

## STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING DURING CORONA PANDEMIC: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to elicit students' perspectives towards benefits and challenges of fully online classes at Hebron University. The researchers examined both advantages and challenges of online classes from students' point of view. Also, they explored some suggestions for improving online classes which could play an important role in improving the online learning and teaching process. The researchers employed quantitative methods. They distributed a questionnaire to collect data. Eighty two students from two different English intensive courses were asked to fill a 5 point Likert scale questionnaire and answer four open-ended questions. The researchers used the survey planet app to facilitate the process of distributing and collecting data. The finding of this study showed that students faced some challenges with online learning; they preferred face to face classes. The disadvantages of online classes from their perspectives are more than the advantages. The weak internet connectivity, poor interaction, less motivation, less participation and less understanding are the most challenges of online learning. However, they find online classes easy to access, convenient and easy to be reviewed for exams.

**Keywords:** *Online learning; advantages; challenges*

### INTRODUCTION

Technology has impacted every small aspect in our life, and language learning process is no exception. In the previous years, using technology in language learning has developed and grown. Many researchers and theories start studying using computers as assisted tools in language learning, which is called CALL (Daud & Farrah, 2013). According to Beatty (2003) CALL changed nature and the process in which learners utilize computers and internet resources and, consequently, enhance their competence. So, the CALL process was the first step in using technology besides the traditional classroom learning (Farrah, 2006). It was used to prompt and facilitate the development of language learning use. Nowadays, the use of technology has expanded to reach a new term which is called online learning. According to Arroyo, Berrocoso, Cevallos and Videla (2020), said that pandemic covid, technology-mediated learning has a significant impact on the educational process. Recently, it became one of the key research concepts.

Before Covid19 outbreak, many educational institutions, schools and universities were using partially online classes just to facilitate the process of language learning (Farrah & Al-Bakri, 2020; Abu Safiyeh, & Farrah, 2020). However, nowadays, all of the schools and universities transmitted to fully online classes in which all of the learning and teaching activities are carried online. Online learning and teaching is carried now at Hebron University with fully online classes. Nowadays, all of the students are taking fully online classes where they are supposed to attend the classes online, take quizzes, and do all of their activities online by using apps like, Zoom, Google meet and others. Accordingly, there is a need to conduct a study to explore the advantages and challenges of online learning.

#### *Stages of E- learning over the previous decades*

Online learning has experienced many different stages; the first stage is CALL system which started in some universities in 1980. CALL was defined as computers and additional softwares to supplement language teaching in such as CD ROM, and online

conferences ... online grade books (Pennington, 1996). With the rapid development of CALL system, many instructors and institutions tried to blend technology inside and outside the classrooms with the aim of having both traditional learning and certain forms of online learning to promote the teaching learning process (Singh, 2003; Farrah, 2006; Daud & Farrah, 2013).

According to Richard and Haya (2009), technological devices become among the essential tools in the teaching learning process. Learners can use the internet to share and access information. Similarly, Oblinger and Hawkins (2005) pointed out that technology facilitated the transmission process towards fully-online courses. Likewise, the European Commission (2001 as cited in Arkorful, Abaidoo, 2014) described e-Learning as utilizing new technologies and the Internet to improve quality of learning by providing accessibility to facilities and services and promoting exchanges and collaboration. Moreover Singh and Thurman (2019) clarified that learners experience synchronous and asynchronous online learning environments and utilize varied technological devices along with internet access. Learners can access information anywhere and interact with faculty members and other students. Nowadays, after the pandemic situation of Covid19, most of the academic institutions are giving synchronous online classes. According to Carey (2020 as cited in Dahwan, 2020), the crucial issue is responding to the pandemic and most importantly providing quality online education and the mechanism of transmission from traditional learning to online learning.

