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Investigating the Effectiveness of E-learning During COVID 19 Crisis EFL Undergraduate Iraqi Students

A B S T R A C T

E-learning has been adopted years ago by academic institutes, and it has been beneficial for many people, especially those who are interested in learning foreign languages. With the spread of the new pandemic COVID19, e-learning becomes a necessity in universities all over the world, including Iraqi universities. The present study aims at investigating the effect of this pandemic on e-learning in one of the Iraqi colleges. The researcher hypothesizes that the students' acceptance of e-learning, as well as their performance, are improved during this crisis. To measure the efficacy of e-learning during the pandemic, the researcher designed a questionnaire, and introduced it to 130 students in the Department of English at the College of Education for Women/ University of Baghdad. Also, an online interview is made with the same students to discuss their agreement or disagreement to the questions of the questionnaire. The results show; first, e-learning could be very useful if it is used with the traditional one. Second, students' attitude and performance are entirely changed when e-learning becomes the sole solution for learning during this crisis.

تقصي فاعلية التعليم الالكتروني خلال فيروس كورونا المستجد (كوفيد 19)

في كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة بغداد

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الملخص

تبنت العديد من المؤسسات الأكاديمية التعلم الإلكتروني منذ سنوات ، وقد أثبت فاعليته في كثير من هذه المؤسسات لاسيما تلك المهتمة بتعلم اللغات الاجنبية. الا انه مع انتشار جائحة كورونا اصبح التعليم الالكتروني ضرورة ملحة في الجامعات في جميع أنحاء العالم ، بما في ذلك الجامعات العراقية. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تقصي أثر هذا الوباء على التعلم الإلكتروني في أحدى الكليات العراقية . يفترض الباحث أن تقبل الطلبة للتعلم الإلكتروني ، وكذلك أداءهم ، قد تحسن خلال هذه الأزمة . ولقياس فاعلية التعلم الإلكتروني أثناء الجائحة ، صممت الباحثة استبيانا وعرضته على 130 طالبة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية التربية للبنات / جامعة بغداد . اضافة الى ذلك، تم إجراء مقابلة عبر الإنترنت مع نفس الطلاب لمناقشة موافقتهم أو عدم موافقتهم على أسئلة الاستبيان. أظهرت النتائج ما يلي: أولاً ، يمكن أن يكون التعلم الإلكتروني مفيدًا جدًا إذا تم استخدامه مع التعليم التقليدي. ثانيًا ،نظرة الطالبات للتعلم الالكتروني وكذلك ادائهن تغير تمامًا عندما أصبح التعلم الإلكتروني هو الحل الوحيد للتعلم خلال هذه الأزمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصفوف الافتراضية , الكليات العراقية , التعليم الالكتروني , جائحة كورونا.

1. INTRODUCTION

After the announcement of the Corona virus as a global pandemic, most institutions were forced to close and to ban face-to face interaction among the faculty members all over the world. On February, 24, 2020 the Ministry of Health in Iraq announced the first infection with Corona virus in Najaf https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2020/02/iraq-officials-in-najaf-confirm-first-coronavirus-case-february-24-update-3. The Council of Ministers declared the curfew throughout the country due to the increase in infections in most of the Iraqi governorates. The Ministry of Higher Education and The Ministry of Education decide to stop all face-to- face classes and opted to shift to online learning to continue the teaching process without causing any harm to the students and teachers. As a result e-learning has increasingly become a substantial type of learning in many Iraqi academic institutions as it evolves in worldwide universities. E-learning has been used recently in the higher institution as a complementary tool for face to face learning. It was used even before COVID 19 and proved its effectiveness. The effectiveness of e-learning is acknowledged by Ghaffari and Abbas (2011); they believe that the increased embracing of e-learning platforms in universities helped to expand online learning and reduce the distances in front of the learners. A successful e- learning strategy can be improved by selecting a well-developed system that achieves the purpose of education "and enables the learner to combat the requirements of work-life with all its facets which are becoming more dependent on information technologies and are evolving frequently" (Obaidat, Obidat & Al- Shalabi, 2020, p. 96). Liaw (2006: 49) asserts the importance of culture in learning a foreign language. He states that "the efficacy of an online learning environment developed to foster EFL students' intercultural competence via reading articles on topics of their own culture and communicating their responses with speakers of another culture."

In the present circumstances, with the spread of the newly emerging crises, the need for e-learning has become very clear that it becomes the only alternative to traditional education. The present study aims at answering the following questions;

1. Why e-learning is a good s
2. ubstitute for traditional learning?
3. What are the difficulties and obstacles that face students at the College of Education for Women?
4. To what extent is e-learning effective at The College of Education for Women?

