

E-learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Voices of King Khalid University EFL Students

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Abstract

This study reveals the perceptions of Saudi EFL students towards e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has particularly focused on EFL students at King Khalid University as typical across the country. It is found that Saudi EFL students have high perceptions (positive opinions) of e-learning during the pandemic by using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The students consider e-learning as a valuable tool for student interaction and motivation that allows a wide range of language learning sources, and it helps students to overcome their shyness and challenges they have experienced. They could learn in a relaxed, stress-free environment. However, major challenges to e-learning have been reported by Saudi EFL students, such as the large number of students on the platforms connected, connectivity problems, insufficient time allocated for online quizzes and exams, and a lack of technical skills. Based on these findings, the study recommends training of EFL students through e-learning platforms, providing them with the necessary devices and Internet connections, and engagingly designing online materials. These insights can be useful for teachers and academic institutions to design learning where the good aspects of e-learning can be retained and the challenges can be overcome.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, E-learning, online learning, EFL, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

The impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) has disrupted the educational field widely by conducting class in the mode of off-campus. (Tawalbeh, 2018) and (Alsuhaihani, 2021) highlighted the mode of handling classes through online platforms and the existence of e-learning platforms such as Microsoft Teams, ZOOM, and Blackboard, which were used in various institutions to facilitate classroom learning.

Several studies reported and identified that e-learning is gaining popularity as a teaching mode in academic institutions worldwide, and students find it useful and engaging. (Hjeltne and Hansson, 2004) highlighted the advantages of e-learning over traditional learning, including lower costs, easier learning, multiple options, and streamlined management. Furthermore, the convenience of review and accessibility of multiple practice opportunities make it an effective learning tool (Long, 2004). Several positive attributes, such as user-friendliness, adaptability, and increased power to influence the natural world, have made it more popular (Ahmad, 2020). However, online education has certain drawbacks in lack of interpersonal connections, an inability to read body language, and technical difficulties (Soliman, 2014; Abbasi et al., 2020).

There was an unexpected and sudden change when the COVID-19 hit social life. Like many other countries, Saudi Arabia indicated in March 2020 that it would switch to an online educational system (Almekhlafy, 2020). As a result of the rapid change, several academic institutions have begun to adopt alternative uses of traditional methods, video conferencing, and online instruction.

(Abu-Ayfah, 2020) argued that e-learning encouraged students to access a wide range of study materials and become more communicative, cooperative, and interactive. Especially, the students of EFL could take their education by evaluating the validity of information presented to them by using various sources. Layali and (Al-Shlowiy, 2020) further highlighted that students of learning EFL are also known for their initiative to seek solutions for their language-learning goals; EFL students are trained to make use of the available technological resources.

When the schools were forced to switch over for online platforms to continue teaching their children, many Saudi researchers have voiced their dissatisfaction on the non standards of the e-learning programmes as the government did not invest for the medium as a top priority (Alkinani, 2021).

Previously, the research has aimed to explore the application and usefulness of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of educational contexts across the globe. Many researchers have yet to look at perceptions as opposed to the quantitative benefits or problems with e-learning among students. (Lee, 2016), one among the researchers, has explored how the perceptions of e-learning differ from teachers to the students. Many researchers have failed to focus on students' perceptions, but this study is very sure about focusing on quantitative problems. This thesis attempts to rectify this.

The purpose of this study is to make an investigation about the perspectives of EFL students towards their online education during the recent COVID-19 outbreak and the strategies to improve quality of e-learning

Statement of the Problem

Before the outbreak, there was widespread use of online courses in Saudi Arabian universities. Amongst EFL students and educators, the topic was studied from a wide range of vantage points (Al Hassan & Shukri, 2017; Fageeh, 2011; Fageeh, 2015; Hakim, 2020; Kashghari & Asseel, 2014; Mohsen & Shafeeq, 2011; Tawalbeh, 2018). For instance, (Mohsen and Shafeeq, 2011) reported that EFL teachers found that the Blackboard tool inspired their students and helped to introduce new approaches to language learning in the classroom. On the contrary, (Tawalbeh, 2018) found that EFL students were dissatisfied with online materials due to their design and organization. (Al Hassan and Shukri, 2017) conducted a study to determine whether EFL students were satisfied with e-learning. They found that due to e-learning's great quantity of resources, easily accessible content, options for interaction and communication in the target language, and user-friendliness, students were happy with it.