#### *Benefits and limitations of online learning*

Many researchers throughout these years discussed the benefits and the challenges of online learning. Brewer et al. (2001) stated that technology plays a significant role in the teaching learning process. However, there is a necessity for appropriate integration of technological tools. They warned that if such learning technologies used wrongly, they are likely to undermine the role technology and thus the failure of the learning process. According to Hsboula (2009), online learning has the potential to improve access to education and training as well as the quality of teaching and learning. He emphasized the role of technology in improving the teaching and learning process and pointed out that such online educational programs should be available to students at a reasonable cost. Likewise, Fedynich (2014) noted the potential benefits of online learning and

emphasized that technology should be cost-effective and instructors or students should have easy access online resources and proper training. Khalil (2018) examined the perceptions of six EFL university students taking a Grammar I course at Palestine Ahliya University, Palestine towards utilizing Google Docs and Google Classroom as online collaborative tools in learning grammar. She found integrating the flipped classroom in teaching grammar can improve learners grammar skills.

According to Arora (2019) poor integration of online learning may yield unwanted challenges ranging from poor communication, sense of isolation, to a sense of frustration. Additionally, Aminullah et al. (2019) reported that teachers held positive attitudes towards ICT in the process of teaching and learning English.

In 2020, many researchers have questioned the validity and the obstacles of fully-fledged online classes and the following are some related studies that discussed the same issue:

Adnan and Anwar (2020) examined the attitudes of Pakistani higher education students towards online learning amid (COVID-19). They found that online learning can not yields the intended results in countries like Pakistan because students and instructors do not have proper access to the internet and they lack both adequate training and the financial resources. Likewise, Aminullah et al. (2019) observed that though some teachers held positive attitudes towards ICT, others still faced many problems such as lack of support from institution, lack of ICT equipment, and also lack of adequate training.

However, in a study conducted in India different results was shown. Nambiar (2020) conducted an online survey regarding eliciting instructors and students' attitudes towards online classes during (Covid 19). The participants were 407 students and 70 instructors from different colleges and universities in Bangalore city. The findings show that there is a need for quality and timely interaction between student and professor, the availability of technical support. Moreover, the study emphasized the need to create "a structured and user- friendly environment for online mode of education." Finally the study concluded with the importance of offering adequate technological training to teachers about method of conducting online classes" (792).

Likewise, Baber (2020) examined students' attitudes towards online learning during Covid19 pandemic in India and South Korea. He found that students held positive perception towards online learning aspects such as interaction, motivation, course structure, instructor knowledge, and

facilitation. Accordingly, they perceived they were satisfied with the learning outcome.

In a study conducted in Palestine, Farrah and Al-Bakry (2020) explored the attitudes of EFL students in six Palestinian universities towards online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers reported that students found some benefits for online learning and they pointed out some challenges that encountered the students during the transmission process towards online learning. Finally, they offered some suggestions to improve the implementation of online learning in the educational process such as improving the technological infrastructure and providing both instructors and students with the necessary that facilitate the learning teaching process in the online environment.

Similarly, Itmeizeh, & Farrah. (2021) examined the extent to which the online applications utilized in Palestine Ahliya University and Hebron University in Palestine met IHEP benchmarks (Teaching Process, Student Support, Evaluation and Assessment, Faculty Support) for online learning. Moreover, they examined the attitudes of EFL instructors' and students towards online education and the challenges that both of them may face. Findings revealed that EFL learners' and instructors' expressed their concerns towards the availability of student support and faculty support.

This is the first time experience of Hebron University students being exposed to fully synchronous classes. This study will explore the benefits and challenges of online learning from the perspectives of first year students at Hebron University. Moreover, students will provide suggestions of how to overcome the main difficulties of online classes. So, it will present a detailed image of students within the online learning environment, prompt deep understanding of how student's look or see the fully online learning according to their present experience. Also, it will offer some recommendations to have effective online classes that can improve and overcome the challenges of online learning. So, this study will be very beneficial for instructors, students, as well as the educational institutions and universities; as it sheds light on one of the most important factors of the educational learning system which is the student.

The research questions in this research are: (1) What are the major benefits and challenges of fully online classes according to Hebron University students? (2) What are the students' recommendations to overcome the challenges of online learning?

