

Challenges of E-Learning Faced by ESL Learners during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study



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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way of life, learning, and work. It shook the entire world and caused the largest disruption to all levels of education in history. As the world went into lockdowns, to reduce the proliferation of the pandemic, people worldwide were confined to their homes; virtual and digital platforms for learning and teaching remained the cornerstone of continuing education. Despite the rapid development of learning technologies, ESL students still face many challenges in learning a language while shifting to e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the current study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by the ESL students of the Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), India. The study followed a qualitative method, where a questionnaire was designed via Google Forms. According to the study's findings, students were dissatisfied with e-learning because they faced numerous challenges such as technological accessibility, social interaction, e-assessment, and academic performance.

چالش‌های یادگیری مجازی در خلال همه‌گیری کووید-۱۹: مطالعه موردی

همه‌گیری کووید-۱۹ شیوه زندگی، یادگیری و کار را تغییر داده است. کل جهان را تکان داد و بزرگترین اختلال را در تمام سطوح آموزشی در تاریخ ایجاد کرد. از آنجایی که جهان وارد قرنطینه شد، برای کاهش گسترش همه‌گیری، مردم در سراسر جهان در خانه‌های خود محبوس شدند. بسترهای مجازی و دیجیتالی برای یادگیری و آموزش سنگ بنای آموزش مداوم باقی ماندند. علیرغم توسعه سریع فناوری‌های یادگیری، دانش‌آموزان ESL همچنان با چالش‌های زیادی در یادگیری زبان مواجه هستند و در طول همه‌گیری COVID-19 به آموزش الکترونیکی روی می‌آورند. بنابراین، مطالعه حاضر با هدف بررسی چالش‌های پیش روی دانشجویان ESL گروه زبان انگلیسی، دانشگاه مسلمانان (AMU) Aligarh، هند انجام شد. این مطالعه از یک روش کیفی پیروی کرد که در آن پرسشنامه از طریق Google Forms طراحی شد. بر اساس یافته‌های این مطالعه، دانش‌آموزان از یادگیری الکترونیکی ناراضی بودند، زیرا با چالش‌های متعددی مانند دسترسی فناوری، تعامل اجتماعی، ارزیابی الکترونیکی و عملکرد تحصیلی مواجه بودند.

واژگان کلیدی: همه‌گیری، چالش‌های یادگیری مجازی، زبان آموزان

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Introduction

The unexpected outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a dramatic loss of human life and caused profound crises affecting all domains of life including education at all stages. As of May 10, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected 215 countries across the globe, and many of these faced lockdowns (2020). As a result, educational institutions around the world have either temporarily suspended or closed their operations to maintain social distancing in order to stop the spread of COVID-19 and avoid losses. In addition, they postponed all events to prevent gatherings where the pandemic might spread. Similarly, AMU was among the first few institutions that suspended all its activities. The prolonged lockdown imposed by COVID-19 has made studying and working from home the new norm. Due to the suspension of face-to-face teaching, a shift to online teaching was the only alternative method to reduce the spread of the pandemic and decrease the contact between teachers with students as well as among students themselves so that teaching can continue. According to Hodges et al. (2020), a temporal shift to an alternative teaching way due to crisis conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be compared with a well-designed and planned online teaching process and even less with face-to-face learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about new ways to conduct different events such as teaching business, public services and other meetings. “With the advent of COVID-19, e-learning seems to be one of the safest and easiest ways to impart education for acquiring new skills, exploring new career options, or for that matter new hobby development” (2020). The unexpected shift from face-to-face classes to online has caused many challenges for both teachers and learners. In turn, a great burden has been placed on teachers who were mostly unprepared and accustomed to face-to-face classes. They found it difficult to adopt new ways of teaching and had to possess a variety of skills with digital platforms. Gradually, they coped and familiarized themselves with it; therefore, they didn’t hesitate to accept any change. “Teachers play a vital role in creating an environment that supports students’ learning” (Johnson, 2017, p. 46).

Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) is a challenging job, particularly for students who require/need continual guidance and observation of teachers in the classroom. These challenges are in teaching language skills, including writing, speaking, listening, and reading during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of social interaction between the teachers and learners during teaching English language skills such as speaking and reading may make students feel too shy to practice. Moreover, Lukas and Yunus (2021) comment that a lack of confidence in speaking

during the virtual class made students more uncomfortable when compared to a face-to-face meeting in the classroom. Unlike online learning, traditional teaching allows teachers to interact and discuss students' questions and inquiries. Thus, students vary in terms of learning styles, interests, and competence levels, particularly when learning English as a second language, which is influenced by many linguistic, cultural, and individual factors.

Literature Review

Some studies have discussed the challenges associated with the shifting from traditional learning to e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lukas and Yunus (2021) conducted a study examining the challenges experienced by ESL teachers in applying online learning during COVID-19. It involved 20 primary ESL teachers in Malaysia. The study concluded that e-learning was effective with some limitations such as the lack of readiness of teachers to adapt to e-learning, technological barriers concerning internet connectivity, and students' evaluation and participation.

Ying et al (2021) investigated the challenges ESL learners experienced in learning English skills using virtual tools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study presented a literature review on ESL learners' challenges in learning speaking skills. According to the study's results, lack of self-confidence, motivation, hesitation, anxiety and limited vocabulary acquisition were some of the challenges faced by ESL learners. The study recommended that integrating virtual tools, including video conferencing, is useful in overcoming learners' obstacles to speaking skills during the pandemic.

Shahzad et al (2020) examined the impact of virtual and digital teaching on the attitude of ESL learners during the COVID-19 pandemic at the postgraduate level in Pakistan. The study was carried out by creating a questionnaire to assess ESL students' attitudes toward online teaching. The study included 100 postgraduate students of the English Department of Khawaja Freed University of Engineering and Technology, Punjab, Pakistan. Analyzing one hundred students' responses, the study found some drawbacks of online learning, such as lack of facilities, internet connectivity and technology, and deficiency of resource material. The study's results revealed that online teaching brings a positive increase in the attitudes of students. Students were excited, motivated, and welcomed online teaching during COVID-19.

Krishnan et al. (2020) identified learners' perception of learning English via free online resources and traditional learning during COVID-19. The study included 25 international pre-elementary intensive English students. The study dealt with challenges that both learners and

teachers faced, such as familiarity with the use of e-learning platforms to gain extra value, teachers being available when needed, as well as the ability to provide quick feedback to students. As for the institutions, they might find some challenges in the cost of implementing online learning facilities. The study results revealed that students weren't very keen to use online resources such as ESL websites for additional learning as they were forced to do so.

E-Learning in ESL Classroom

E-learning describes using digital platforms for teaching and learning instead of face-to-face learning. Rodrigues et al. defined e-learning as a creative digital system developed through the use of digital technologies and a variety of learning materials and resources to provide students with a learner-centered, conducive, and interactive environment. Likewise, Zarei and Mohammadi (2021), defined e-learning as a flexible, interactive, self-paced, and elaborate pedagogical method that introduces educational approaches using a wide variety of platforms. "The e-learning system is an important source of information, because of its ubiquity (i.e., availability anywhere and anytime), low cost, ease of use, and interactive character" (Almiah et al., 2020, p. 5262).

In this mode of teaching, teachers and learners can meet virtually using laptops and smartphones through different conferencing applications such as Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Webex meetings, Microsoft Teams, Telegram, or Line. In terms of English language teaching and learning, the extensive use of online learning and modern technology has a tremendous influence on learners and teachers alike. The rapid technological progress in recent decades has helped in the provision of opportunities for language learning. For instance, the use of audio, graphics, and animation effects increased the effectiveness and appeal of e-learning (Wijaya & Helmi, 2018). Thus, teachers and students have to take into account that e-learning will be the future learning norm.

