Teaching Grammar to Iraqi EFL Students of Al- Hamdaniya University during COVID-19 Pandemic: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract

During the fight against Covid-19, schools and universities in Iraq and many other countries have been closed and digital learning has begun to take place. In this paper, the researchers have tried to identify the difficulties which faced students through Electronic Learning (hereafter, E-learning) during Covid-19. Inadequate instruction, lack of internet and electricity, little experience and low attendance are just some of the problems that our student face in this type of learning. To assess the benefit of such learning in Iraq, it is hypothesized in this paper that online learning has a bad impact on students' performance be it spoken or written. To test the validity of the hypothesis, an online questionnaire of (3) items was given to (30) 4th year students of English department to identify the problems and solutions to digital learning from their own perspective. Data was analyzed by using a mixed method (i:e both quantitative and qualtitative) because such method describes and interpretes statistical percentages. The results of the analysis show that the biggest problem for most of the students in particular in our country is that electricity and internet are not available all the time. Another conclusion is that some students personally are not interested in the subject of grammar. It has also been found that the best solution is to go back to classroom teaching or face to face communucation. The study provides some recommendations which can be of benefit to EFL teachers, students and probably to the teaching process in cases of emergency.

Keywords: Covid-19, e-learning, grammar, pandemic, teaching, problems, solution

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the Corona virus pandemic that swept the world at the beginning of the year 2020 has caused many economic and social problems. This pandemic has radically changed the delivering classes from traditional mode to a new mode i.e., online education. The problem with this new trend in methodology is that there was no experience and training for using technology in language teaching. Lack of experience results in random teaching i.e, the students had no interest to attend the classes because most of them were occupied with household issues. What makes the situation worse for the students is the lack of teaching materials. They have only to depend on the material sent to them by their instructors. What is the worst is that students have very little oppurtunety in participating in the classroom discussions. Most instructs were satisfied with giving only few examples without practical exercises for applying grammatical roles. This current situation inspired the researchers to carry out linguistic analysis on e-learning. The researchers have consulted previous studies on the topic under investigation (see the previous studies section). All these studies deal with language teaching in general or teaching English for specific purposes. However, our attempt is completely different from the current literature of the subject because we need to know the problems or the challenges which face students in teaching grammar which is one of the most important components of language teaching. Lack of grammar leads to unsucseful learning because it organizes what we say and write (see among others, Salman & Hazem 2022). Inappropriate use of grammar leads to confusion and misunderstanding (Hazem & Kanaan, 2020). Accordingly, students will not be able to construct correct grammatical sentences which is the ultimitae goal of teaching grammar in Iraq. The other difference between the previous studies and the current one is that we also elecited the solutions from students the latter proposes solutions from students' perspective. We don't claim to be pioneers in the field of e-learning, yet our work lends some support to the previous literature on the impact of COVID-19 on the educational sytems which have been the focus on the previous studies.

On the basis on what we have mentioned above, we hypothseised that online learning has a bad impact on teaching

grammar to our students. To verify the hypothsis, this paper tries to find some answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges which face Iraqi university students of English in learning grammar during COVID-19?

2. How can such challenges be solved from students' perspective?

Therefore, the aims of this paper are twofold: the first aim is to identify the problems which faced Iraqi EFL learners of English in learning grammatical materials.The second aim is to suggest some solutions for the problems.

To achive the goal of the paper, the researchers have adopted a mixed methods of analysis (see the methodology section). It is hoped that this paper will be of benefit to both teachers of English and students learning a foreign language since it makes them be familiar with the challenges and some solutions to e-learning. It is also of benefit to those in authority and representatives of educational institutions for doing their best to minimize the challenges created by COVID-19 and provide the necessary technological tools.