## METHOD

The researchers, in this paper, used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This study was conducted during the Fall Semester of the academic year 2020/2021. In order to gain a better insight into the students' perspectives of online learning and the possibilities for improving it at Hebron University, the researchers distributed questionnaires to 114 students from two service English courses (English Intensive 2 and English Intensive 1). Eighty two students from both courses voluntarily agreed to fill in the posted online questionnaire. All of the students are first year students who are experiencing the fully online classes for the first time.

A Questionnaire was chosen for this research because it is a reliable and quick method to collect information from multiple respondents in an efficient and timely manner. It aimed to elicit relevant information concerning student's perspectives of online classes. The questionnaire combined 5- point Likert scale and open-ended questions (see Appendix). The content of the instrument was developed and utilized to discover the advantages and disadvantages of Online learning from students' point of view. The questionnaire has two sections, the first section is to elicit students' preferable learning method and collect the perceptions of the students about challenges and benefits of online learning through 32 items of 5 point Likert scale. Questions of 5- point Likert scale offering respondents the possibility to choose and rate among several options from 1 (*Strongly agree*) to 5 (*Strongly disagree*). In the second section, there were four open-ended questions (See Appendix).

According to the limited time of the researchers during both lectures of (Intensive 1 and 2), researchers chose to collect the data through online tools and by using the students' classroom app. Also, the researchers used the surveyplanet app to facilitate the process of distributing it. After validating the questionnaire, the researchers posted it on students' classroom stream. The researchers informed the participants that this questionnaire is conducted for Hebron university research paper and that any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Then, the researchers collected eligible data from 82 collected questionnaires. After collecting data, it was analyzed statistically using SPSS. The researchers examined the questionnaire reliability and they found that the overall Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the questionnaire was ( $r=.71$ ), indicating an acceptable degree of internal consistency. This

means that the questionnaire was a reliable instrument for the purpose of the current research.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The researchers used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 24) to analyze the collected data and the advantages and disadvantages of online learning from Students' perspectives. The mean and standard deviation (SDs) were calculated for 32 Likert scale items. The results of the study

revealed that most participants *strongly agreed* on one Item which is Items 19. This Item shows that most of the students *strongly agreed* that the internet connection is very poor. The mean of this item was 4.27 (see Table1).

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Table 1. *The means and SDs of the items the participants strongly agreed upon.*

No.	Statements	Mean	SD
19	Internet connection is very week	1.73	1.11

Note. If the mean is less than 1.80, this means that participants strongly agree.

As table 1 show, most students *strongly agreed* that the internet connection at Hebron University is very poor (M=1.73).

Most of the participants have rated the following nine items with *agree* (see table 2). The means of these Items were less than 2.60. Item10, Item14, Item20, Item 25 and Item 32 were items related to disadvantages of online classrooms. For example, most of the students *agreed* that Interaction with instructors in online classes is less than interaction in face to face classes with a mean of 2.02. Also, they believe that instructors talk most of the time in

the online classes with a mean of 2.59. Most of them *agreed* that instructors and students need training for online classes (see Items 20, 25 in table 2). Most of the students get bored in the online classes with a mean of 2.5 and STD 1.33. Moreover, most of the students agreed on 3 items which are about the advantages of face to face classes. Most of the students prefer traditional classes and participate in it more than online classes. Also, they are accepting feedback from each other more in the face to face classes with a mean 2.15 and a STD of .85.

Table 2. *The means and SDs of the items the participants agreed upon*

No.	Statements	Mean	SD
2	I prefer traditional ( face to face) classes	1.82	1.08
5	I participate more in face to face classes	2.04	1.02
10	Interaction with teacher in online classes is less than interaction in face to face classes	2.02	1.09
14	Teacher talk most of the time in the online classes	2.59	1.2
17	I am able to receive feedback from others in face to face classes	2.15	0.85
20	Students are not trained enough to learn through online classes	2.48	1.26
24	I would recommend face to face learning	2.11	1.26
25	Instructors and students need training courses to make online courses more beneficial	2.39	1.2
32	I get bored in the online classes	2.5	1.33

Note. If the mean is less than 2.60, this means that participants *agreed*.