Advantages of E-Learning

The only advantage of COVID-19 is that it has compelled the majority of educational institutions worldwide to adopt the idea of online learning. Hernandez and Flórez (2020) stated that "COVID-19 opened the door to online teaching during the emergency and as a benchmark to the future learning spaces" (p.162). The next section will discuss some advantages of e-learning.

Accessibility

Online learning provides very effective ways to conduct classes. With online applications, teachers can easily upload their materials, present their videos and assign assessment tests. In addition, teachers can record the lectures and lessons and share their references with a wide range of audiences and students can access them anytime and, in any place, as long as there is a device and connectivity. Maatuk (2021) said many users of online learning platforms find that e-learning is simple to manage as well as the students can obtain the teaching materials easily.

Affordability and Time-Saving

One advantage of online learning is that no textbooks are required from the learners. It is more affordable/cheaper if compared to face-to-face learning. Learners can access the teaching materials online easily without any constraints. Unlike textbooks which need to be retrieved and reprinted again when they become outdated, online materials can be updated and reloaded many times. Furthermore, when compared to the traditional method, online learning saves time. Designing and preparing teaching curricula in the traditional method is a complicated process, however, online lessons can be updated and prepared efficiently and quickly. As reported by Maatuk et al. (2020), e-learning “helped reduce the effort and travel expenses and other expenses that accompany traditional learning” (p22). Moreover, it is a friend of the environment, as it is paperless. It does not share in creating any of the environmental issues accompanying paper production. Thus, e-learning saves money and time.

Self-paced and Less Absenteeism

E-learning is described as self-paced. Learners can manage their own schedule and time, instead of the class attendance requirements of traditional learning. It allows learners to express their thoughts with their peers and teachers. Self-paced learning helps in increasing the satisfaction of learners and decreases their anxiety, resulting in better learning outcomes for everyone involved. Absenteeism is one issue of face-to-face learning. With online learning, learners are not required to physically attend. Therefore, learners can access classes easily from their homes or other places.

Challenges Faced by ESL Learners in Shifting to Online Learning Mode

Despite the rapid technological growth, teachers and learners face challenges when shifting to e-learning, particularly in underdeveloped countries. Students who take online classes face

challenges they have never faced in a traditional learning and teaching environment. On a positive aspect, the pandemic acted as a catalyst forcing many educational institutions to devise effective solutions in a comparatively short period. Todorova and Bjorn-Andersen (2011), stated that the most important lesson for others from this pandemic is to adopt e-learning technology before disaster strikes. The pandemic certainly has sped up the process of online teaching. “Online teaching-learning became a massive challenge to deal with, and stakeholders are not potentially fit to adjust to the sudden educational change as they are not technologically competent to embrace the current situation” (Sujata, 2022, p. 187).

On the one hand, the pandemic exposed the insufficiency of India’s education system. Many institutions lack online teaching tools, and most teachers are not well-skilled and familiar with the new mode of teaching. As well, some students without reliable internet access struggle to take part in digital and virtual learning. The following section will summarize some of the e-learning challenges faced by ESL learners during the COVID-19 pandemic in detail:

Technological Accessibility Challenges

One of the primary requirements for e-learning is a high-speed internet connection. The lack of technological readiness of educational institutions in many countries including India is one of the main challenges in implementing online learning. Despite the accessibility of online resources, the transfer of knowledge has not been effective due to inconsistency in the system. One of the online teaching challenges at Aligarh Muslim University is that major students live in remote areas having less internet connectivity. In some regions of India, people are still utilizing 2G or 3G internet speeds. “During the lockdown period, 70% of Indian students attended online classes, the majority of which used android smartphones, but digital platforms used for e-learning are not compatible with smartphones” (Zarei & Mohammadi, 2021, p. 9). This results in enormous difficulties in uploading and scanning their assignments on plain sheets of paper depending upon the internet speed and quality of smartphones and load on the university server. Furthermore, app problems during teaching may deprive the learner of the lesson’s allotted time.

