The EFL University Teachers' Perspective Towards E-Learning and E-Examinations of Iraqi Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study aims to assess E-learning and E-examinations concerning teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at university stage, as an action taken by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Iraq to ensure students' learning continuity in Iraqi institutions since the academic year 2019-2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was limited to find out the perspectives of EFL teachers at university stage in two colleges, the college of Basic Education   (state college) and Bilad AlRafidain University college (private college) in Diyala Governorate. This study aims to find answers to two questions 1) Is E-learning appropriate and adequate for EFL learners? 2) Do E-examinations give accurate image for English language learners' progress? To achieve the aims of the study, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed to teachers in both colleges. Twenty English language professors and teachers participated in this study, (11) from Bilad Al-Rafidain University college and (9) from the Basic Education college. The responses were analyzed according to the Spearman -Brown equation which was used to find the correlation coefficient of the questionnaire as a whole. The results showed that the majority of teachers agreed that E-learning cannot replace traditional face-to-face interaction classroom, but they don't deny the importance of using technology in English language teaching. There's a tendency towards blending the two methods to achieve better results in teaching English language and develop the language skills among the learners. Regarding E-examinations the results have revealed that the university teachers are not in favor of E-examinations , they prefer paper-based examinations because they are more reliable and giving a more accurate image for English language learners' progress.

Introduction

During the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, online learning was the best solution for continuing education. Therefore, many educational institutions have completely transferred to online mode in most countries around the world. This transition from traditional classrooms to virtual classrooms, has also required the need to search for many software solutions and applications such Meet, Zoom, Webex, Amazon Chime, and Microsoft team allow video conferencing. Also moving from an in-person class to an online environment, however, has offered its unique challenges to many students and professors alike. In fact, the use of the digital content in education worldwide was relatively uncommon before the pandemic of COVID-19 only 20% of the countries had digital learning resources in teaching, but only in some schools. A mere 10 percent of countries had more robust digital learning capabilities offering some of the educational materials available outside of school. According to the World Bank, no country has a universal digital curriculum for teaching and learning. These numbers paint a picture of the efforts that governments and schools had to take to rapidly move to E-learning to ensure continuity of learning (1).

In Iraq, students are used to obtaining education and attending examinations in contact with their teachers in face-to-face interaction and during exams, they are exposed to a variety of questions: subjective and objective with strict educational instruction and invigilation.

Online learning as distance learning system has never been applied in Iraqi educational institutions before the academic year 2019-2020. The Iraqi educational institutions adopted E-learning and electronic examinations because of

the outbreak of the infectious disease caused by COVID-19 as a forced alternative. Both teachers and students have suffered a lot because most of them do not have ample experience in computer skills and because of some reasons concerning the internet coverage. The present study aims to find out the perspectives of EFL university teachers towards E-learning and E-examinations which have been adopted in Iraqi institutions in the past two years.

Significance of the Study

This study is an endeavor to shed light on the E-learning and E-examination which had been putting in use in Iraqi institutions since the academic year 2019-2020 because of the COVID-19.

The problems of the Study

The study aims at answering the following questions:
1) Is E-learning appropriate and adequate for EFL learners?
2) Do E-examinations give accurate image for English language learners?

The Aims of the Study

This study aims at assessing E-learning and E-examinations concerning teaching English as a Foreign language at the university stage

Limits of the Study

This study is limited to the perspectives of EFL teachers at the university stage. It was conducted in two colleges in Diyala Governorate: The College of Basic Education (state college), and Bilad Al-Rafidain University college (private college) during the academic year 2020-2021.

Literature Review

E- learning is one of the essential topics of research in higher education as well as other stages of education. In fact, the digital transformation of education systems in all levels has allowed incorporating this new teaching-learning platform mainly after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the world. Teaching remotely has been adopted by many institutions to replace face-to-face learning.The American Society for Training and Development defines E-learning as a broad set of applications and processes which include web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital contents. The definition of E-learning varies, depending on the organization and how it is used, but basically it involves electronic means of communication, education, and training (2). Therefore, E- learning provides teachers and learners with useful resources and materials to develop English language skills such as:reading, writing, listening and speaking. Through E-learning teachers as well as students can obtain information easily and this facilitates learning and makes it interesting. By using E-learning, teachers can engage their students to become skilled at English language.