Table 2 shows that most of the students have preferences for face to face classes as they interact more and they were able to receive immediate feedback. However, they do not like the online classes as instructors talk most of the time which

makes them bored. They believe both students and instructors need training. Therefore, they recommend the traditional classroom.

Moreover, there are 17 Items that were rated with *neutral* as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *The means and SDs of the items the participants were rated with neutral*

No.	Statements	Mean	SD
1	I prefer online classes	3.33	1.33

3	I spend less time and effort in online classes	2.80	1.27
4	I participate more in online classes	3.33	1.26
6	I don't have good internet connection	2.65	1.35
8	I prefer submitting my assignment via online	2.88	1.47
9	I feel relaxed in the online classes	3.11	1.33
11	Online classes make me less anxious	3	1.27
12	I feel stress if I did mistake in the online classes	2.87	1.26
13	I feel stress if I did mistake in the face to face classes	2.93	1.36
15	I am able to work independently in the online classes	2.88	1.29
16	In online classes, I take risk to answer without teacher instruction	2.90	1.28
18	The quality of online learning at Hebron University is good	3.13	1.23
21	Instructors are not trained enough to teach online classes	3.21	1.15
26	The online classes help me following and reviewing the course easily	2.94	1.22
27	Online classes are easy to reach	2.87	1.20
29	It is very difficult to study through online classes for students	2.77	1.11
30	It is frustrating to do task via online	3	1.29

Note: if the mean is less than 3.40, this means that participants were neutral

Table 3 shows the participants were neither agree nor disagree with items about the advantages of online classroom like, *I spend less time and effort in online classes, I participate more in online classes, I feel relaxed in the online classes, online classes make me less anxious*, and many other advantages of the online classroom like reviewing,

or easiness in submitting assignments. So, they didn't see using online classes or technology tools as a benefit either as an obstacle too

Finally, it seems that most of the students were not satisfied with the online learning experience as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *The means and SDs of the items the participants were rated with disagree*

No.	Statements	Mean	SD
7	I don't find difficulty in using Google classroom, zoom or other apps	3.82	1.03
22	The student learn and get the same learning from online and face to face classes	3.59	1.18
23	I would recommend online learning	3.59	1.33
28	Online classes satisfy my learning needs	3.46	1.12
31	Online classes make me more competitive	3.54	1.15

Note: if the mean is less than 4.20, this means that participants *disagreed*

Table 4 shows most of the students *do not* recommend the online classes (M=3.95). Most of them are not satisfied with learning through online classes. Also, they *disagreed* that they get the same learning from online classes and face to face classes (M=3.59).

However, most of the students *disagreed* on item 7 that they don't find difficulty in using Google meet or other online programs (M=3.8).

#### *The results of the open-ended questions*

The researchers asked for more elaboration about the advantages and disadvantages of online classes, 90% of the students whether they recommend or do not recommend online classes, they have *agreed* that online learning saves time, effort and it is easy to be accessed and reached. S26 said "Online learning saved my time and my effort too. Also, it saves my money for transportation". However, S12

said "There are no positives other than saving time and money". Also, 85% of the students agreed that it is better to use the online class for reviewing the material. Some of them mentioned other factors like; I feel more comfortable, relaxed and less shy but they are just two students. Also, S27 and S28 agreed that they participate in online more without hesitation. Also, S3 said, "It is good to get higher grades".

Most of the students have agreed on three negatives factors in the online classes and they are as the following: (1) 70% of the students refer to the interaction problem between students and the teacher; they said "The interaction between students and teacher are less than the interaction in the traditional classroom." (2) 90% agreed on the poor internet connection which makes online learning very hard for most of the students. Also, they refer to some issues like the limited number of electronic

devices in each home. (3) 50% of the students feel less motivated in the online classes.

