

Challenges of Teaching English Language Online: Teachers Perspective

Ibtihal Murad Zangana¹, Omar Nesrallah^{2*}

Abstract

Virtual online teaching was adopted at the Iraqi educational institutions: schools and universities when COVID-19 break out. It was the only alternative to revival the education sector after locking down schools and universities by the condition of the quarantine. The scenario of locking down schools and universities after the spread of COVID-19 pandemic pushed stakeholders and decision makers to switch the educational process to the online mode (Thi1 & Minh, 2021). This sudden shift arose many issues and challenges which was faced by both teachers as well as learners, soon questions about the validity and authenticity of the educational process and outcomes were raised. The current study seeks to uncover hidden issues and challenges which English language teachers at Diyala University encounter at this critical period 2019-2022. A semi-structured interview was utilized as the instrument of this small scale qualitative and descriptive study. The qualitative raw data obtained from the interview transcripts were thematically coded and analyzed. The finding were interpreted in two directions: first: failure of the new online teaching process in obtaining the desired educational outcomes outlined by the ministries of education and higher education due to several reasons: uncontrolled examination session which led to student cheating and resulted in unauthentic grading marks. In addition to internet connection issues which is added to the teachers burden and affect negatively EFL teaching process. Secondly: it was proven that online teaching can be beneficial in the sense that it can save time and effort if new strategies of assessment were adopted, intensive training courses for teachers as well as students were applied, in addition to providing good internet service for both student and teacher.

Keywords: online English language teaching, covid-19 pandemic, EFL, educational outcomes, thematic coding.

Introduction

Our world had not witness such a serious disturbance with such a large scale as that caused by the pandemic of COVID-19 (Demuyakor, 2020)

¹ Diyala University, Iraq. Email: ibtihalzangana@gmail.com

² Diyala University, Iraq. Email: omarnesrallah8@gmail.com

especially in the educational sector. When quarantine was imposed to prevent loss in people lives. Virtual teaching seemed to be the only alternative to keep the track of learning in progress. It was impossible for both instructors and students to exist in schools or universities at the time of COVID-19 (2019-2022) thus online teaching did rescue the educational sector.

Online learning and the so-called distance teaching was not new experience for many countries. Still, Diyala University didn't have an experience with online teaching before. In ideal situation teaching is seen as a real-time direct interaction between the instructor and the learner in which new information are conveyed to the learner. The outcomes of the teaching process should result in acquiring new information or skill from the side of the learner. However, in online learning this interaction take place with the aid of internet and virtual platform in virtual classrooms. The teacher and its students are supposed to be presence online to negotiate, interact and explaining new material in a meaningful pedagogical tasks. However, the quality of online and in-class teaching process are not evaluated by the same methods.

Butcher and Wilson-Strydom M. (2013) and Butcher, N. and Hoosen, S. (2014) suggested a guides to the quality of online learning focusing on formal higher education which tries to assess online and distance learning by seeking to answer the questions:

1. What is online learning?
2. How is online learning offered?
3. What constitutes quality in online learning?
4. How can institutions assure quality?

The guide summarized the key quality issues in online education in a concise and accessible manner which considers academics and students as the key stakeholders for online education. The researcher derived its semi-structured interview questions depending on this guid to assure the validity and reliability. And the interview was built around those key quality issues of this guide with a special focuses on the teachers' perspective concerning online teaching sessions.

To this end, the current study seeks to answer questions concerning teaching English online at Diyala University / Iraq during the critical period (2019-2022) using the alternative electronic platforms which were rapidly developed to be utilized at Iraqi universities namely: google classrooms, free conference call and zoom to replace in class teaching.

Despite the novelty of the research topic, Lots of papers were written and published concerning the effect the pandemic has on educational sector during the critical period of COVID-19 (2019-2022) it was the focus of scholars since the quarantine seeking to assess, develop and find solutions for the upraised obstacles. Rinekso and Muslim 2020 investigated usage of synchronous discussion in higher education context, their study results revealed the students positive response to those online discussion. Asmara 2020 used WhatsApp app to investigate the challenges of teaching English in virtual classroom during COVID-19 pandemic, the research summarized those challenges by the following: bad internet connection, students' attendance and reluctance and student bad language skills. Rahman 2020 studied the challenges of teaching English as a foreign language online during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia and strived to discover whether the teachers are satisfied with online English language learning classes or not. The findings revealed promising results indicate that teaching English as a foreign language online can be very useful if proper training and orientation programs for teachers and students are implemented and online language learning platforms and tools are up to date. In the same vein, Bin Dahmash (2020) investigated the benefits and challenges of blended learning from the EFL students' point of view at King Saud University during the pandemic using two focus group sessions and one-to-one interviews with students taking intensive English language course at King Saud University. The results showed that blended learning did have many benefits for students such as supporting writing skills, encouraging online searching and being economical. On the other hand, the study identified the main challenges that the EFL students faced by: technological problems, instructor performance flaws and difficulties taking online test.