Despite widespread support, Saudi Arabia's e-learning culture faces several obstacles, including problems with internet connections, personal gadgets, students' privacy, screens, and technical difficulties (Almekhlafy, 2020; Al Shlowiy et al., 2021). Elder educators are often skeptical of the benefits of online learning, and some use it only to check off the fundamental technological boxes of accepting student work, distributing materials, communicating with parents, and distributing grades (Al Shlowiy & Layali, 2020). As a result, the benefits of online education for Saudi students were highly debated.

Learners may have a pessimistic outlook and resist change if they are aware of the existing state of e-learning (Sharma, 2019). Students' attitudes toward online learning were widely varied based on the Learning Management System (LMS) used by the teachers (Bousbahi & Alrazgan, 2015). Although they like the ease of the online learning system, they prefer face-to-face settings when they fail to share ideas, develop their abilities, or acquire new information (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021). Therefore, such administrative uses of online learning fail to achieve the pedagogical goals of learning and instead foster a negative attitude towards it amongst students. Thus, according to (Al Shlowiy, 2021), during the COVID-19-based e-learning process, Saudi EFL students have encountered several challenges that can be classified into four categories: (a) students' emotions towards e-learning, (b) the learning environment not being supportive of learning, (c) students' characteristics that required more involvement, and (d) other deficits and needs which may be student specific.

The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia (MoE) has been working tirelessly to adapt the educational system in distance learning since the suspension of school. Saudi Arabia has a history of offering distance education programs (Oraif & Elyas, 2021). For instance, King Khalid University has introduced an extensive online education system across all of the academic divisions. The excellence in the e-learning program was awarded and established by the College of Science and Arts at Al-Mjardah to improve educational experiences of students and faculty members. The excellence in the e-learning program was highly successful in achieving its goals of providing quality instruction, preventing grade inflation, and preparing both students and teachers to use digital resources effectively for quality education. However, students experienced challenges at King Khalid University, and their perceptions created a major step in future directions towards e-learning at the university.

This study has attempted to examine the perception of Saudi EFL students towards e-learning and the challenges they experienced to overcome during the COVID-19 pandemic at King Khalid University.

Research Questions

This research poses the following questions:

1. What were the perceptions of Saudi EFL students towards e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at King Khalid University?
2. What were the challenges faced in e-learning by Saudi EFL students during the COVID-19 pandemic at King Khalid University?
3. What are the recommendations required for enhancing the e-learning system at King Khalid University?

Research Significance

The increasing level of COVID-19 globally has led to a significant growth in acquiring education online. Students have experienced a new hindrance, which the sudden and unexpected expansion of acquiring education through online is trying to address. The extent to which they adopt a new situation and how quickly they learn may be affected by this abrupt shift (Oraif & Elyas, 2021).

Researchers believe that learner-centred teaching is effective; hence, they are interested in the perspectives of students. Students are active participants in student-centred classrooms, and they collaborate and communicate with each other and instructors. Without understanding the preference drivers for students and eliminating the hurdles of online learning, it becomes difficult to improve their experience of online learning. According to Saudi Arabia's "Saudi Vision 2030," acquiring education online may play a significant role in the growth of the educational system in the country (Al Shlowiy, 2021); therefore, it is expected that students can achieve results comparable to those in traditional classroom settings by following these strategies.

The results of this study shall provide clear vision of Saudi Arabian universities valuable information about how students see online education, its advantages, disadvantages, and difficulties. To improve the advantages of e-learning and get beyond the obstacles of making it a future-orientated approach for all college students and instructors, new policies, procedures, and regulations might be developed.

2. Literature Review

The WHO (World Health Organisation) identified COVID-19 in December 2019 and declared a worldwide pandemic in March 2020. Some nations followed herd immunity, while others proclaimed war-foot policies like lockdowns and maintained social distance to stop its spread (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). All around the world, over 1.5 billion students were impacted by the preventive measures taken, which included flexible scheduling and doing work from home and indefinite closing of workplaces and schools (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Institutions had to adhere to distance learning programs.

Around six million kids were enrolled in distance learning programs when many nations implemented lockdowns in March 2020 (The World Bank, 2022). 98% of students involved in distance learning. Digital education supported academic activities, according to two-thirds of teachers (The World Bank, 2022). The digital tools like Blackboard supported students at many educational institutions in Saudi.