1.1 Why Grammar Is Important in Learning a Language?

Grammar is considered to be the backbone of any language and the foundation for communcation (Salman, 2020: 26).Canale & Swain (1980:187) cited in Kumar et al (2015) state that "without awareness of grammar, no one can communicate efficiently". Without mastering grammatical roles, it is impossible to write well-organisied pieces of written materials. Similarly, lack of knowledge of grammar makes communication vague. Having mastered roles of grammar, learners will be able to become more effieicent and competent in using language (Pachina, 2019 & Zhang, 2009:184) to mention only few among many others. It is taken for granted that language learning is the acquisition of a set of skills, two of which are oral(i.e., listening and speaking), while the other two are written (writing and reading). Iraqi learners of English have to master the four skills in the order which is prescribed by the objectives and goals of learning. Grammar and vocabulary are language compotents which are essential for mastering the four language skills. At the primary stage in Iraq, the focus is on the oral skills. At the intermediate and secondary levels, more attention is given to writing. While at Iraqi universities, the focus is primariky on written performance of the students. Thus, at Iraqi universities, grammar is one of the most important and indispensable components of language teaching. Iraqi university students enrolling at the department of English must study grammar for four years. Without knowledge of good grammar, it is virtually impossible to use any language skills. Grammar improves students' proficiency in the four language skills. On the other hand, without knowledge of good grammar, students' performance be it written or spoken will not be comprehended by others. Accordingly, when there is no good grammar, a great deal of misunderstanding arises (Dalil & Harrizi, 2013:11-12). Having justified the signifigance of grammar in language learning, let's now briefly explain the contents of the prescribed grammatical textbook for Iraqi university students.

1.2 The Prescribed Textbook for Teaching Grammar in Iraqi Universities

In this paper, we are going to test students' comprehension of the book entitled *(A University Grammar of English)* written by Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum, 1973 during Covid-19. This book is prescribed for teaching students of third and fourth stages at the department of English in most Iraqi universities. The current textbook includes fourteen chapters (the first six of which are taught to the third-year students, while chapters seven, eleven and twelve are taught to the fourth-year students). The chapters which deal with the fourth-year students deal with grammatical notions like clause pattern, clause elements, the syntactic and semantic features roles of clause elements, negation, concord, kind of sentences, kinds of clauses and verb complementation. All these grammatical notions help students structure the written performance.

1.3 Technology and E- Learning

Despite the functional importance of educational technology as a mediator that carries the message and the educational content of the recipient, its role should not exceed that function to replace the goals that we target from the learning process; In addition to the growing role of the medium, with the ease and speed of communication provided by advanced technology, and making it available to learners, it shares the curriculum designers with the secretariat of delivering the message, so that the message remains the ultimate goal of all parties to the educational process, learners, teachers, or those in charge of this great matter that determines the status of nations.

2. Previous Studies

Much has been written on thechallenges in teaching language during Covid-19 since its appearance in December 2019. These studies were carried out to explore the impacts of this virus on electronic learning and teching English

language for Arab Students. So, the researchers have consulted some related studies that could serve as a basis for the current paper. To begin with, Akhter (2020) carried out a study on the 100 EFL Saudi students from different colleges to identify the problems which face students in learning listening skills. The results of the study show that the online learning is dissatisfactory due to the lack of planning and preparation or management. Barzani et.al (2021) conducted a study that centers basically on the tools used in E-learning like tablets/laptops, Smart Boards, and Moodle(online learning management system) and surveys the responsibility of technology applied at the Preparatory schools of English. It explores the cons and pros of technology and proposes to know whether or not a teacher is concerned in teaching language beyond electronic technology. This paper given consultations from the experient teachers, whom they use the technical during the teaching online classes. The findings reveal that the teachers who use technology things have the the great impact in enrich the skills of learing and/or teaching English. However, there are also another group of teachers and students face difficulties in using the electronic devises because of the lack of knowledge in these techniques in Cyprus International University. Erarslan (2021) carried out a study to evaluate the effect of emergency online teaching on students' language development, depending on language skill and area. The Conclusions show that the E-teaching and learning of English essentially designed challenge because of the students' access to smart phones or computers and internet connection problems. Hakim (2020) investigated technology integrated classrooms and the challenges facing EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia during COVID-19 Pandemic. The population of the study included 50 English language instructors from King Abdul-Aziz University. The result of the analysis reveal that the common challenges were the inability to access the modern equipment, weak internet connection, learners' low motivation level and attention defect. Krajka (2021) conducted a study on "Teaching grammar and vocabulary in COVID-19 times: Approaches used in online teaching in Polish schools during a pandemic". This study aims at exploring the form of online grammar and vocabulary teaching ordered by secondary school English language teachers during the COVID-19 lockdown era". It proposes that Covid-19 has changed the shape of language education in Poland. The results of the analysis this study show that the online instruction for the period of lockdown indicated how crucial applicable teacher training is not only inside the field of technological expertise but, further essentially, employing chosen instruments to suit one's own teaching method. Oraif& Elyas (2021) carried out a study about the effect of Corona Virus on the processes of education in Saudi Arabia. The main aim of this study is to investigate EFL learners' level of commitment in online lessons utilizing a planed school program prescribed by the ministry of education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The problem of this study is that Learners who previously take part in old-fashioned education now stand facing a new challenge, a typical rise in E-learning and this shift may perhaps affect learners understanding actions and receiving of the transformation enormously. The findings show a high stage of commitment in E-learning among EFL Saudi Arabia students. This assisted to produce suggestions to progress EFL procedures, mainly by electronic learning atmosphere either at the domestic stage in the Saudi Arabia situation or at the international stage. Our paper benefits much from the previous studies with regard to methodology and data analysis. However, our study is different from the previous ones because it is limited to the teaching of grammar only. Accordingly, the results of our analysis are different.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In this paper we have given a questionnaire of (3) items to students to elicit the difficulties which faced them and the solutions which they suggest. See the appendix (1). To achive this aim, a mixed method was adopted (quantative & qualitative).