2. LITERATURE REVIWE

This section is devoted to present some related studies that explore e-learning during COVID 19 and other previous studies that were conducted to investigate e- learning in general. A study was conducted by Zalat et al. (2021) in which they test the challenges and acceptance of e- learning among the university medical staff member. The results show that the majority of the staff agree that e-learning provides a good opportunity to improve their experience in using electronic devices in teaching. A meta- analysis study is used by Yildiz (2020) to trace the new trend in education in Turkey and abroad within the last five years. The finding out of the study approved that e-learning is efficient in these countries. An article was written by Iwai (2020) that explores the impact of the pandemic on e-learning at different universities. Iwai (2020) believes that some professors have real problems in using technology and the university should take this into consideration and provide these professors with the suitable aid to overcome such problems. She adds besides the chaos created by e-learning, there are other advantages to the virtual classes. For example, the students can collaborate freely with each other and participate in the online discussions and they can perform equally as in their traditional classes. A descriptive statistical method was used by Mahyoob (2020) to inspect the challenges and obstacles that face the EFL learners in Taibah University, Saudi Arabia during the shift to e-leaning due to the COVID 19 pandemic. He presents some solutions and recommendations to overcome these obstacles. The results showed that the most challenges that face learner is related to technology like internet connectivity which result in other problems like material downloading, daily exams and accessing virtual classes. A study by Alsoudi & Harasis (2021) focused on e-learning experience and readiness in Jordanian Universities during the pandemic. A questionnaire was distributed to the students across 12 governorates. The finding showed that the frequency of the online courses is acceptable. Yet most students are not well prepared to deal with online classes. An online survey was conducted by Obaidat, Obidat & Al- Shalabi (2020) introduce a survey to assess the students' awareness of the effectiveness of e-learning. 399 students replied to this survey. The results showed that although most students faced some problems in online learning, they evaluate the e-learning positively. A study was conducted by Widodo, Wibowo & Wagiran (2020) to find a suitable formula to assess students' readiness with respect to technological devices , students' skill in using smart devices and motivation and the benefit gained from e-learning. The result showed that e-learning can be assessed by using certain formula from different aspects including organization, students and lectures. Devi, Sharma& Lepcha (2020) made a review of nineteen articles that were written to explore the online and blended learning. The result showed that the finding of the majority of those studies recommended the adoption of the blended learning. Another study was carried out by Favale et al (2020) to explore the influence of the lockdown on the Politecnico di Torino campus network . They investigate the change in traffic network with a focus on the cooperation and distance learning platforms usage. Favale et. al. (2020) "attest how remote

working, e-learning and online collaboration platforms are a viable solution to cope with the social distancing policies during COVID-19 pandemic." The results show that there was an increase in using the traffic network especially those encountered for educational purposes. There was an unexpected explosion in the number of the exchanged messages between faculty members and the students on the one hand and the students on the other hand. Based on the foregoing, it can be said that the results of all the mentioned studies assert the effectiveness and the necessity of e- learning.

3. WHAT IS ELEARNING?

Many terms have been adopted to describe online learning, such as distance education, internet learning, computerized electronic learning, and others. E-learning refers to the use of modern electronic technology in teaching and learning. It depends on using the computer and smart devices as the best tools for presenting materials to students. E-learning enables the students to watch or listen to the lecture and repeat it more than once if they misunderstand some parts of it. The students can free themselves from the constraints of attending their lectures at the exact time and place. It has several advantages over traditional education; for example, it offers an opportunity for busy people to attend the virtual classes in their spare time. Also, teachers can make the material more exciting by employing different electronic means. Furthermore, it is economical for both teachers and students since they depend on the stored information in their devices, and of course, they don't need to go outside and consume time and money to attend lectures. Zakarneh (2004, p.173 in his study "; *Effectiveness of E-learning Mode for Teaching English Language in Arab Universities."* confirms this benefit. He states that; "e-learning helps learners to use their electronic mails to consult and collaborate with their teachers, and it also offers a cost-saving advantage to the learners."

EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF E- LEARNING

Marshall (2012) made a survey about the history of what he called "distance learning". He states that distance learning dated back to 1892when Chicago University started its first online learning program. In 1961 online programs were expanded to include the postal services and radio shows. Then they were televised in 1963. In 1963 PLATO (Programmed for Automatic Teaching Operations) organized a system of linked computers through which students can attend courses and listen to the recorded lectures.