At universities, digital tools like Blackboard helped students effectively. A study by (Alshaikh et al., 2021) that collected 150 responses from the students studying in Saudi Arabian universities found that 57% agreed and strongly agreed that the technical tools like Blackboard fulfilled their needs during distance learning, while 52% used other technical tools. However, challenges existed, especially for young students, who experienced digital systems and their related issues (The World Bank, 2022).

E-Learning

E-learning is a method of delivering instruction through electronic channels using digital materials and resources either asynchronously or synchronously (Hjeltnes & Hansson, 2004). It helps students to learn at a convenient time and platform via online or offline portals (Anas, 2020). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies were not fully accomplished for language teaching (Moorhouse, Wong, & Li, 2023). However, some institutions had started to make use of e-learning technology as a tool in the classroom, providing flexibility and fostering collaboration among the students (Hakami, 2020; Abbasi et al., 2020; Alkinani, 2021).

E-Learning in the COVID-19 Pandemic

The abrupt shift to e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic set to experience typical challenges to teachers and curriculum planners, who were implored to build special curriculum for e-learning (Lee, 2022). Not all digital tools are easy for students to handle; some digital tools, like web 2.0, are difficult for them. It happened just because of insufficient skills about digital learning platforms and cultural backgrounds (Alkinani, 2021; Khafaga, 2021). The efficient use of modern technologies in classrooms requires students to acquire proper training and time to familiarise themselves with such tools (Jebreen, 2017; Khalil & Alharbi, 2022).

Despite the technologies supported, teachers would be concerned about student absences, network issues, technical difficulties, and a lack of institutional support and training (Soliman, 2014). Despite the availability of online learning tools, some educators found it difficult to manage the technical aspects (Haque, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the achievements of the students were impeded by admitting coursework management, communication barriers, and technical problems in the e-learning system (Rahman & Sandaran, 2020).

E-learning programs have been extensively accepted because of their feasibility and user-friendliness. Meanwhile, it also assists students to lead isolation and diminish the meaning of face-to-face interaction (Ahmad, 2020; Abbasi et al., 2020). During the pandemic, students were facilitated with the e-learning process for its cost-effectiveness and adaptability (Pratiwi & Kurniati, 2022). Google Classroom was found to be more effective for teaching English to non-native speakers when compared to other online classroom tools (Khalil & Alharbi, 2022). Online writing tools also enhanced the vocabulary, error correction, and spelling skills of the students, which boosted their confidence (Haque, 2022).

Online Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Saudi Arabia

During the pandemic, several Saudi researchers have explored the impact of using e-learning methods, focusing on mixed perceptions. (Almekhlafy, 2020) noted that freshmen struggled with technical issues and connectivity problems, which led them to have a negative perception of e-learning, while (Alkabaa, 2022) emphasised some suggestions like discussion boards, more servers, and conducting workshops for better engagement, especially for female students who are already lacking in technical skills. Conversely, (Alshaikh et al., 2021) reported that 57% of students found that Blackboard tools are sufficient for distance learning needs, and (Alsuhaibani, 2021) highlighted its key benefits as accessibility, document sharing, and independence in coursework submission.

While the adaptability and collaboration opportunities of e-learning gained popularity (Khafaga, 2021), challenges like connectivity issues, delayed feedback, and feelings of isolation still persisted (Al-Kinani, 2021). Hindrance often stemmed from unfamiliarity with platforms and lack of infrastructure (Al-Azawei et al., 2016). Despite their potential for engagement and interactivity, limited use of e-learning remains the cause of barriers (Tawalbeh, 2018).

Cultural resistance and sudden transitions brought further obstacles, especially to Saudi EFL students (Al Shlowiy, 2021). Effective e-learning requires technical and motivational skill and social challenges to understand and maximise its benefits for the enrichment of students and teachers.

The literature reviewed in the study gives mixed perceptions for online learning widely as well as for Saudi EFL students in particular. While e-learning has been available for some time now, the COVID-19 pandemic insisted on adopting e-learning over traditional learning.

Once the pandemic situation is over, if academic institutions returned to traditional learning or if there is a scope for online learning in a hybrid form, which is a research gap that this research aims to fill. Another issue with existing literature on the topic is that they have relied on only one method (questionnaire) to understand the issue, which has its drawbacks (discussed in the next chapter).