Moreover, most of the students give the same solutions to make online classes more effective as they mentioned increasing the internet speed in the university and for instructors and students. Also, they mentioned some ideas to make the students be motivated and participate in the class. S30, S56 and S70 said that instructors should encourage and motivate the students by making slides, PowerPoint's, let them watch films and do some interesting activities".

In the last open-ended question (see Appendix), the researchers asked the student that if we resolve all of the obstacles from having good internet connection, instructors and students are well trained then what type of learning would you choose? 37 students out of 82 choose online classes. However, 45 students choose face to face classes. So, the results showed that most of the students still prefer the traditional classes (face to face classroom) but they think it is good this time because it will protect them from Coronavirus nothing more.

This study attempted to elicit perceptions of first year students at Hebron University towards advantages and disadvantages of online classes. It aimed to show the most efficient methods of learning from their point of view. For the purpose of this study, 82 students from two different English intensive courses have participated in this research. The researchers answered the following research questions according to the students' perspectives.

*What are the major benefits and challenges of fully online classes according to Hebron University students?*

As the finding showed, most of the students do not recommend online classes. Also, they focus on showing the negative side of it more than showing its advantages. For the disadvantages of online classes, students see that they don't interact or be motivated in the online classes. Also, they feel bored. S4 said, "It is important to see you physically in the classroom this will make us be motivated and participate more". This finding is in line with (2010) who noted the importance of the instructor's presence to establish proper patterns of communication, and enhance student motivation.

Furthermore, most of the students *strongly agreed* on the poor internet connection at Hebron University. This prevents the effectiveness of online classes. S33 said, "I can't concentrate in the online classes as the internet disconnects every 5

minutes". This problem is considered the main problem for most of the students. Mohammad (2020) found that online learning can't be effective in underdeveloped countries, where a majority can't get access to the internet due to technical as well as economic issues.

Also, most of the students *agreed* that "students and instructors are not trained enough to teach or learn in online classes". This makes the results of taking online classes be less satisfied for both students and instructors. Because as the result shows, students are not satisfied with online learning and do not see the learning and teaching process being delivered the same as face to face learning; That's why they prefer face to face lectures. S68 said "I don't accept online learning because I don't understand the material well in the online classes.

However, when the researchers asked for more illustration in open ended questions, most of the students agreed on the following advantages of the online classroom: (1) Easy to be reached and accessed. (2) Saves time, effort and money. (3) Easy to be reviewed

Despite the result in the questionnaire, the researchers find that they were neutral. They don't agree nor disagree about these advantages. Therefore, further research need to be conducted in this field.

According to the student's perspectives, what are the students' recommendations to overcome the challenges and the difficulties of online learning?

According to their perspectives, issues of connectivity are matters as 20% will recommend online classes if all of these problems will be solved. Also, they recommend training classes for both instructors and students in order to know how to deal with apps and programs like Zoom and Google meet because most of them find difficulty in using these apps (see table 4). So, after being trained, they may find online classes more effective for them. So it is about the quality of internet connection and the effort that instructors and students give. According to Arora (2019) a number of problems may arise due to lack of careful planning from instructors and students as well as implementation of online learning. Students may feel a sense of isolation, frustration, stress, in some cases and poor performance. Also, 40 % of the students recommend that universities should ask for increasing the speed of internet connection as well as scheduling a number of class training for both instructors and students to facilitate using online and replace it with face to face classes.

## CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has affected the traditional learning method of academic institutions across the whole world. Therefore, synchronous online classroom online learning was a fundamental topic that needs to be discussed. According to the survey that was distributed to 82 students, the result shows that students are not satisfied with the online classroom. They prefer and recommend traditional classes more as they participate, interact and be motivated more in it. They assume that online class has negatives more than positive things. However, they recommend contacting the responsible companies to solve the connectivity problem and they recommend training for students as well as instructors to make online learning sufficient.

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*Cohesion and coherence in written texts of health medical laboratory students*

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