Many researches have been conducted on this topic and most of the related studies on E-learning can be classified into three categories. The first category focuses on the teachers' views and attitudes towards E-learning. The second category focuses on the students' attitudes towards E-learning and the third one focuses on the effect of different learning tools on EFL learners' achievement. Some researchers (3) grouped the publications about e-learning into four dimensions: Pedagogical, technical, organizational, and sociocultural. Others found that (4) E-learning covers a wide set of applications and processes, such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration. It includes the delivery of content via Internet, intranet/extranet (LAN/WAN), audio- and videotape, satellite. Regarding E-learning and English foreign learners' achievement several studies (5) have been published about the effect of using different E-learning tools on English language skills and its components. The results of the previous studies showed that using e-learning devices had positive effects on reading, writing, and translation ability. Some researchers have investigated the positive effectiveness of using E-learning tools on improving English skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). Moreover, they conducted some studies about the effect of using E-learning tools on English language components (vocabularies and grammar) and found out positive

influence (6). Besides some researchers focused on teachers' attitudes towards E-learning and found that although using E-learning in teaching has positive effectiveness, it faces some obstacles and challenges that are related to the teachers (7). The study also investigated the obstacles that hinder the application of the E-learning system and they found that teacher-related obstacles ranked first. In addition, a study was conducted at Tishreen university in Syria which aimed to identify the E-learning nature. After preparing and applying the instrument of the study on a random sample of (113) teachers and (774) students, the study concluded that the instructors were careless while using E-learning. The study showed some negatives of E-learning like decreasing the load of instruction, diseases caused by the long period of time while sitting in front of computer and unavailability of special places for E-learning (8). Regarding E-examinations in one of the literature reviews of E-exams (9) 23 papers were analyzed, among which only three studies showed a superiority of E-exams, nine of paper-based tests and in the remaining ones no significant differences in student performance were observed. In fact implementing E-exams or E-assessment in higher education could face some challenges and this point has been investigated in a number of studies and some solutions have been suggested by the researchers. For example, inexperienced students with computers and online process of E-assessment may encounter many problems (10), (11) so students need to be trained at the beginning to be familiar with E-exams. Some studies focused on computer accessibility and internet (12), (13) and as solution for this problem the researchers suggested that universities should provide labs with fully equipment and internet access for those students. Moreover, some studies pointed out that some teachers are unfamiliar with technology and most of them seem to be using E-exams for the first time; therefore, teachers need some training to be confident for using E-assessment system (14) (15). Furthermore, some studies manipulated an online examination management to identify and hinder cheating (16). A fingerprint authenticator and an eye tribe tracker were used during the E-exam session to accomplish their objective.

The present study is different from these studies in a sense that it seeks to elicit the perspectives of EFL university teachers in two Iraqi universities towards E-learning and E-examinations which have been adopted by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research during the past two years. This study, takes into consideration the main problems which encounter university teachers with E-learning which is in its initial stage in Iraq and suggest some possible solutions to help both teachers and learners in this regard benefiting from other countries' experiences which are more advanced in this type of learning.

Procedure

The research was conducted on a population of 20 professors and teachers. This is the actual number of EFL professors and teachers at the English Department at Bilad AlRafidain University college and the department of English of Basic Education at Diyala University.

The questionnaire was used as the most common and appropriate tool for this kind of research, after reviewing the literature on the subject. The questionnaire in its initial form consisted of 21 items (Appendix 1), and its face validity was confirmed by presenting it to a group of experts in the field of English language teaching to ensure the accuracy of the wording and the clarity of the items. The criterion for approving the acceptance of the items was that it obtained the agreement of experts by 80 % or more, noting that the number of experts who judged the questionnaire was only five professors. Their opinions and observations were taken into account in deleting some items and amending others, and the final form of the questionnaire has become composed of 20 items (Appendix 2). To measure the stability of the tool, the split-half method was adopted by calculating the correlation coefficient between the odd and even items of the questionnaire. The correlation coefficient for the half of the test was 0.80. The Spearman -Brown equation was also used to find the correlation coefficient of the questionnaire as a whole, through the use of the following formula:

$$r_{full} = \frac{2(r_{half})}{1 + r_{half}}$$

$$\frac{2 \times 0.80}{1 + 0.80}$$

0.88

This stability is considered to be high in human studies. The weighted mean was also used to calculate the importance of the paragraph according to Likert Scale, which consists of five levels:

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree for which the abbreviations (SD, DA, N, A, SA) are used and with the marks 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 allotted to each level.

