EFL teachers' attitudes towards online learning in Palestinian high schools during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify teachers' perceptions towards online learning in teaching English language during the COVID-19 pandemic in Palestinian schools. The study sample included 418 male and female EFL teachers working in the schools of the education directorates of the Palestinian Ministry of Education in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The researcher employed a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative methods. Teachers were asked to fill a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, including 59 items and answer three open-ended questions. The researchers used the statistical analysis method. To analyze the three open-ended questions, the researchers employed the content analysis. Study findings have shown that EFL teachers had positive attitudes towards online learning in an emergency. Results also demonstrate that online learning developed students' communicative competence. Moreover, the study has portrayed that both high and primary school EFL teachers had positive attitudes towards online learning as it offered many opportunities for teachers and their students. Findings also reveal that teachers and their students faced many challenges of online EFL learning. The study recommends improving the technological infrastructure and online educational applications. It also suggests holding sufficient training courses and workshops for teachers, parents, and students.

Introduction

Technology has affected all sides of our lives in general. Language learning process has been highly impacted, developed, and grown by using technology in language learning process. The digital change of the educational systems in all levels has offered incorporating a new teaching–learning environment named e-learning (Berrocoso et al., 2020). Educational institutions, schools, colleges, and universities were utilizing to some extent online classes

just to facilitate the process of language learning before COVID-19 outbreak (Abu Safiyeh & Farrah, 2020; Farrah & Al-Bakri, 2020).

However, there have been two opposing opinions and ideas regarding the value and efficiency of online learning at Palestinian institutions. The first opinion claims that in online learning, students perform much better than traditional learning, and this can be concluded by their better result, increased course completion rates, student satisfaction, and their motivation levels in order to get more knowledge from online learning as stated by Bernard et al. (2014), Lockman and Schirmer (2020), and Ryan et al. (2016). The other opinion claims that face-to-face learners were more successful when compared with online learners as claimed by Adams et al. (2015), and Powers et al. (2016). The COVID-19 pandemic caused the terminating of classrooms all over the world while forcing 1.5 billion students and 63 million educators to unexpectedly to adjust their face-to-face typical academic model practices, wherever possible (Berrocoso et al., 2020).

The starting point in using technology integrated with the traditional classroom learning was the CALL method (Farrah, 2006). CALL started as the process to supplement language teaching in such as CD ROM, and online conferences by using computers and additional software's (Pennington, 1996). The CALL concept appeared to be one of the most researched keywords by investigating the usage of computers as assisting devices in language learning (Daud & Farrah, 2013).

According to Bao (2020), when the Coronavirus (COVID-19) spread in China, Chinese universities switched to online learning, so their students had to stay home and take online courses and based on an interpretation of students' replies on social media, they did not encounter operational technical obstacles. However, the matter was not that easy for teachers, as most teachers faced many difficulties, which are the lack of experience in teaching via the Internet or prior preparation or technical support from the technological education team.

Online learning theories developed upon other learning theories, as Picciano stated (2017) that there is no well-clear theory that online learning relies on. Online theories such as Community of Inquiry (COI), connectivism, and online collaborative learning (OCL) were built upon other learning theories, e.g., behaviorism, cognitivism, and social constructivism.

Online learning during COVID-19 pandemic

The Corona pandemic has led to many changes in our lives in the short and long term. The pandemic was first recognized in Wuhan, China in December 2019. Therefore, the governments all over the world have warned the public to take caution. It also disrupted the traditional educational practices. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever, as it led to the closure of schools, institutions, and other learning spaces all over the world as stated by Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021). This strategy of staying home has put in place the pressing need to create and carry out alternative educational and assessment approaches.

Recently, Palestinian universities were forced to shift to online-learning because of Coronavirus pandemic. Farrah and Al-Bakry (2020) said that the situation of online learning in Palestinian universities (Birzet University, An-Najah National University, Bethlehem University, Hebron University, Al-Quds University, and Palestine Ahliya University) during

the COVID-19 pandemic needs to have an   enormous effort in promoting the technological infrastructure also holding adequate training programs for everyone. However, the dynamic change to online learning in Palestine because of the Coronavirus assists the educational process to continue.