Marshall (2012) continued that in 1970 Coastline Community College was "the first college without a physical campus". They introduce exclusive televised lectures. Later on many institutes follow their experience and offered online courses through television. In 1985, National Technological University was the first school that offers "online degree courses via satellite transmission." Hiltz (1986) acknowledged the use of virtual classrooms in which the users depend mostly on sound and videos. With the development of the new technology many new tools are used in virtual classrooms. "Most environments offered features like real-time voice and video, whiteboard, slides presentation, text-based interaction and means for learners." Finkelstein (2006, p. 945). These early trials failed to equip the students efficiently with the new learning tools due to the network limitations. Later on in 1900 and 2000 distance learning spread all over the world. Many schools and some colleges embraced distance learning or blending learning (part of the materials are given in the traditional classrooms and the other parts are given electronically through virtual classes). To provide more options for schooling, some states tried to make use of full time virtual classes and created full-time virtual schools. Many students enrolled in these schools (Miron &Urschel, 2012). This situation continued for years till the spread of

COVID19 when, according to UNISCO, a minimum of 1,268,164,088 students from 177 countries are obliged to enroll in the virtual classes.

4. WHY E-LEARNING?

E-learning has recently evolved into the educational system, and has increased significantly. It has been used for a variety of reasons. First, it is used mostly by working people since they don't have time to join schools or colleges. Second, the recent studies' results improved the effectiveness of e-learning in many higher institutions. Another reason for the increased employment of e-learning is the new generation's excitement in modern technology and their fondness of receiving further information through their smart devices.

A crucial reason for embracing e-learning nowadays is motivation. The role of motivation in the success of e-learning has been asserted by Hartnett (2016, p.1). She speculates that "motivated learners are more likely to undertake challenging activities, be actively engaged, enjoy and adopt a deep approach to learning, and exhibit enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity." Motivation is an important reason to employ e-learning in Iraq. Both learners and faculty members find themselves obliged to encounter e-learning as a substitute for traditional learning, which stopped completely in most academic institutions in Iraq because of the COVID 19 pandemic.

5. TYPES OF E- LEARNING

E- learning can be classified according to the way in which it is delivered. There are two basic types of e- learning; Synchronous and Asynchronous. The former refers to the actual interaction between the students and their teacher. Both the teacher and the students are available online at the same time. Whereas the latter refers to "pause and resume type of learning" (CommLab Indian Bloggers, 2014).In synchronous e- learning the students can communicate with each other and receive feedback from the teacher through smart phones, seminars and chats. This type of learning is obtained via virtual classes, webinars, chats, videos, audio and video conferencing and application sharing. It is very similar to the real class except that the teacher and the learners are in different places (Abernathy, 2020). In asynchronous e- learning the teacher and the learners do not interact at the same time. It is a kind of self-paced learning where the learners can "learn at any time, download documents, and chat with teachers & also with co-learners"(Abernathy (2020).This type of e- learning depends on e-mails, discussion forums and eBooks. Splittgerber & Stirzaker (1980) cited in (Haward, 1987) mentioned two other types in addition to the Synchronous and Asynchronous leaning; Computer-Managed Learning (CML) and Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI). CML depends on computers. Teachers assess the students' answers, identify their mistakes and points of weaknesses and provide them with the required feedback. (Splittgerber & Stirzaker, 1980). defined CML as

> ... an instructional management application utilizing the computer to direct the entire instructional process, including C~I format as well as the traditional forms of instruction which do not require computers, for example, lectures and group activities(p. 38).

CAI is a tutorial method that makes use of computer in the interaction (online or offline) between the teacher and the learners. It provides different activities such as; drills, games, simulation and problem solving. This type of learning offers a good opportunity for students to progress and to be free to choose when, where and what to learn.

6.   MERITS AND DI MERITS OF E-LEARNING

Many inquiries have been presented concerning the benefits of e-learning. Mohamad, Omar, Hussin, Amir, and Idris (2013) give several valuable advantages based on the results obtained from their study. They organize an online course for undergraduate students of Allied Science Faculty. Mohamad et.al.(2013) state that e-learning enhances the collaboration between participants, and at the same time, it helps them to increase their comprehending of the topics since they were allowed to discuss with each other during online courses.

Mohamad et al. (2013, p.149) add that e-learning improves reading skill too. They refer to some respondents, who were hesitant at the beginning to consult online references and prefer to print the online articles on a paper before reading it. Still, when they are involved in the experience, they assured the advantage of online reading as they don't need to go to the libraries to borrow or buy books.