The percentile weight was also used for the purpose of knowing the strength and importance of the item through the application of the following formula:.

Weight percentile = weighted mean. X 10

maximum score

Population Description

The population of the study is illustrated in (table1)

Table (1) The display of the population

No	College	EFL teachers
1	Bilad Al-Rafidain University College	11
2	The college of Basic Education at Diyala University	9
	Total	20

Data Analysis

After receiving the questionnaire from the respondents, the answers were unloaded for each item by adopting the repetitions obtained by the item at the five levels set Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree (SD, DA, N, A, SA) and their weights (5, 4, 3, 2, 1), respectively

The results were organized in table (2), including the items expressing the criterion according to its weighted average and percentile weight, from highest to lowest or in a descending order as shown below:

The table shows all the items with the average rate between 4.86 to 4.0 and with the percentile rate between .97% to .80% except for one item, it had a score of 3.4 and a weight percentile of .69%. Item number (7) which states "A virtual classroom cannot replace face-to-face interaction classroom" and item number (19) which states "Technology handled by experienced teachers can be productive and make a change"come in the first rank with a weighted average of (4.86) and percentile weight of (.97), and item number (6), which states "E-learning is more effective than the traditional face-to-face interaction" appears last with a weighted average of (3.47) and percentile weight of (.69). Thus the majority of teachers agree that E-learning cannot replace traditional face-to-face interaction classroom, but they don't deny the importance of using technology in English language teaching. By Blending both E-learning with face-to-face interactive learning, the English language learners will benefit a lot in developing reading, listening, speaking and writing skills which are the basic skills for learning a language.

Table (2) shows the items Rank, weighted average and percentile weight in descending order

Item No.	Rank	Items	Weighted Average	Percentile weight
7	1	A virtual classroom cannot replace face-to-face interaction classroom..	4.86	.97
19	1	Technology handled by experienced teachers can be productive and make a change	4.86	.97
2	2	The speed and coverage of the internet is not equal in all places in Iraq.	4.8	.96
10	3	Both teachers and learners might encounter the	4.73	.94

		problem of the repeated cutting of electricity		
18	3	E-learning facilitates contact between teachers and students	4.73	.94
16	4	E-learning reinforces the use of audio and visual aids.	4.66	.93
5	5	The atmosphere inside the learners' homes does not highly motivate online English language learning	4.6	.92
15	5	E-learning enables learners to enjoy autonomous learning	4.6	.92
20	5	E-exams do not give an accurate measurement of learners' achievement	4.6	.92
9	6	Learners have got some problems related to fixing specific dates for online classroom for domestic and personal reasons.	4.53	.90
11	6	Some families, for social reasons, prevent their daughters from using mobile and computers or showing their personal photos and names online	4.58	.90
3	7	In online classes, less attention is paid to productive skills.	4. 46	.89
13	7	E-learning weakens the social relationships among learners.	4.46	.89
1	8	Online teaching of courses agrees with teaching goals.	4.55	.86
8	8	Most teachers do not have sufficient basic computer skills.	4. 33	.86
4	9	Learners do not benefit a lot from E-learning	4.26	. 85
12	9	E-learning is appropriate for English language learners	4.26	.85
17	10	E-learning creates more opportunities for learners to learn and revise the same material on different occasions.	4.2	.84
14	11	E-learning takes place at any time and any place	4.00	.80
6	12	E-learning is more effective than the traditional face-to-face interaction.	3.47	.69

It can be noticed from the table that items (7) and (19) of the questionnaire got the first rank. This indicates that the teachers prefer to teach in face-to-face interaction classrooms rather than virtual ones , but they are with using technology in the classroom efficiently and wherever possible.

Item number (2) which says (The speed and coverage of the internet is not equal in all places in Iraq) got the second rank. This reveals the main problem of getting the good service of the internet all over the country , so better results in e-learning will not be obtained.

Item number (10) which reads (Both teachers and learners might encounter the problem of the repeated cutting of electricity) this reveals the suffering of the students and teachers from continuity of remote lectures. Item (18) which says (E-learning facilitates contact between teachers and students) points out that e-learning enables both teachers and students to be in contact with each other by different social applicants such as, what's app, telegram, Viber and messenger any time, but the main problem is the repeated cutting of electricity. Both items (10) and (18) came in the third rank.

Item (16) which says (E-learning reinforces the use of the audio and visual aids) states that EFL teachers are-doing their best to achieve the objectives of their lectures through using a variety of teaching aids and techniques and this item scored the fourth rank.