In addition to connectivity issues, students could not afford the price of laptops or new smartphones. According to reports, a significant part of students come from poor families (Fry and Cilluffo, 2019). As matter of fact, a huge proportion of Indian society are farmers facing a financial crisis and cannot afford the costs of new devices.

Social Interaction Challenges

The lack of interaction between teachers and fellow learners is another major challenge of e-learning. Interaction is defined as the exchange of knowledge and information between teachers and students as it plays a vital role in developing learners' language skills. Unlike face-to-face learning, e-learning limits the interaction between teachers and students and students themselves. The absence of effective contact between teachers and learners is a big issue in the language learning process. Some students are categorized as tactile learners who require face-to-face interaction with their instructors to comprehend the challenging material provided online (Zarei & Mohammadi, 2021). The entire suspension of face-to-face interaction resulted in an incomplete process of information exchange and transmission, and students' skills cannot be developed. For learners, it is better to be with their teachers as they can discuss, talk and interact, which is an important aspect of learning a language. Digital efficiency, which is described as the understanding, abilities, and attitudes needed to participate in digital classes is another significant obstacle to remote learning (Ferrari, 2013). Similarly, teachers' lack of readiness to encourage learners to participate and finish their tasks may lead them to lose their focus and feel bored. Moreover, insufficient online lesson deprives ESL learners to practice their language skills. Thus, teachers must keep their sessions interactive enough to make learners focused despite the limits e-learning places on peer interaction.

E-assessment Challenges

Another key challenge of online learning faced by students is the e-assessment process. E-assessment as a way of assessing learners has developed recently with the advent of e-learning. It simply means electronic assessment. Reju and Adesina (2009) defined e-assessment as the end-to-end electronic assessment process that starts with the setting and planning and ends with data analysis and results. Some universities adopted it in place of the traditional method in order to obtain a faster and more accurate method to assess learners. E-assessment has improved student outcomes measurement and allowed them to receive immediate and direct feedback. The multiple options of e-assessment including automatic assignments, digitizing sheets, and online tests that include various choices added a challenge for students during COVID-19.

The key advantages of using e-assessment in online learning are: providing students with direct and immediate feedback, improving students' outcomes, minimizing the teacher's time and effort, reducing the institution's expenses, and promoting positive thinking which is one of the learning

goals (Alruwais et al., 2018). According to Osuji (2012), the challenges of e-assessment can lie in poor technological infrastructure, especially in underdeveloped countries, unfamiliarity and lack of teachers' and students' experiences with the process of e-assessment as well as the accessibility of the internet, particularly in remote areas. Conducting e-assessments remotely has posed additional challenges for higher education institutions as Aligarh Muslim University did. As a result, online education relied on an untested trial-and-error system that was largely hit-or-miss; online evaluation and assessment also had significant flaws and ambiguity (Tahseen, 2020).

Academic Challenges

The academic challenge is also a hindrance for ESL students in e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden shift to e-learning has added daunting tasks for teachers, as it requires more effort such as mental preparation, memorizing, reading, and online recording. Teachers could not achieve their academic objectives during COVID-19 because of numerous issues including a lack of communication skills among teachers and learners, a lack of reading and writing skills, a lack of group discussions during assignments as well as a lack of vocabulary acquisition. In online classes, learners feel it is difficult to share with their teachers and to speak as they are afraid to make grammatical mistakes. At the same time, online classes lack writing skills in which the class is focusing on speaking and listening only. "It could be assumed that the transition from face-to-face classes to virtual learning spaces due to COVID-19 has originated certain discomfort in students so that they feel limited to speak or write unless it is requested from the teacher" (Hernandez and Flórez, p. 232, 2020). As a result, learners lose interest in learning language skills. Aside from language skills, learners feel unsatisfied to have learning at home that lacks motivation and interaction, which are important factors when acquiring any foreign language including English. Sayuti et al, mention that learners' lack of communication and confidence during electronic learning has made it more difficult for them to speak the words properly. They also lack ample vocabulary and practice which made them feel difficulty expressing themselves as they are shy, afraid, and hesitant of making mistakes or being mocked by their peers (Syafiq et al., 2021). Therefore, learners' limited exposure to language content made them anxious and afraid to communicate and express themselves.