Quantivaly, percentages were calculated statistically while qualitatively responses were given to the numerical data.

3.2 Study Population

The participants for this paper were (30) 4th year students of English Department, Al-Hamdaniya University, College of Education for the academic year 2020-2021. The questionnaire was given to the students online .

3.3 Study Context

The study took place at At A- Hamdaniya University /college of education/ department of English during the academic year 2020- 2021. Al Hamdaniya University is one of the Iraqi government universities located in eastern part of Mosul city which is known Ninevah Pain.

4. Analysis and Discussion

In this part, the results of data analysis reveal to research question that are given by authors.The participants of this study included (30) students. In the present era, various media have become a necessity for education, because the teacher has become aware of its importance in language teaching in particular. The traditional system of education

was a widespread system through the long ages. This education system has contributed to the industry and development of human civilization at the level of the countries of the world (Khan & Mufidah 2021). With regard to question N0. (1) which is (what is your point of view of electronic learning during Covid-19?), (17) out of (30) students (%57) said that E-learning is too bad. For them this is because of the following reasons:

1. Inefficient and unstable internet connectivity.

2. Lack of computers, laptops and technical problems.

3. Poor communication between students and teacher because of lack of practice.

4. Obliging students to follow one official channel i.e. (Google classroom) was boring and variations are not allowed.

5. The interruptions which occurred through E- learning like lose of electricity.

6. Too many materials to be covered within one hour.

7. Low attendance of some students and not taking any official measures against those who are absent encouraged teachers not to be motivated inside the class.

8. Teachers' style of teaching and their personality encourage students not to attend electronic classes. Such teachers neither ask students questions nor to take part in the class. Their main objective was to present the lecture only. This teaching method is very boring on the part of learner.

9. Some teachers did not consider the loss of internet connection during online testing as such, some students living in IDP tents have no internet most of the time and they were not able to send their replies and as such they failed in some subjects.

While (5) out of (30) students (%17) regard E- learning as a good style because they have experience in using laptops and electronic devices. (8) out of (30) students (%27) regard E-learning useless or without benefit, because they are not able to understand such style of teaching, see figure (1):
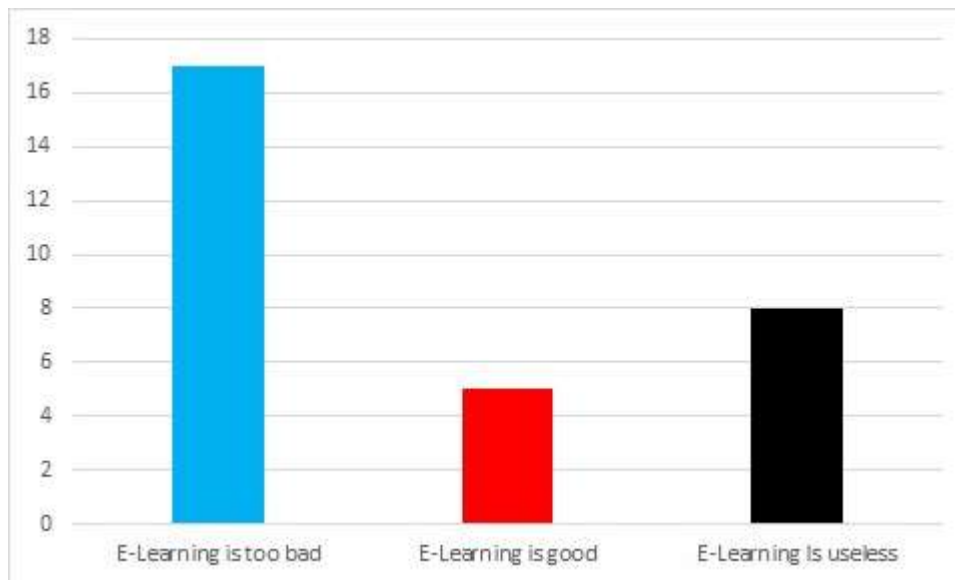