Miron & Urschel (2012) assert the financial advantage of e- learning. They state that virtual classes have a great cost advantages for both the students and the institutions. The students in virtual classes save money when it comes to food services and transportation. E- learning advantages are also highlighted by Abernathy (2020) in her article *Online learning is not the next big thing, it is the now big thing.* She states that

Online learning has numerous advantages over traditional learning methods. Some of these include the possibility for students to make use of self-paced learning and to choose their own learning environments. Additionally, e-learning is both cost-effective and cost-efficient, as it removes the geographical obstacles often associated with traditional classrooms and education.

Virtual institutions "also benefit from cost advantages by having more students per teacher and by reducing overall spending on teacher salaries"(Miron & Urschel, 2012:6)

Another advantage related to the results of the online quizzes, is presented by Mohamad et al. (2013), who state that the respondents excitedly describe e-learning as a useful tool because they could answer online quizzes easily from the suggested websites. Moreover, they feel free for first time to discuss their solutions with other students. These discussions deepen their information about the discussed topic.

According to Hartnett, et al. (2011, p.1), online learning has several merits: One of them is the possibility to overcome the temporal and spatial restrictions of conventional educational settings. They add that freedom "from constraint may also be seen as a defining feature of distance learning, for example, freedom of content, space, medium and access."

Alasraj, and Alharbi (2014) carried out a study to investigate the benefits of e-learning as compared to traditional learning. The results showed that the e-learning platform provides an excellent opportunity for the learners to perform better than their peers learning under the conventional classroom platform. They think that e-learning has some pedagogical benefits because learners get new information while searching for different websites to answer the quizzes.

Nevertheless, besides all these advantages there are also disadvantages. For example, the lack of the direct contact between the teacher and students in e-learning makes some students feel isolated, and cannot   perform adequately , because they think that they don't get enough feedback as in the conventional learning. Wolfinger (2016) states that the students' performance in traditional classes tends to be better than their performance in virtual ones. This is due to the shortages in funding and the lack

of a suitable environment for students. Hubackova (2015) believes that using e-learning methods sometimes seems complicated especially when learning foreign languages,

> "…because foreign language teaching without face-to-face contact and the possibility of oral communication with a tutor is hardly imaginable. In every case, a foreign language teaching requires some conversation, authentic listening, teamwork, group work, etc." (p. 526)

Though e- learning provides a good opportunity to learn anywhere and anytime, but it has been misused by some commercial organizations. Many unexperienced institutions offer online courses with low prices and give invaluable degree compared to other trustworthy institutions. Another disadvantage is related to technical problems like stable internet access and smart devices, which may not be available for some students. Some others may have all these necessities, but they do not know how to use them. Finally, there is a real disadvantage concerning some students' activities like cheating, which is very difficult to overcome in e-learning (Hetsevich, 2017). Mandela (2020) provides a list of e- learning disadvantages. She states that students are completely isolated and this limits the presented feedback. It requires high self- managements. Some disciplines cannot be taught online. Cheating is very difficult to control in online tests. Practical aspects are neglected in online teaching. Online schools are unaccredited.

7.   Problems Of E-Learning At The College Of Education For Women/ University Of Baghdad

Iraqi students face so many difficulties due to the exceptional circumstances in Iraq. As it is known, Iraqi people suffer from electricity shortages and limited internet connectivity, which create a real obstacle for students. The spread of the coronavirus leads to big economic problems for many families who stop working and become unable to pay for internet services. Moreover, College of Education for Women has its privacy concerning the bigotry of some students' families who refuse collaboration through social media and, prevent their young daughters from having smart devices. Accordingly, some students are deprived of joining the virtual classes and some others reject e-learning. Yet, teachers at this college, especially the teachers at the Department of English try to overcome this problem and help those students by collecting an amount of money and buying mobile phones to deliver them to the students.

8.   PROCEDURE

At the end of the academic electronic year, the researcher aimed at measuring the effectiveness of e-learning during this period by employing a case study. A case study is selected to give more accurate results because it studies one particular issue related to a specific group within a particular situation. Merriam (2009), cited in Mohamed et al. (2013, p.148), defines a case study as "a study which aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of a situation and a process rather than the outcome or product of the phenomena." To answer the questions that are mentioned at the beginning of the research, a questionnaire is designed by the researcher and introduced to 130 second stage students at the department of English/ College of Education for Women. After reviewing the results of the questionnaire, an online interview is carried out between the researcher and the students to discuss the

students' responses, and to make a general evaluation of the whole electronic process throughout the academic year.