Online Teaching at Aligarh Muslim University

Aligarh Muslim University was among the first few institutions that decided immediately shut down all its activities hopefully to avoid the spread of the pandemic and minimize the loss. Online teaching was the only option to continue teaching at Aligarh Muslim University. On 23 March 2020, the Vice-Chancellor of AMU emphasized the importance of information technology during the pandemic. He urged teachers to assist students in overcoming the loss of classes and tutorials through email and other electronic mode interactions. He also appealed to the teachers to regularly upload the teaching materials and circulate them via WhatsApp and/or emails (AMU website, 2020). The university asserted that it is a priority to utilize information technology in the teaching process and in preparing the workforce for the future.

On 21 April 2020, Aligarh Muslim University launched an online teaching program. The step has been met with enthusiasm from teachers and students, and faculty members have dealt with the challenges creatively. To improve online teaching, it was decided that e-content/e-lab experiments would be created by the teachers involved and uploaded to the website. The University's HRDC (Human Resource Development Centre) instantly launched an online Faculty Development Program (FDP) for all teachers exclusively for the management of online classes and research. Online classes were held through conferencing tools (Google Meet, Microsoft Team, Webex or Zoom, etc.), and writing and reading assignments were done using various apps such as Google Classroom, email, and WhatsApp groups. Furthermore, Asim Siddiqui, a professor and head of the English Department at Aligarh Muslim University who taught on Zoom, stated that it was a revitalizing experience for him. I have found that in online classes, students aren't distracted and the teacher can make eye contact with the majority of them. (AMU website, 2020).

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative method was employed in this study. It was carried out based on primary and secondary data. The primary data of this study were collected from the questionnaire, while secondary data was also collected from published articles, research papers, and books.

Research Instrument and Participants

To achieve the objectives of the study and data collection, an online questionnaire was conducted and distributed. The questionnaire was designed via Google Forms and distributed

among students through WhatsApp groups. Students who participated in this study were BA students in the Department of English of Aligarh Muslim University. 50 students participated in this study. They had the same cultural background with the same educational level. The questionnaire included 19 items. It covered four aspects- technological accessibility challenges, social interaction challenges, assessment challenges and academic challenges. The questionnaire was measured with a five-point Likert scale. Before distributing and executing the questionnaire, the respondents (students) were informed about the nature and objectives of the study and the importance of their participation in it, and contents were requested and obtained.

Results

SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences 28) was used to analyze the data of the study. The questionnaire was made up of four aspects and 19 questions. A five-point Likert scale format from 1 to 5 (1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5= strongly agree) was used to assess the responses of the teachers and students. The first aspect is about technological accessibility challenges during online learning. It includes five items (1-5). The second aspect is about the social interaction challenges and covers four items (6-9). The third aspect relates to the assessment's challenges. It includes three items (10-12). The fourth aspect of the study is academic challenges. It includes seven items (13-19). The designed questionnaire was given to one category of respondents, BA undergraduates of the English Department of AMU.

From Table 1, it is noticeable that the technological accessibility challenge was an important challenge faced by students during online learning at AMU. It showed that both institutions and students were not prepared to implement online learning. 33% of respondents agreed that the university lacks some of the necessary technological facilities and 31% of them agreed that some students need smartphones and laptops. Moreover, 29% of respondents agreed that there are some challenges with online conferencing apps. 29% of respondents agreed that they faced inadequate internet access as they live in remote areas. Whereas 21% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that internet packages are expensive.