Figure 1. Percentage of Students answers for question 1

As far as question No. (2) is concerned which is (what are the difficulties which faced you in teaching grammar during Covid-19?), (7) out of (30) students (%23) said that grammar is more difficult than other teaching materials because they are unable to memorize and recognize grammatical rules. For (12) out of (30) students (%40) said that teaching grammar through online courses is more difficult to understand than traditional teaching method where(the teacher, the classroom, the board, etc). They said they were not able to understand the material through digital learning because there were no enough opportunities to ask the teacher questions as well, the practical side of materials (exercises) need classroom situation   .For (11) out of (30) students (%37) said that they didn't face any difficulty in digital learning because they have experience in digital learning and they like grammar lessons or materials. This group of students has a good command of grammatical competence and they were able to recognize and produce grammatical rules because they basically are interested in learning grammar. In addition, they were

living in city center and internet and electricity services are available most of the time. They rarely missed any online lectures while they were willing learn, see figure (2):
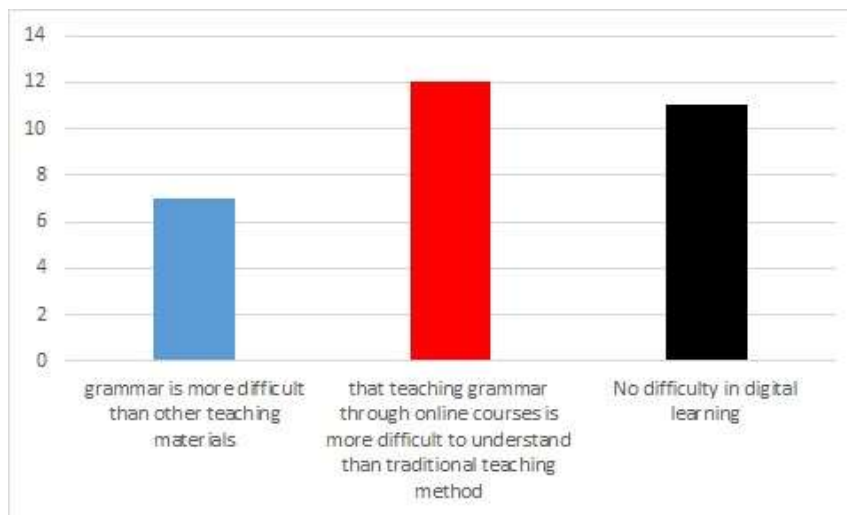

Figure 2. Percentage of Students answers for question 2

With regard to question No(3) which is (what are the solutions which you suggest for making E-learning more effective?), it has been found that (12) out of (30) students (%40) suggest to abolish this type of teaching and to go back to the classical method of classroom teaching because E-learning is not suitable for Iraqi learners of English, since it lacks the basic components which make it successful and such students also said that the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research should suggest solution and give teachers the freedom of choosing any channel which students prefer more. (2) out of (30) students (%7) said that there is no any solution now because the Covid-19 pandemic is still attacking people everywhere. (5) out of (30) students (%17) propose that the best solution to avoid problems of E-learning is to reduce the subjects and materials to no more than two subjects to be taught electronically and to create classroom situations which motivate or call students to take part in classroom discussions. In addition, daily and finally exams should be taken from the materials being really taught. And the questions should be multidimensional i.e., (multiple choice questions, true & false sentenses, filling in the blanks, matching and some brief questions and answers). And (7) out of (30) students (%23) suggest that the availability of internet, electricity all the time can solve the problem. (4) out of (30) students (%13) propose that giving the lecture its due share of time on the part of teacher can make students understand what is going on in E-learning.

