in the focus groups mentioning practice tests and quizzes as part of their assessments.

However, EFL students have limited interactions with their classmates and teachers inside the EFL online classroom. This is evident in the results for item 12, which had a mean of 3.40, and a 28.6% strong disagreement, and item 11 had a mean rating of 3.32 and a 30.7% strong agreement rate.

In summary, the results revealed that EFL students did not find it difficult to learn English online using the Blackboard platform and to follow the instructions. Students were learning English online through a virtual classroom, an online learning platform (Blackboard), coursebooks, assessments, and audio-visual teaching aids. However, EFL students have limited interactions with their classmates and teachers inside the EFL online classroom.

English Online Learning Activities.

The third theme, English online learning activities, emerged from the students' responses to the open-ended questions. This theme consists of two categories related to the learning methods during COVID-19, including (i) activities during the online classroom and (ii) activities outside the online classroom. The following sections detail the findings under each of these categories as perceived by the participants

Activities during the Online Classroom.

This category presents the activities in which participants engaged to learn English during the online classroom during COVID-19. Students mainly used the Blackboard online learning environment to learn English: to follow with the teachers and complete the online learning activities during the synchronous online classroom. Students were using the PDF files and the hardcopy of the coursebook. Most of the activities during the online classroom were taken from the coursebook. Students noted matching, short answer questions, discussion, true-false questions, fill in the blank as activities completed during the online class. Sixty-seven of the 118 (56.7%) student responses made comments on the activities that took place during the online classroom. For example, a student said that “we had different activities like matching the words and completing the sentences ... etc”. However, thirty-nine of the 118 (33%) student responses said that there were no activities during the online classroom. One of the students stated “Nothing”.

In focus groups, ten out of thirteen (76.9%) student responses said that most of the learning activities were taken from the coursebook. For example, a student stated that “at the beginning, the teacher asked all the students to read the text silently and then asked one of the students to read it again aloud. After that, the teacher asked the students to answer the questions in the coursebook”. Likewise, three out of thirteen (23%) student responses said that they engaged in group work during the online classroom.

Activities outside the Online Classroom.

This category reveals the activities which participants engaged in to learn English outside the online classroom during COVID-19. Students used English language applications, translation software, social media, online games and TV shows and movies to learn English by themselves during COVID-19. Seventy-six of the 118 (64.4%) student responses reported activities that they used outside the online classroom to learn English. For example, a student said that “we used some online English language programs to learn English and some translation programs to find the meaning of the new words”.

In focus groups, three out of thirteen (23%) students said that they used some online applications and websites to learn English during COVID-19. For example, a student stated that “the teacher was sharing a website to explain the meaning of the new words” which he then used outside the classroom. Additionally, two out of thirteen (15.3%) students said that they were using YouTube to learn English. Two out of the thirteen (15.3%) students mentioned that they were watching TV shows and playing online games to improve their English. For example, a student stated that “some video games and TV shows helped me to improve my English”.

Online Learning Challenges.

The fourth theme that emerged from the students’ responses to the open-ended questions was online learning challenges. This theme consists of three categories related to the learning challenges during COVID-19, including technical challenges, pedagogical challenges, and social challenges. The following sections detail the findings under each of these categories as perceived by the participants (Figure 2). These are also themes in the data obtained in the questionnaire.

Technical Challenges.

Students faced several challenges related to the technical issues such as internet connection, Blackboard maintenance, digital literacy, and teachers’ lack of technology skills. Moreover, 105 of the 118 (88.9%) student responses mentioned problems with the internet connection. For example, a student said that “I could not understand the lesson clearly because most of the time the internet was not good”.

In addition, fifty of the 118 (42.3%) student responses mentioned the technical challenges of the online learning platform. One student mentioned that “it was very nice experience but sometime the online learning platform stopped working”.

In addition, twenty-two of the 118 (18.6%) student responses mentioned other technical problems such as unclear sound and microphone issues. One student said that “I can not understand the lesson because of the internet connection and teacher’s unclear voice”. Moreover, two of the 118 (1.6%) student responses commented about ownership of electronic devices to continue their learning online. For example, a student said that “some students did not have laptops, which made it difficult for them to complete the learning activities”. In addition, two of the 118 (1.6%) student responses mentioned their lack of digital literacy related to using technology. For example, a student said that “I did not understand how to submit homework through Blackboard”.

In focus groups, twelve out of thirteen (92.3%) students mentioned issues with internet connections. For example, a student stated that “we faced some technical difficulties such as bad internet connection from the teacher’ side”. Also, ten out of thirteen (76.9%) students mentioned issues with using Blackboard. For example, a student stated that “Blackboard maintenance was a problem because it took long time and prevented us from accessing the online materials”. In addition, two of the thirteen (15.3%) student responses stated that some EFL teachers did not have skills in using technology. For example, a student stated that “the first teacher was not able to use technology appropriately during the online class. He was not able to share the screen with the students”.