3. Methodology

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, previous studies have relied on questionnaire-based research, which, while allowing for gaining quantifiable insights in a structured manner, suffer from drawbacks related to the designing of the questionnaire and respondents' understanding of measures used in the questionnaire (Pozzo et al., 2019).

Therefore, this study adopts a mixed approach: As per the quantitative approach, the questionnaire is designed, and insights are drawn using descriptive analysis. The goal of a descriptive approach is to provide thorough information on a subject by describing relevant occurrences and dissecting them into their constituent parts (Crowder et al., 2017). The goal of analytical research is to go beyond descriptive research to identify the underlying causes of events (Robson, 1993). Therefore, this study relies on a qualitative research approach as well. As part of this approach, interviews were conducted and were analysed using thematic analysis as suggested by (Dawadi, 2020). The use of two methods—descriptive and thematic analysis—help to achieve triangulation and enhance the quality of the results (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023). Assuming that a chain of causation has been established, the next step is to identify modifiable factors (variables) that may affect the outcome. Considering the recent pandemic, this study describes and analyses how Saudi EFL students perceive e-learning. To answer these problems, a research plan has been developed. These questions originated from the researcher's readings and fieldwork.

Theoretical Approach

The theoretical framework of this study is inductive research, which gathers and examines the data to generate ideas, concepts, or hypotheses based on patterns found. It engages a “bottom-up” methodology, starting with particular findings and working their way up to more general conclusions (Hodkinson, 2008). Exploratory studies frequently engage in inductive research, especially when there is a deficiency of previous studies on the subject. This study uses it to analyse the perspectives of Saudi students about online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly revealing problems that need more research.

Three essential steps in the inductive research process are identified by Schwester (2015): theory formulation, pattern detection, and observation. Data collection by surveys, interviews, or direct observations is known as observation. Analysing the gathered data to find trends, themes, and connections is known as pattern recognition. Lastly, theory development classifies data according to similarities and differences to produce frameworks. Over time, better understanding and continuous improvement are made possible by this cyclical process.

Inductive research creates new hypotheses from evidence, as opposed to deductive research, which tests preexisting theories (Tajvidi & Karami, 2015). According to Hodkinson (2008), it starts with empirical facts and then applies analysis to produce more comprehensive theoretical conclusions. In order to guide future research, this study investigates the e-learning experiences of Saudi university students during the COVID-19 epidemic.

The result was analysed using grounded theory, a popular qualitative research methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded theory, which was created by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, methodically produces ideas and hypotheses by gathering and analysing data. It is especially helpful when researching various populations, like Saudi university students, who have different motivations and perspectives.

The three primary goals of grounded theory, as defined by (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), were to legitimise qualitative research, bridge the gap between social scientific theory and empirical data, and offer a logical framework for grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded theory emphasises the development of theories through inductive analysis and is both a research methodology and an outcome (Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019).

Grounded theory has been defined differently by a number of academics. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) emphasise that it emerged from methodically collected facts, while (Glaser and Holton, 2004) characterise it as a systematic set of conceptual hypotheses. (Charmaz, 2006) highlights its function in developing conceptual frameworks, while (Birks and Mills, 2015) contend that researchers develop grounded theory according to their viewpoints. Grounded theory method was used in this study to generate theory based on inductive research.

Data Collection and Instruments

The primary method of data collection was made it self-reported, closed-ended questionnaire as suggested by (Girko, 2018) as the questionnaire is most appropriate to gather information from a sizable population. Earlier empirical research inspired the development of this research questionnaire. The survey questions were developed using data gathered from studies about the experience and perspectives of EFL students on e-learning during the pandemic.

The survey was conducted in English language. The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part, which consisted of 15 questions, focuses on understanding the perspectives of EFL students on e-learning during the pandemic. The second part consisted with 13 questions, focuses on understanding the difficulties and obstacles faced by students. The response of the students was collected using a five-point Likert scale where the respondents could indicate their response on a scale of 1–5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the

highest agreement with the given question statement.

Before sending the questionnaire to respondents, the face validity of the questionnaire was ensured by the accuracy of assessing the variables of interest. The pilot study was conducted with 5 EFL degree pursuing students, they were given access to the questionnaire for their feedback and to understand if the questionnaire covered all necessary aspects. The survey was revised based on the feedback of reviewers included more succinct questions that is the core aim of the research.