They said that teachers should vary the activities inside the class and should not only explain the material, but they should give examples from real life situations. As well, some teachers were not serious in teaching the material i.e. they only share material without teaching it. Accordingly, students did not acquire real long-lasting knowledge. They have also to give students written assignments to be done and to be discussed inside the online class next lecture, see figure (3):
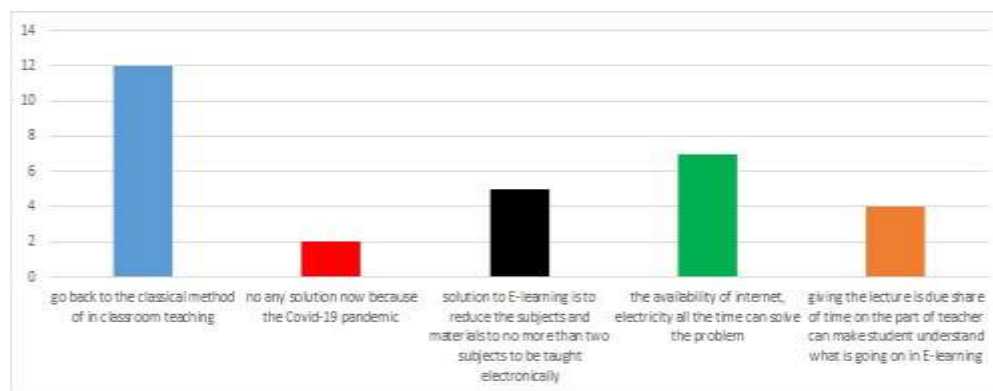

Figure 3. Percentage of Students answers for question (3)

5. Conclusions, Recommendations, and Suggestions for Further Research

5.1 Conclusions

Although E-learning is not a new phenomenon, yet Iraqi teachers and students have no experience in teaching through this style. In this paper, we have tried to identify the difficulties which faced students through E-learning during Covid-19. It has been found that the greatest challenges is related to technology. Nither Iraqi teachers of universities nor their students have experience in using digital learning. Due to the geographical location of Al-Hamdaniya University in the suburb of Mosul city presents internet issues that are the most problamtic in e-learning, specially for those living in camps. In such areas internet connection and electricity are not stable and coast much. In addition, lack of digital computer is another challenge hindering e-learning. Many students in the countryside lack computer litreracy and fail to solve emergency cases which normally occur during exams and these happen more than one time when we carry out final exams for the students. Another conclusion is related to time management during grammar lessons. Teachers spent two much class time on organizing and explaining grammatical roles without practice. Students were not given enough opportunities to take part in classroom activities. Accordingly, some students did not attend classes because they were encougae in how they solve duties at the time of giving e-classes. What makes the situation more worse is that some students were used to interrupt teachers by talking, eating and drinking during the classes. The analysis also reveals challenges related to pedagogy in the sense that in both face to face teaching and e- learning, the method used is teacher- centered. The method lacks using visual aids which makes lessons more enjoyable and interesting. This makes lessons boring and students did not concentrate on what is going on during grammar presentation. Accordingly, most students regard E-learning useless because it lacks the basic components which make it successful. Hence, they suggest to abolish this type of learning in particular with regard to the teaching of grammar since such a subject requires much practice, guidance and assessment on the part of teachers i.e, (writing the material on the board, giving students some notes, doing some exercises inside the class and asking students questions at the end of the lecture and assigning homework). Thereby, the hypothesis of this paper is confirmed.

5.2 Recommendations

It is the responsibility of goverments and representatives of educational institutions to provide internet connection in serves for both teacgers and students in particular for those living in the villages and camps which are far from the city center. It is also necessary to give intensive training courses to the staff members and students in order to be able to mater e-learning. In addition, representatives of educational institutions should do their best in order to make available learning references(e-text books, e-dictionarires and digital resources relating to teaching grammar). Furthermore, teachers should design open book exams in such away which would minimize direct copying from the book. Teachers should focus on what students really need in learning grammar i.e., their learning styles. This implies that teachers should adopts learner-centered approach rather than the current one (i.e., teacher- centered approach. Teachers should also use a verities or strategies in teaching grammar like deductive, inductive in presenting grammatical poits in contastive pairs. In addition, representative of educational institutions should develop computer literacy so that teachers and students should be able to use it effectively. Moreover, there is intensive training courses to the staff members and students also developes their digital skills.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

One area for further research is to investigate problems which face teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in Iraqi universities. Another area is to examine the challenges facing students in learning English for specific purposes. A more strighting area is to investigate EFL teachers' openion on Online English Language Assessment.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Appendix (1) A Questionnaire

Dear students, in order to assess the effectiveness of teaching grammar electronically, please answer the following questions :

1 – What is your point of view of electronic learning during Covid-19?

2 – What are the difficulties which faced you in teaching grammar during Covid-19?

3- What are the solutions which you suggest for making E-learning more effective?