9.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the present study based on three axes: the questionnaire, the interview, and the researcher evaluation of the whole process through her personal experience, as a teacher, in e-learning.

10.1.   Results Obtained From the Questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire show no significant difference among the students' responses. The percentages of the answers ranged between 20% and 50% for all items. For example, the answer for the first question "e-learning makes me responsible" 53.4% of the students agree on that, 9.7% disagree, and 21.4% are neutral. These percentages were very close to almost all of the questions. Table No.1 shows the results of the questionnaire.

TABL 1. Results obtained from the questionnaire

	Strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree
e-learning makes me responsible	11.5	53.4	11.4	10.7	13
e-learning increases self confidence	10.7	25.5	40.5	16	7.3
e-learning creates good cooperation among students	13.7	37.4	32.1	13.7	3.1
I can learn away from street traffic	10.7	30.5	27.5	26	5.3
e-learning saves money	13.7	38.9	27.3	16	4.1
e- learning weakens my writing skills	16.6	56.7	12.1	6.7	7.9
e-learning offers a good chance to make mistakes without embarrassment	12.2	31.3	29.8	23.7	3

We can notice that the students' responses are not encouraging because the questionnaire is introduced in the middle of the academic year when most students reject e-learning. Yet, the highest portions for nearly all questions are AGREED, and the least portions are STRONGLY DISAGREED. These answers give a glimpse of light that the students would accept e-learning in the future.

10.2.   Interview

The same questions of the questionnaire are asked to the students in an online interview to discuss their answers and to find the reasons and justifications for their solutions. A for the first question "e-learning makes me responsible."
First, the researcher asked the students who disagree on this point. One of the student answers "I don't think that e-learning makes me responsible because I used to depend on my friends in doing the assignments and even quizzes." Another student says I don't feel that I am   accountable since I can find all the materials in the class, and I don't need to prepare before the lecture as I used to do in traditional learning. On the other hand, some more students viewed that e-learning gives them a good opportunity for organizing their weekly lessons schedule and searching for more information about their scientific subjects. They add, e-learning facilitates understanding their materials because all the lectures are stored online in their virtual class, and they can go back to them at any time.

When discussing the responses to the second item "e-learning increases self-confidence." Most students say that "the lack of face to face study weakens the self-confidence because we cannot express ourselves clearly on the paper as we do in the class." They add that they feel unconfident of their answers because they get the grades without knowing their mistakes, and this makes them unsure of their responses. Other students adopted another opinion; they see that e-learning makes them more confident, especially in quizzes, because they feel that their teachers trust them, and this boosts their self-confidence.

Another item in the questionnaire (e- learning weakens my writing skill). This item got the highest percentage of agreement. When asking students about this they said that they depend on typing and sometimes copying words from websites and this has a great effect on their writing skill.

At the end of the interview, I asked the students about the last problem "e-learning offers a good chance to make mistakes without embarrassment." I noticed that most student DISAGREE with this point. When asking students why they disagree, the answer was really hilarious. They say that "we don't feel embarrassed when we make mistakes in the classroom."

10.3.   Results Obtained From Self-Assessment

Despite the difficulties related to the network, electricity, and the ineligibility of some students to deal with the technology, the researcher   noticed   that the students overcome all these difficulties gradually, especially when they had no other way to complete the requirements of the academic year. The same students who initially rejected the whole process found the experience enjoyable later on. Most of the students became cooperative. They helped each other either by explaining the materials or teaching their classmates how to use the electronic classes. They even provided financial aid to the students who cannot get smart devices and access to the internet.

As for the daily performance of the students, it was not at the required level, because most students joined the classes late and found themselves overloaded with so many duties. Also, the lack of daily follow-up by the teacher makes the students neglect their daily tasks.

Finally, it is worth noting that most students have achieved better grades in the online exams as they are allowed to consult their books and electronic references, besides freedom given to discuss the questions with each other.

11.   CONCLUSION

The present study yields the following results:

- E-learning can be extremely useful when the appropriate conditions such as electricity and good internet access are available.

- It is better to use E-learning in conjunction with the traditional one under the name of blended learning.

- E-learning is an interesting experience for most students who see it as a nice change in the educational process.

- E-learning cannot be used as a complete alternative to traditional education due to different reasons: First, it weakens the students' handwriting skills because students depend on typing rather than writing. Second, the absence of the invigilators in the exam allows the students to cheat. Third, the self-organization could be a real problem for some students.

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