Table 1

Question	Strongly Disagreed	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed	Strongly Agreed
The necessary technological facilities are unavailable	2	2	4	33	9
Some students' laptops and phones are incompatible.	2	3	6	31	8
There are some challenges with online conferencing apps	1	3	3	29	14
Inadequate internet access	1	2	9	28	10
The cost of internet packages is expensive	0	10	21	19	0

Table 1 above presents students' responses concerning the social interaction challenges. According to the result of the questionnaire, 33% of respondents agreed that online learning is personal and indirect while 26% of respondents agreed that e-learning lacks effective interaction between teachers and learners. In the same context, 26% of respondents 'online learning lacks group discussions during assignments. On the other hand, 26 respondents strongly disagreed that online learning is motivating when compared to traditional one.

Table 2

Question	Strongly Disagreed	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed	Strongly Agreed
Online learning is more motivated compared to traditional teaching	26	19	3	0	2
Lack of interaction among learners and teachers	0	2	8	26	14
Online learning is too personal and indirect	3	2	6	33	6
Online learning lacks group discussions during assignments	0	2	10	26	12

Table 2 presents the responses of students about the challenges of e-assessment. The students agreed that there was an assessment challenge during online learning. The multiple modes of assessment made students dissatisfied with their scores and demoralize them to continue online learning. 30% of respondents agreed and 10% strongly agreed that e-assessment was one of the main e-learning challenges. 30% of respondents also agreed that e-learning is focusing on theory,

not practice as well as 22 agreed and 17 strongly agreed that e-learning lacks good monitoring during examinations and assignments.

Table 3

Question	Strongly Disagreed	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed	Strongly Agreed
The various methods of assessment are a challenge for students.	0	2	8	30	10
Online learning is focusing on theory, not practice	0	5	10	30	5
There is poor monitoring during e-learning	0	4	7	22	17

Table 3 above presents the responses of students about the academic challenges. This challenge included all language skills: speaking, writing, reading and listening, vocabulary and motivation. 29% of students confirmed that online learning did not address their needs for language skills and motivation. 36% of respondents agreed that e-learning lacks effective communication and reading skills. 14 respondents disagreed and 22 neither agreed nor disagreed that e-learning improves the writing skills and vocabulary acquisition of ESL learners. On the other hand, 24% of respondents disagreed and 18 strongly disagreed to study English online.

Table 4

Question	Strongly Disagreed	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed	Strongly Agreed
Online learning is beneficial for ESL learners	4	22	13	11	0
Online learning is better than face-to-face learning	18	24	3	5	0
Online teaching of language differs from other subjects?	2	1	5	27	15
Online teaching fulfills learners' needs	14	29	5	2	0
Lack of effective communication and reading skills represents a challenge to ESL learners during online learning.	0	2	2	36	10

Online learning improves the writing skills and vocabulary acquisition of ESL learners.	0	14	22	14	0
Online learning causes a lack of motivation and self-confidence among learners	0	0	7	33	10

Reliability and Validity

SPSS version 28 was used to analyze the questionnaire data. The validity and reliability score of the questionnaire according to Cronbach's Alpha was as follows:

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.733	18

Discussion

This study investigated the e-learning challenges faced by ESL students of the Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that these challenges varied in terms of technology and way of teaching. These challenges can be technological accessibility challenges, social interaction, e-assessment and academic. Based on the questionnaire findings and in response to the first statement- technological accessibility challenges, it revealed that the students were not ready and discontented with online learning during the pandemic. Technological accessibility challenges include the availability of internet facilities, using compatible smartphones, conferencing app issues and internet package prices. According to the findings of the questionnaire, the item that states 'the necessary technological facilities are unavailable' earned the highest response 33%. It is followed by the item that explains 'some students' laptops and smartphones are incompatible' with 31 %, as almost of students are from low-income families. The next item that got 29% was 'there are some challenges with online conferencing apps. 'The cost of the internet package is expensive', was the item that got a minimum score varied between 21 neutral and 19 agreed.