The reliability of a study was measured by the stability of the results (Girko, 2018). The reliability of each item was calculated using Cronbach's alpha and the results are presented in the table.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

Questionnaire Sections	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Perception of Uses of E-learning during COVID-19 Pandemic	15	0.811
Challenges of E-learning during COVID-19 Pandemic	13	0.892

As shown in the above table, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the two parts of the questionnaire reflect high reliability.

The next instrument used in this study is an online interview for which the participants of the pilot study were in discussion. It was decided to use the three research questions for the interview. The interview questions are designed to provide detailed insights on the topic and compare them with the insights from the questionnaire.

Sampling

According to (Knight Frank, 2021), there are over 1.6 million students in Saudi Arabian universities. Since this study focuses on Saudi EFL students, being able to approach all relevant students across the country would have been difficult. Therefore, the study involved all Saudi EFL students enrolled at King Khalid University throughout the pandemic to constitute the study population.

Based on the information gathered at King Khalid University in 2023, 54,000 students registered across 26 colleges and 120 departments. From this information, it is understood that students of the university are typical when comparing with other universities in Saudi Arabia. However, the sample size was decreased because the goal is to comprehend the viewpoints of EFL students.

As suggested by (Sauders et al., 2019), this sampling approach follows inductive research that uses specific observations and patterns to draw a theory. In this research, responses by respondents from one university were used to identify observations and patterns and were used to create a theoretical framework that can be applied across Saudi Arabia. For these reasons, snowball sampling inspired by an inductive research approach was chosen to complete the research.

The snowball sampling method was used in this study to reach the respondents, where initial contact was established with a few respondents (who were part of the pilot study), and these respondents were requested to share it with more relevant respondents. As argued by (Dragan and Isaic-Maniu, 2013), this sampling method is convenient when it is difficult to access the sample population. This study required the sample to be made of Saudi students learning English.

The use of the approach allowed us to reach 120 individuals who comprised the study population, all of whom were fourth-year students in the English language department. The questionnaire was sent to the respondents via mail, and respondents were requested to share the responses within a week. The questionnaire was completed by 107 students (89.1% response rate).

Once the responses to these questionnaires were submitted, the respondents were requested to volunteer for a short interview to which 4 students agreed. This interview was conducted online. Unfortunately, only 4 out of 107 students who completed the questionnaire complied with the interview request, which was not a good representation of qualitative data, as it meant that only 3.7% of the sample assisted with this part of the research. This is because a low response rate indicates that the study is more likely to be subject to sampling bias, with some members of the study population more likely to be in the sample than others, leading to inaccurate conclusions (TASO, 2022).

Data Analysis

The method of choosing the right statistical approach requires considering both the data's characteristics and the method's connection to the study's aims (Girko, 2018). Considering the study's research question and theoretical framework, two data analysis methods were employed. For the analysis of the questionnaire, the descriptive analysis method was employed. The responses were analysed using statistics, including mean score (M), percentage, standard deviation (SD), and frequency (F).

The above analysis allows us to summarise the data and understand it; however, a major drawback of the above analysis is that it does not explain why the respondent picked a measure on the scale. Thus, it explains the "what" of responses but not the "why." Therefore, there is a need to understand the responses in a detailed way, so interviews were conducted (Dawadi, 2020).

For the analysis of interviews, thematic analysis is used, where the first step is to get familiar with the data, the second step is coding, where key text is highlighted (refer to the appendix), and the third step is where themes are developed as suggested by (Dawadi, 2020).

These themes were compared with the insights of the descriptive analysis to get detailed insights. Each research method ensured reliability and validity by conducting a pilot study amongst several EFL students before approaching respondents; however, conducting analysis using two different methods and then drawing insights helps in achieving triangulation and enhances the credibility of this

research.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of King Khalid University before commencement. All participants were aware of the research objectives, and their responses were kept confidential and used for research purposes only. No advantages were offered to any volunteer participants in the study.