The present study differs from the previous body of literature in the sense that it utilizes new procedure in collecting the required data as the research instrument. It is proven that interviews are used mostly in data collection because it uncover the story behind a participant's experiences, and since online English language teaching was a new experience for the instructors at Diyala university, the current study instrument was an excellent choice to get rich in depth data. Wheeler & Brett, 2022 stated: "Interviews are an incredibly flexible and versatile method". Researcher followed a line of questions to gain information about a topic, or further explore responses or findings. It is worth to be mentioned that the current study is limited with its scale for it takes in consideration examining online English language teaching at Diyala University for the academic year (2020-2021).

Concerns about the validity of the teaching process and authenticity of the educational outcomes at that critical period of the COVID-19

pandemic arose. The education sector was strongly affected by the pandemic especially how the teaching-learning process should be conducted (Widiastuti, Mantra, and Sukoco 2020). Activities like teacher–student and student–student interaction, teaching approaches, feedback, and assessment were the focus of the semi-structured interview questions which was the research instrument that the researcher chose to carry on the current study.

The current study seeks to uncover the teaching- learning process challenges which are detected in practice using virtual classrooms from EFL instructors' perspective. In addition the study seeks to assess the quality of the online teaching outcomes during the pandemic of COVID-19. The current study focuses on two main research questions:

1. What are the challenges that English language teaching at Diyala University encounter while implementing virtual classes during COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the consequences of implementing virtual classes? Are the outcomes of teaching process during COVID-19 authentic and valid?

Materials and Methods

Participants

The current study participants are chosen because they fit for the purpose of the study which is answering questions about the phenomena, i.e. they are seen as “experts” in one way or another (Carmichael & Cunningham 2017) because they have many years of experience in EFL in class teaching and at least two years of online teaching. 41 English language instructors teaching at Diyala University were the population of the current study (22 female and 19 male). Their age was as follows: 7 teachers aged from 24-34 years, 15 teachers aged from 35-45 years, 11 teachers aged from 45-55 years and 8 teachers aged from 55-63 years.

Assessments and Measures

The current study adopted a qualitative research design with descriptive analysis. It also a quantitative in the process of presenting the data analysis results. It has been conducted at Diyala University/ English language departments at the both Faculty of Basic Education and the Faculty of Education for Human Science during the academic year 2021-2022.

A semi-structured one-to-one online interview was the instrument used to collect the required data (Appendix 1) the interview draws on Butcher and Wilson-Strydom M. (2013) and Butcher, N. and Hoosen, S. (2014) guide. The Researcher believed that focusing on a relatively

small group will help to obtain more in-depth rich data (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2008) in addition, the semi-structured interview helped to collect detailed data by allowing the participants to explore their thoughts, feelings and beliefs as well as uncover personal, sensitive issues which might be experienced by participants. Aung, Abdul Razak & Nazry (2021) stated: "Semi-structured interview is more flexible in terms of changing the order of questions and for a more extensive follow-up participants' response" (p.601). The semi-structured interview validity and reliability was warranted because all participants were asked the same questions. Validity and reliability of the interview questions in a qualitative study depend on what data researcher expects from participants (Dikko, 2016., Sharrad wt al, 2021). The participants were interviewed through the skype app one by one (skype is a software which enables making live video and voice conversation, send instant messages and share fills).

Data Analysis

Participants were interviewed one by one and the responses were written done, then themes from the raw collected data of the interview transcripts were extracted. The way the researcher perceives and interpret the raw data depends on what type of filter covers the analytical lens that the researcher wears when looking at the phenomenon (Saldana, 2016). The researcher being an English language instructor herself at the University of Diyala knew who to determine which of the data were salient and frequent. It is worth to be mentioned that the obstacles which the researcher had face in teaching online in addition to be unconvinced with the educational process outcomes and the online assessment procedures constructed the motivation behind carrying out the current study.