Three items (5), (15) and (20) got the fifth rank. Item number (5) which says (The atmosphere inside the learners' homes does not highly motivate online English language learning) stresses that the environment around most learners creates negative impact on learners such as noises around them, domestic affairs especially among female students and for students who are engaged in part- time jobs. This indicates a negative point towards E-learning. Item (15) which says (E-learning enables learners to enjoy autonomous learning) shows how learners should be active participants in distance learning. This also reveals that learners should not be passive. Item (20) which says (E-exams do not give an accurate measurement of learners achievement) is a very important issue toward E-exams from the teachers' point of view as it indicates that they are not satisfied with this type of exams, because it gives students an opportunity to cheat. Also the types of questions in E-exams are mainly MCQ and there is a great opportunity for guessing.

Item number (9) which is "Learners have got some problems related to fixing specific dates for online classroom for domestic and personal reasons "got the sixth rank, it reveals that the department should take into account the students' point of view in organizing the timetable of the online classes.

Item (11) which is "Some families, for social reasons, prevent their daughters from using mobiles or computers or showing their personal photos and real names online". This item which got the sixth rank shows the negative attitudes of some families towards E-learning. This also shows that the society is unfamiliar with this type of learning.

Item (3) which reads "In online classes, less attention is paid to productive skills" got the seventh rank. This indicates that the four basic language skills do not go equally together in E-learning.mainly speaking and writing.

Item (13) which is"E-learning weakens the social relationship among learners" got the seventh rank and this shows the negative aspect of E-learning because it deprives them from meetings at the cafeterias and enjoy going on picnics and making parties.

Items (1) and (8) come in the 8th rank. Item (1) states that "online English courses agree with teaching goals". This means that the teaching goals are achieved with no obstacles. Item (8) says "Most teachers do not have sufficient basic computer skills". This reveals computer literacy of some teachers which is essential for E-learning. That's why many teachers cannot handle online classroom though they have good experience of teaching. The ninth rank was occupied by items (4) and (12). Item (4) which says "Learners do not benefit from E-learning". It reveals that students are not satisfied with this type of learning and they prefer to go back to face-to-face classrooms. On the other hand, item (12) which says "E-learning is appropriate for English language learners" is in favor of E-learning. It seems that learners find it appropriate because they can attend at any time specially those who have jobs. In the tenth comes item number (17) which says "E-learning creates more opportunities for learners to learn and revise the same material on different occasions". This item focuses on the learners and how they can benefit from E-learning. Item number (14) which reads "E-learning takes place at any time and any place" gets the eleventh rank. This item emphasizes the possibility of learning at any time and any place and there are no restrictions in the process of learning through e-learning. Item (6) got the twelfth rank and this is the last rank in the order of the items in the questionnaire. This item says "E-learning is more effective than the traditional face-to-face interaction". There is an emphasis here that traditional face-to-face classrooms are more effective than virtual classrooms, so teachers prefer to go back to actual classes.

Conclusion

In fact, COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the whole educational process to online. Thus E-learning which is in its initial stages in Iraq has been adopted in our universities officially. Our study has revealed

that teachers do not totally agree with virtual classrooms. They prefer to go back to the actual classrooms, but at the same time they support the use of technology in teaching and learning process as E-learning has enabled them to use a variety of online learning platforms and materials sharing despite the challenges they encountered such as internet connectivity, electricity cuts, lack of experience with digital devices and the feeling of anxieties. Regarding E-exams, the study has also revealed that the university teachers are not satisfied with this type of exams which do not give an accurate measurement of the learners' achievement. It's worth noting here that E-exams have provided a direct and immediate feedback for students and reduced the time and effort of the teachers in correcting papers, but the teachers seem to prefer paper-based exams because they are more reliable and there is a little chance for students to cheat while they are performing them.

Recommendations

In the light of the analysis of the conclusions, the following recommendations are drawn:

1) Blended learning is more useful for students to acquire the basic skills of language than E-learning by itself.

2) paper based should be conducted because they are more accurate in giving the correct image of the students' achievement and reducing the opportunities of cheating.

3) In the case of applying E-examinations, it is essential to reduce the time allotted to the paper according to the number of items and questions. Each item and question should have a certain weight of scores.

4) Distant learners (people who are not enrolled as regular students) can benefit from remote learning at any time and wherever they are.

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