As a matter of fact, these issues can happen especially in underdeveloped countries that lack technological infrastructure as the majority of students live in remote villages as well as their parents are farmers who can't afford the prices of smartphones and laptops. On one hand, in developed countries, e-learning can be effective in that both students and teachers can access

online learning platforms easily (Ahmadi and Ilmiani, 2020). On the other hand, in underdeveloped countries, implementing e-learning for institutions is a big challenge for all including universities, teachers, and students. Thus, the current study identified that technological accessibility is one of the important online learning challenges faced by ESL students.

In response to the second statement- social interaction challenges, the findings showed that social interaction is a core element in learning English skills and without it, learners may not achieve the desired results. This aspect highlighted that e-learning is too personal and indirect with the highest percentage of 33%. Items state that ‘learning lacks group discussions during assignments and interaction among learners and teachers’ earned the second highest percentage of response of 26%. On the contrary, the lowest percentage varied between 0 agreed and 2 strongly disagreed in response to this statement- ‘e-learning is more motivated when compared to traditional teaching’. According to Baber (2022), social interaction is an important element and has a significant positive impact on the effectiveness of online learning. The study found that the absence of personal interaction between teachers and students as well as students with their peers was one of the barriers to effective learning.

Responding to the third statement- e-assessment challenges- respondents showed that e-assessment is one of the challenges e-learning students face during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results revealed that students were dissatisfied with the e-assessment results due to their multiple ways. These difficulties can be found in the online test methods and question varieties, lack of experience and unfamiliarity of learners and teachers as well as the availability of technological infrastructure. 30% of respondents agreed and 10% strongly agreed that e-assessment is problematic. The focus on theory rather than practice, as well as poor instructors’ mentoring during online lessons, are both disadvantages of e-assessment. 17% of respondents strongly agreed and 22% agreed that e-learning lacks good mentoring during the assessment. According to Alruwais et al. (2018) “Assessing a group project is a difficult job. It needs a monitor of the communication skills, evaluates the group work, assesses each member and the whole group, and provides feedback” (36).

Another point the participants agreed on was the academic challenge. The participants complained that e-learning did not meet their language needs. It lacks the necessary language skills strategies such as communication, motivation, vocabulary acquisition, speaking and writing practices as well as self-confidence. Furthermore, students don’t dare to speak or discuss and share

information with their teachers and peers as they are afraid of making mistakes. The item ‘lack of effective communication and reading skills’ earned the highest percentage of 36% agreed and 10% strongly agreed. The item ‘online learning causes a lack of motivation and self-confidence among learners’ earned the second high percentage 36% agreed and 10% strongly agreed. Meanwhile, on the contrary, the point stating that ‘online learning fulfills learners’ needs’ got the highest percentage of 14% strongly agreed and 29% agreed.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic put the global education system under pressure, forcing learners and teachers to shift to online learning suddenly. It has affected all domains of life including education. E-learning has become the safest alternative during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to avoid losses, as teaching can continue. The study’s overall conclusions demonstrated that students faced numerous challenges with e-learning throughout COVID-19. The challenges were technological accessibility, lack of social interaction, e-assessment, and academic performance. As a substitute for face-to-face learning, students found e-learning to be unproductive as well as they were ready to shift to e-learning. They prefer traditional learning practices, considering them more effective and productive than e-learning.

Some suggestions and recommendations can be concluded from the findings of the study. One of these suggestions is that higher education institutions must be technologically prepared, including internet accessibility, digital platforms, and resources, particularly in underdeveloped countries. The other thing is that students and teachers have to take into account that online learning will be the future learning norm.

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