4. Results and Discussion

Analysis and the findings of the Perspectives of EFL students on E-learning amidst the Pandemic. This study sought to present responses of the participants towards the questionnaire items below. Table 2. Perceptions of Saudi EFL Students towards E-learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

S.No.	Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation	Order
1	Online learning uses a wide range of language learning sources to support learning (blogs, websites, articles, videos, etc.)	4.46	1.83	2
2	Students can easily get explanations from their teachers during online classes.	3.87	1.51	8
3	Online classes promote students' motivation to learn.	4.09	1.55	7
4	During online learning, students and teachers interact and communicate effectively.	4.51	1.89	1
5	During online learning, students have the opportunity to interact with each other.	4.32	1.70	4
6	Online learning promotes students' active engagement in group tasks and discussions.	3.83	1.48	9
7	Learning via the online platform is interesting and engaging.	3.79	1.39	10
8	Online classes enhance students' autonomy and self-learning.	3.75	1.33	11
9	Online learning helps students overcome their shyness.	4.39	1.73	3
10	Online classes create a relaxed and stress-free atmosphere.	4.28	1.67	5
11	Online classes make it easier and more convenient for students to study and practice at home.	4.13	1.61	6
12	Peer/group feedback in online classes is easily accessible.	3.42	1.24	13
13	Feedback in online classes is supported by clear examples/suggestions for improvement.	3.27	1.16	14
14	I am satisfied with the format and content of the learning materials presented on the online platform.	3.21	1.09	15
15	Overall, I am satisfied with the process of online learning via the platform.	3.49	1.27	12
Overall Mean			3.92	

While the above-presented descriptive analysis indicates EFL students' perspective on e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to get detailed insights for which thematic analysis of interviews is done next.

The key themes that emerge from the analysis of the interview are, first, the students have a positive perception of e-learning as it is a convenient and flexible way for students to continue their education during the pandemic (Respondents 1 and 2); however, there were difficulties in staying motivated and engaged (Respondent 2). Second, educational materials in PDF format along with e-learning facilitate the e-learning process and continue the learning process with ease and comfort (Respondent 2). Third, a key reason behind the positive perspective of the students is the successful execution by the university (Respondent 3). Fourth, e-learning enhances the participation of female students, as online platforms allow female students to interact with the faculty and learn more effectively in comparison to physical classes.

These findings are consistent with those of (Haque, 2022), who argued that the integration of technological resources into English classrooms improves the overall linguistic abilities of the students. According to (Soliman, 2014), e-learning is an important and useful platform for EFL educators and students alike. Another study by (Jebreen, 2017) supported this idea, indicating that it helps to examine the ability of the students and improve and rephrase the passages with the help of engagement in e-learning.

The results of this study show that despite facing some difficulties when learning online, Saudi EFL students had good attitudes toward e-learning throughout the pandemic. By including audio, video, animation, and interactive features, e-learning provides a stimulating and inspiring environment for students, fostering productive interactions between educators and pupils and encouraging the latter to take an active role in their education. These results are in line with those of (Abbasi et al., 2020) and (Al-Kinani, 2021), who found that e-learning is an interactive facility that transfers learning from a teacher-centred mode to a learner-centred mode, ensuring that students engage in classwork, group projects, and other forms of active learning.

EFL students in Saudi Arabia have a favourable impression of e-learning because it facilitates a wider variety of teaching and grading strategies than conventional classrooms. Consistent with the findings of (Almekhlafy, 2020) and (Al-Nofaie, 2020), who reported that EFL students prefer e-learning because it accommodates a variety of learning styles and provides instantaneous feedback on student progress, it was found that students prefer e-learning to traditional classroom settings. (Alshehri and Cumming, 2020) agreed with this conclusion, noting that e-learning reduced uneasiness and unwillingness of students to speak up in class, creating an encouraging and tension-free atmosphere in which they felt comfortable asking and providing answers to questions.

According to (Al-Suhaibani, 2021), traditional methods of EFL instruction have resulted in teacher dominance in the classroom; however, technological advancements have made it possible to create a more interactive learning environment. Learners’ needs have shifted because they engaged with cutting-edge technologies (Layali & Al Shlowiy, 2020). However, altering the pedagogical paradigms in language classrooms presents a challenge for teachers. According to (Anas, 2020), the focus of EFL classes has shifted from the instructors to the students.

The findings of this study corroborate those of (Hakim, 2020), who found that students’ enthusiasm and participation in class improved thanks to e-learning and advocated for the use of social media applications for educational purposes.