Pedagogical Challenges.

Fifty-five of the 118 (46.6%) students in the interviews reported the pedagogical challenges such as teachers’ support, coursebook availability, the need for interactive teaching materials and limited feedback from the teachers. For example, a student mentioned that the teacher did not know how to use Blackboard appropriately. In focus groups, two of the thirteen (15.3%) student responses in the focus groups mentioned that the coursebook was not available. For example, a student stated that “we have faced difficulty in finding the coursebook, it was not available in the bookstore”. Furthermore, one of thirteen (7.6%) student responses in focus groups said that the online learning environment needed more interactive teaching materials similar to those available during face-to-face learning. For

instance, a student stated that “I think in class learning is better than the online learning because it has more activities, better collaboration, interaction with other classmates and practice English”.

Social Challenges.

Ten of the 118 (8.4%) student responses in their comments encountered social challenges while learning English online such as (i) lack of suitable home learning environment to study and (ii) limited interaction with other classmates. For example, a student stated that “Online learning was interesting, but in-class learning is better because of the interaction inside the class”.

Overall, the findings presented in this paper have demonstrated that EFL students have different views about using remote teaching and learning as an alternative mode of delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings revealed that EFL students were learning English through Blackboard during the ERT and there was lack of designing online learning materials. It also showed that the technical issues were challenging for most of the students. The findings provide substantial data to address and answer the research question of this study. These answers and the implications of the findings are fully explained in the discussion chapter.

6. Discussion

EFL students have different views about using remote teaching and learning as an alternative mode of delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some EFL students perceived that remote teaching and learning helped them in improving their communication with other classmates. The findings revealed that thirty-four (45.5%) of the EFL students surveyed believed that remote teaching and learning improved their communication with other students and teachers and fifty (50.3 %) of the EFL students believed that synchronous and asynchronous interaction through Blackboard Learn was effective. However, eighteen of the 118 (15.2%) of the students who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions stated learning English online improved their communication with their teacher and their classmates. For example, one student stated that “learning English online was excellent because it allowed students to communicate with the teachers better than in-class”. A possible explanation is that remote teaching and learning provides a more engaging learning environment because of the available tools such as discussion boards, chatrooms, online meetings and online break out rooms. Fuentes Hernández and Flórez (2020) found similar results in their study examining students' engagement in an online EFL class during the COVID-19 pandemic. They discovered that synchronous interactions and access to information regardless of location can have a positive effect on students' engagement.

Remote teaching and learning enabled students to learn at their own pace which increased their confidence and reduced their stress. Findings from the open-ended questionnaire revealed that twenty-three of the 118 (19.5%) student respondents believed that online learning reduced their stress and improved their confidence. Rahim and Chandran (2021) found similar results in their study of the perceptions of EFL students during the COVID-19 pandemic when implementing eLearning at university-level education in Afghanistan. They found that remote teaching and learning reduced the students' anxiety. Rahman (2020) also employed an online survey to investigate tertiary EFL students' perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. He found that online learning fostered their autonomy and confidence.

In addition, some EFL students perceived that remote teaching and learning helped them in improving their English language skills. Twenty-six of the 118 (22%) students who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions mentioned that remote teaching and learning improved their language skills and communication. For instance, one student commented that “the online learning course was nice, organized and understandable. It helped me a lot in improving my language skills”. Forty-five (45%) of the EFL student participants surveyed also believed that remote teaching and learning improved their English language skills.

The online learning environment appears to have had different advantages that helped students in developing their language skills such as offering students an opportunity to engage in learning from a distance and flexibility of time. Hazaymeh (2021) found similar results in her study of EFL undergraduate students' perceptions of ERT for enhancing English language learning during COVID-19 in the United Arab Emirates. She found that online learning enhanced students' digital communication and collaboration skills through interacting in a digital environment. Indeed, students revealed positive perceptions of using technology to achieve efficient learning of English skills. Karataş and Tuncer (2020) also found similar results in their study of the impact of ERT on the language skills development of Turkish pre-service teachers of EFL. They found that online education provided free time for EFL students to focus on the development of their English skills.

Another explanation for the benefits of using technology to improve students' engagement is that remote teaching and learning provides students with access to more interactive learning materials and different online learning applications. Budianto and Yudhi (2021) found similar results in their study of teachers' and students' perceptions of utilizing WhatsApp as a primary teaching and learning tool in Indonesia. They found that WhatsApp could be a suitable primary tool for teaching and learning, rather than being limited to its more traditional role as a supporting tool.