Results and Discussion

The current study seeks to diagnose the potential challenges faced by English language teachers utilizing virtual classes during the global pandemic COVID-19 at Diyala University- Iraq. Moreover, the current study attempts to sets the most appropriate solutions for similar situation if the EFL sessions coerced to be transmitted teaching sessions online to their students. The current study brought to light some promising findings. Concerning the first research question:

1. What are the challenges that EFL instructors at Diyala University encounter implementing virtual classes during COVID-19 pandemic?

Most of the English language instructors believed that regular face-to-face classes are more beneficial than virtual classes teaching. It is obvious that online teaching has revival the education sector after the

paralysis which affected the educational sector and all life aspects during the quarantine of COVID-19. However, findings revealed deviation in the educational process and its objectives, invalid teaching learning process and unauthentic student grads.

As shown in Table (1) there are two areas of shortcomings: first, shortcomings related to the students such as: being passive participants as students were less motivated during an online class. Moreover, students managed to develop new cheating methods at assessment sessions. Second: technical shortcomings related to the internet coverage and speed, as well as lack of experience in using google platform for both students and instructors.

As for the second research question:

2. What are the consequences of implementing virtual classes? Are the outcomes of teaching process during COVID-19 authentic and valid?

Most of the instructors believed that those shortcoming mentioned above led to reflect invalid assessments process which gave chance for students to cheat which in turn to unreal student grade marks.

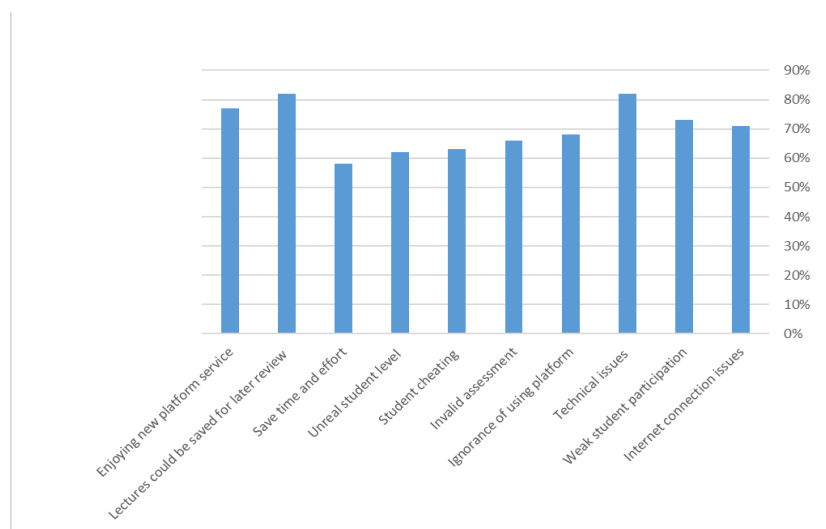
The researcher was seeking for notable, salient and agreed upon pieces of information in the transcripts. Afterwards, the themes were coded and conceptualized and grouped under categories which were interpreted to main themes, each category represent collected related ideas (Table 1). The rich in-depth data gave chance to the researcher to get good insights to understand the problem from the instructors' perspective hence answer the research questions stated earlier. The question of the interview were open-end questions (Appendix) and were triggers to stimulate the participant to demonstrate and reflect their experience. The researcher extracted the frequency that each category occur in the participants' transcript of the interview. Then categories were classified from the high occurrence one to the lowest in order to be explained and interpreted hence answering the outlined research questions.

Table (1) Themes and their frequency

N	Themes	Frequency
1.	Internet connection issues	71%
2.	Weak student participation	73%
3.	Technical issues	82%
4.	Ignorance of using platform	68%
5.	Invalid assessment	66%
6.	Student cheating	63%
7.	Unreal student level	62%

8.	Save time and effort	58%
9.	Lectures could be saved for later review	82%
10.	Enjoying new platform service	77%

Figure (1) Categories and their frequency chart



Conclusion

The results showed that the EFL instructors were unsatisfied with online teaching at Iraqi universities for many reasons which can be classified into two areas: reasons related to the quality of the internet and technological services in Iraq and their availability to both students and instructors. Beside, both student and instructor lack the experience to make the maximum benefit from virtual classes.