Saudi EFL students also demonstrated that they valued the knowledge and experience gained through e-learning and were content with the university’s instructions and support for e-learning. Moreover, as with EFL students, their impressions of e-learning are affected by the relaxed atmosphere of the virtual classroom and increased opportunities for classroom participation (Sharma, 2019; Rahim & Sandaran, 2020). Saudi EFL students now have the opportunity to use e-learning, but they need to be taught how to use the necessary technology and effectively submit and retrieve data from the system (Rahim & Sandaran, 2020). There should be no connectivity issues and sufficient training on using online platforms for EFL teachers; therefore, they must have access to reliable connections, infrastructure, and facilities (Khafaga, 2021).

Furthermore, the incorporation of e-learning into the language-learning process suggests that the language curriculum and activities should be adapted to suit the online mode of learning and that students and teachers should find more opportunities to interact with one another and enjoy the learning process (Al-Nofaie, 2020).

Thus, the first research question of perceptions of Saudi EFL students towards e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at King Khalid University has been answered.

Analysis of Difficulties and Obstacles Faced by Students in e-Learning amidst the Pandemic

Table 3. Challenges of E-learning from the Perspective of Saudi EFL Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

S	Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation	Order
1	Many students in online classes negatively affects learning outcomes.	4.12	1.13	1
2	Students make more effort than usual during online activities via the platform.	3.81	0.95	7
3	Miscommunication between instructors and students often happens in online classes.	4.04	1.08	2
4	Some language lessons cannot be taught online.	3.74	0.91	8
5	Poor network connection causes problems with student interaction.	4.01	1.06	3
6	The time allocated for online quizzes and exams is insufficient.	3.93	1.02	4
7	I get confused and lost during online classes.	3.69	0.82	10
8	I do not have the appropriate technical skills for online learning.	3.88	1.01	5
9	I do not have a recent computer device or a speedy internet connection.	3.86	0.97	6
10	During the online class, I cannot avoid using social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.).	3.07	0.77	13
11	Online learning is too boring to continue my learning.	3.10	0.79	12
12	I feel isolated during online courses	3.24	0.81	11
13	I feel exhausted due to sitting in front of computers for a long time.	3.71	0.87	9
Overall Mean		3.70		

Table 3 shows that EFL students experienced several challenges (M=3.70). This indicates that e-learning was associated with major challenges during the pandemic, as reported by the EFL students.

As shown in table 3, the major challenges experienced by Saudi EFL learners in e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic were the large number of students in the class (M=4.12), miscommunication that often occurs in the class between instructors and students (M=4.04), poor network connection problems (M=4.01), insufficient time allocated for online quizzes and exams (M=3.93), lack of technical skills (M=3.88), and recent computer devices and internet connections from the students (M=3.86).

Other challenges in e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have also been reported. For example, students had to put in more effort than usual (M=3.81), some language lessons couldn’t be taught through online mode (M=3.74), students got exhausted because they sat in front of computers for a long time (M=3.71), and students got out and confused during online classes (M=3.69). Other challenges included feeling isolated during online classes (M=3.24), e-learning made them boring (M=3.10), and students were unable to avoid using social media during online classes (M=3.07).

While the above-presented descriptive analysis indicates that the perspectives of EFL students on difficulties and obstacles faced by students in e-learning during the pandemic, there is a need to get detailed insights for which thematic analysis of interviews is done next.

Several insights can be drawn from the interview, including the fact that challenges faced by students may differ from one another; however, common challenges include connectivity issues in remote areas, problems uploading assignments, solving cases (respondent 2), limited opportunities for collaboration and interaction with other students, inadequate training and support for users, difficulty to stay motivated, students lacking the financial ability to afford good electronic equipment (respondent 1, respondent 3, and respondent 4), and decreased community learning (respondent 3). However, according to respondent 4, the faculties at the university facilitated the transition to online

learning by conducting workshops, and as a result, students did not face any major challenge.

Students voiced their concerns about the potential roadblocks to their success in distance education. This finding is consistent with other studies (e.g., Khalil & Alharbi, 2022), which found that online students' development and personality were severely impacted by a lack of interaction owing to the large number of students. The research findings of (Rahman and Sandaran, 2020) verified the concerns of students about the network connections that inhibit their ability to partake and communicate with one another. The students were also concerned about their insufficient time to complete all the work required for their online courses, including homework, quizzes, and exams. The issues of slow connectivity and lack of time have been confirmed in previous studies (Anas, 2020). Additionally, just over half of the students reported that they put extra effort into completing online exercises. It is logical for students to think this way in language programs, as the schedule is always full (Long, 2004).