However, some EFL students had difficulty in learning English online because they believed remote teaching and learning was hard as it was difficult to understand the lesson online, difficult to use the online platform, and was stressful and they were easily distracted. Thirty-seven of the 118 (31.3%) students who responded to the questionnaire's open-ended questions mentioned that they preferred in-class learning because online learning was hard to understand the lesson and focus with the teacher and eight of the 118 (6.7%) of the students preferred in-class learning because online learning was stressful and distracting. The majority of students (51.7%) of the EFL students surveyed also

believed that remote teaching and learning was difficult and not more convenient than face-to-face learning with 56.5% of the EFL students believing that remote teaching and learning was difficult to use reinforcing the responses to the open-ended questions. For example, a student said that “learning English online was an excellent and interesting experience but it made students feel stressful because of Blackboard technical problems like internet connection”.

A possible explanation for students’ limited interaction is that students may not be engaged with their teacher and other classmates because of the physical distance. This is consistent with Naqvi and Zehra (2021) and Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020) who found that there was a lack of interaction during the online sessions, a lack of motivation among students because of the absence of their physical presence. Also, the online learning materials were not carefully designed to engage students in learning English online. Nugroho et al. (2021) found similar results in his study of exploring Indonesian EFL teachers’ teaching activities, challenges, and insights of ERT amidst the global pandemic. They found that students were less motivated during the online teaching due to the ineffective online classroom design and the students’ unfamiliarity with digital learning activities.

6. Limitations

There are a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged in the study. Firstly, the study was conducted in a single specific setting in Saudi Arabia and was limited to male participants in the Institute who voluntarily took part. As such, the findings are therefore restricted to a specific cohort of EFL teachers and students. This restricts the generalisability of the study’s results because they may be different in different institutions based on the teaching staff, management support and instructional methods during COVID-19.

Another limitation was imposed by the cultural norms in Saudi Arabia. The study was limited to EFL male teachers and male students because the educational system in Saudi Arabia uses gender segregation, and it is difficult for a male researcher to conduct the study with female teachers and students. The study may have had different results if it was undertaken in a female English language institute with female participants.

Additionally, as this study was conducted during COVID-19, participants may not have been able to engage in the study as honestly as they could because of the psychological impact of COVID-19 and the strict restrictions imposed by the government. The COVID-19 affected participants’ availability which may have influenced the sample size. i.e. impacted on availability of participants.

Furthermore, it is possible that the data collection used in this paper may not have been optimal for capturing the participants’ experience. Additional methods such as document analysis and observations could have been employed in order to gain a richer understanding of the participants’ experiences. Document analysis may have provided an insight into what was done in comparison with what participants stated had occurred, especially as related to teachers’ pedagogy and delivery of online learning and activities. Observations would provide an in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences by allowing the researcher to observe the participants’ behaviour during the sessions.

7. Conclusion

COVID-19 had significant impact in the education sector as systems at all levels adapted teaching and learning to meet the country’s or city’s restrictions enforced to limit the spread of the disease and also continue the learning of their students. English language institutes, like other educational organisations in Saudi Arabia were forced by the government to implement remote teaching and learning for months to control the spread of COVID-19. This situation was unexpected requiring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to shift their mode of teaching and learning from face-to-face delivery to remote delivery via online platforms, including synchronous online classes using Zoom or Blackboard Collaborate. However, the shift in the mode occurred quickly due to the emergency conditions and with little if any preparation on what this change may mean to their teaching practices or to the learning of their students. This type of teaching has been considered as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). ERT is defined as “a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances” (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 6). ERT was used as a solution to meet the challenges of continued learning for students during the COVID-19 pandemic despite the difficulties of using technology to learn and teach English.

Emergency Remote Teaching is a new experience that has recently emerged as a term to describe the delivery of teaching and learning in the field of online education to distinguish it from high-quality online education (Hodges et al., 2020). Therefore, it would be beneficial to conduct more studies about online learning delivery in reaction to a crisis or natural disaster to be prepared for continuity of learning.

To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of ERT, it would be beneficial to replicate this research. This research’s validity and reliability will be enhanced by doing similar investigations with different participants and in various educational settings within and outside Saudi Arabia. In addition, a comparative study could assist us in understanding what went well during emergency remote teaching, as well as what teachers missed most about face-to-face teaching when they were separated from their students and begin to combine the two to design the new normal.

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Authors’ contributions

Dr. Abdulrahim Aloufi was responsible for study’s conception and design. Dr. Katina Zammit and Dr. Maree Skillen provided supervision,

mentorship as well as reviewed and edited the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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