The second area is related to the students' commitment to the classes and exams. Majority of the students were not motivated to join the virtual classes, and they used to gather in groups to answer the exams questions and pass the right answers which is obtained from the book or someone who lashes into strong language to each other. This cheating process did not come to an end, and the consequences were invalid and unauthentic educational outcomes which led to instructors' frustration.

However, the qualitative data also revealed that instructors were pleased using the new technology once they managed to master it as it saves time and effort, in the sense that classes can be conducted anytime-anywhere. Some instructors mentioned that they managed

to conduct meetings with their students online outside the time table, by which they managed to discuss issues related to the teaching material. In return, those meetings led to a better understanding from the students' side. Still researcher strongly suggest to conduct research which investigate students' perspective concerning online teaching. Researcher also suggest giving more attention to the following aspects in order to strengthen EFL teaching online sessions:

1. Improving language learning platforms adding more features which support writing and reading skills especially.
2. Conducting intensified training courses for teachers and students to perform online teaching–learning programs efficiently
3. Developing more appropriate assessment strategies and techniques which sport the authenticity of examination.

Bibliography

- Aung, K.T., Razak, R.A., & Nazry, N.N.M.(2021): Establishing Validity And Reliability of Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire in Developing Risk Communication Module: A Pilot Study. *Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan*. Vol 2 No 3 November 2021.
- Bin Dahmash, N. (2020). I Couldn't Join the Session: Benefits and cahallenges of Blended Learning amid COVID-19 from EFL Students.
- Butcher, N. and Hoosen, S. (2014) *A Guide to Quality in Post-traditional Online Higher Education* Dallas TX: Academic Partnerships
- Butcher, N. and Wilson-Strydom, M. (2013) *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning* Dallas TX: Academic Partnerships.
- Carmichael T. & Cunningham N. (2017). Theoretical Data Collection and Data Analysis with Gerunds in a Constructivist Grounded Theory Study. *Journal of Business Research Methods* Volume (15) Issue (2).
- DEMUAYAKOR, J. (2020) Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Online Learning in Higher Institutions of Education: A Survey of the Perceptions of Ghanaian International Students in China. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 10 (3), e202018
- Dikko, M. (2016). Establishing construct validity and reliability: Pilot testing of a qualitative interview research in Takaful (Islamic insurance). *The Qualitative Report*, 21(3), 521- 528. Retrieved from: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss3/6>
- Enes. B &Ihsan, K. (2020). The effect of Coronavirous (Covid 19) outbreak on education system: evaluation of distance learning system in Turkey.*Journal of Education and learning*, Canaian Center of Science and Education.
- Fageeh, A., and Mekheimer, M. (2013). Effects of BlackBoard on EFL academic writing and attitudes. *JALT CALL Journal*, 9(2), 169-196. Retrieved on January, 10, 2021 from <https://doi: 10.29140/jaltcall.v9n2.154>.

- Fraenkel, J.R., & Wallen, N.E. (2008), *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education* (7th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill, Inc.
- Hassan S. T., Hasan I.M. & Mahdi Y.S. (2020). Validity of Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language at the Time of Covid-19. *Elementary Education Online*, 2020; Vol 19 (Issue 3): pp. 4070-4076
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (pp. 169-186). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Saldana, J. (2016). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchs* (3rd ed.) London,UK: Sage.
- Widiastuti, Mantra, and Sukoco (2020). MOBILE INTERNET-BASED LEARNING TO CULTIVATE STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILL DURING CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC. *International Journal of Applied Science and Sustainable Development (IJASSD)* Vol. 2 No. 1 (2020).
- Widiastuti, I.A.M.S, Mantra, I.B.N., Sukoco, H. & Santosa, M.H. (2021). Online assessment strategies to enhance students' competence and their implementational challenges. *J. Eng. Educ. Society.* 6:2. doi:10.21070/jees.v6i2.1378.
- Katy Wheeler & Bethany Morgan Brett (2022). *How to Do Qualitative Interviewing*. SAGE Publications Ltd; 1st
- Sharrad A, Faravani A. Delving into the Relationships among Iraqi EFL Learners' Willingness to Write, Personality Types and Writing Ability. *kurmanj* 2021; 3 (1) :23-29