The findings also shed light on several additional challenges experienced by students, including a lack of social connections to instructors and peers and a deficiency in computer literacy. According to the results, which are consistent with those of prior studies conducted during COVID-19 on topics related to online education, students were not satisfied with distance learning and faced various challenges (Oraif & Elyas, 2021; Hakim, 2020; Anas, 2020).

These findings support (Khafaga, 2021) conclusion that the lack of technological proficiency of students and teachers is one of the main obstacles to online education. This is difficult because top professors typically possess more sophisticated IT knowledge and competencies, allowing them to implement a more cutting-edge technology infrastructure in their classrooms. Students, however, often lack rudimentary familiarity with IT architectural frameworks.

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Saudi educational institutions switched to e-learning because they already offered online courses. At first, the majority of students were first-time users of the internet as a learning tool. They lacked the background and self-assurance necessary to successfully learn in a novel online environment. Eventually, students were able to overcome most of the technological challenges that arise when using online learning systems. However, there are still issues with English that make e-learning difficult (Alshehri & Cumming, 2020).

The time has come for EFL students to transition to online education (Abbasi et al., 2020). Teachers of EFL are primarily responsible for encouraging student participation in online programs (Hakim, 2020). To increase the likelihood of student participation in online discussions and capture students' attention (Rahim & Sandaran, 2020), instructors should carefully plan the layout of their virtual classrooms to incorporate aesthetically pleasing technologies and amenities (Layali & Al Shlowiy, 2020).

Thus, the second research question about challenges in e-learning from the perspective of Saudi EFL students during the COVID-19 pandemic at King Khalid University has been answered.

The third research question regarding the recommendations for enhancing the adoption of e-learning at King Khalid University is answered after summarising this study in the next chapter.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Owing to the mobility afforded by digital learning resources, online education allows students the freedom and flexibility to study as per their schedules. As a result, e-learning is used more frequently in educational contexts to meet the requirements of learners and improve language teaching and learning. As a result, it is no longer optional to use technology in EFL classrooms. The ability to learn at one's own pace, expand one's understanding of the language in various domains, and foster greater cooperation and communication with teachers and peers are all benefits of online education for students of EFL.

E-learning accessibility in EFL classrooms stems from its nature as a cross-platform, open-source, and free course management system. Online platforms are amongst the most useful Internet resources for promoting EFL studies. It offers interactive online activities and multimedia language courses that mimic real-world scenarios. Furthermore, it guarantees instantaneous, seamless, and engaging online collaboration for writing projects, activities, and assignments. As a result, the online platform is found to be useful to enhance and enrich the learning atmosphere by simplifying realistic conversation between students and teachers, as well as among students themselves, but it is crucial to enhance the writing skill of EFL learners.

The effectiveness of online language learning is contingent upon authentic interaction between teachers and their students as well as the provision of optimal learning environments. Some students may have trouble with online language sessions, but the many benefits they gain from not having to leave their homes far exceed the few drawbacks they encounter because of the absence of face-to-face interaction with a teacher. However, additional studies are needed to propose solutions to the issues that Saudi EFL students face in online classes, such as a lack of Internet connection, insufficient student-student and student-instructor contact, and a lack of technology and computer competency.

The findings of the current study indicate that Saudi EFL students viewed online learning tools favourably. Positive experiences and a sense of ease of using online learning tools have also been reported. Students reported that e-learning simplified their coursework and improved their communication with the help of their instructors and peers. However, students faced obstacles, such as a lack of confidence in their technological abilities, technical difficulties, high technology costs, a dearth of interpersonal connections, and the possibility of feeling isolated during online instruction. Therefore, EFL teachers should continue to use and maintain the most popular and desirable online learning programs during distance learning to ensure that all students continue to feel motivated and enjoy their experiences. More studies should be conducted to learn the perspectives of teachers about using technology to teach English to their students during the pandemic.

It is advised that EFL programs incorporate e-learning as an integral component of the curriculum rather than an afterthought. EFL teachers may benefit from instruction in the creation of lessons, exercises, and quizzes specifically for online delivery. To successfully present their materials, create assignments, engage with their teachers and classmates, and take examinations, EFL students must have an in-depth understanding of online platforms and all their components and services. However, e-learning can only be successful if institutions provide the requisite resources, such as language labs, virtual classrooms, and high-speed Internet access.

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Authors' contributions

The author was responsible for the study design, data collection, drafting the manuscript, and its revision.

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