Affouneh et al. (2021) explored students' and faculty members' responses to universities' migration from face-to-face to online instruction as a result of the coronavirus. They used qualitative approach for data collection. They found that students and faculty members were overwhelmed and stressed at the beginning, but as they started to acclimate to online, faculty members were satisfied, but students seemed to be dissatisfied with this new approach to learning. Furthermore, faculty members and students both mentioned different challenges they had faced. Evaluating and assessing students was a main challenge for faculty members as the study analyzes the assessment and evaluation tools that they use in their online teaching.

Online learning in Palestinian schools

The population of the Palestinian community who are under the age of 18 is with 45.3%. Therefore, any incident on this large group of people will have a great effect on the society such as the Corona pandemic. This pandemic is exceptional in Palestine except during the first Intifada back in 1988 when schools were closed for three months.

According to Awad (2020) around 1.3 million students had to stop going to school during the lockdown in March 2020 and return has been limited and inconsistent, mostly as a hybrid between physical presence and online learning. Awad (2020) found that many students did not participate in the online educational activities during the lockdown period because of inaccessibility of internet, their teachers did not conduct any educational activities, and the children themselves were refusing to carry out or perform educational activities.

Shraim and Crompton (2020) examined how decision-makers and teachers have responded to offer education for all Palestinian students at the immediate onset of the COVID-19 outbreak and how technology is being used to continue education online. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants from parents, teachers, and decision-makers in Palestine. They reported various challenges including the widening of the education's digital divide and an increasingly negative attitude towards online education. They concluded that the national and international initiatives with a multi-stakeholder partnership could provide sustained, long-term, real solutions for online learning.

Online learning as any teaching tool has its own advantages and benefits and, in this part, we will talk about them. According to Kwofie and Henten (2011) online learning affords the chance for the material to be stored in different mediums and formats for a long time and reachable for long distances. Also, instructors can present these materials in various forms – text, sound, pictures, etc.

Even though that online learning has great advantages, it has many difficulties and limitations. In this section the researcher will shed the light on the most popular obstacles that face teachers and students. Kwofie and Henten (2011) stated that technical problems are likely to be the most fundamental challenge facing the online educational system implementation in developing countries. Sadeghi (2019) studied some hindrances of

employing online education like sophisticated technology. Thus, in situation of whatever hardware (i.e., laptops or tablets), software (e.g., reading and writing software, internet browsers) breakdown, the online class meeting will be paused or the learning process malfunctions. Ali (2020) observed some obstacles of using online learning such as a lack of technical support. Thus, education institutions need the basic information and communication technology infrastructure to effectively roll out online learning.

Likewise, Coman et al. (2020) pointed out that technical problems are the most important challenge regarding the implementation during the pandemic, followed by absence of technical skills. Additionally, online lectures encounter the problem of internet weaknesses interruption. As Ferri et al. (2020) stated that the technological challenges are mainly associated with the unreliability of internet connections and the insufficiency of the necessary required devices and equipment. Additionally, insufficient training for both teachers and students stands in front of effective learning and represents a disadvantage to online learning. Altunay (2019) indicated that orientation programs should be given to students at the beginning of the semester, he also emphasized on the importance of developing speaking activities for language learning to improve student-teacher interaction. Ferri et al. (2020) stated the pedagogical challenges are mainly related to teachers' and learners' inadequate of digital skills, the absence of organized material as opposed to the richness of online resources, lack of educated interaction, and lack of teachers' social and cognitive presence.

Fanous (2020) investigated the impact of asynchronous and synchronous e-feedback (electronic feedback) on EFL students' writing skills. The participants were 34 students a private university in Lebanon. She found that the asynchronous approach of providing e-feedback demonstrate to be more effective in promoting the quality of students writing as well as their engagement in the writing process. Farrah (2006) evaluated an online English language course for academic writing offered by a university in Malaysia. The revised version of the Institute for Higher Education Policy Standards (IHEP 2000) was used to determine whether the course met the quality standards for online learning. To collect data, questionnaires were administered interviews were conducted with teachers and students. The results show that the online support was missing and needs to be improved. To improve this, the study identified weaknesses should be addressed.

Bao (2020) researched online teaching strategies of teachers at Peking University education. Six strategies are presented to sum up the present online teaching experiences. She debated how teachers can apply effective instructional strategies to avoid undesirable learning circumstances for students and confirm the effectiveness of online learning. Finally, she inferred five rules of great influence in teaching practice for delivering effective online learning.

After the Corona pandemic, e-learning has become one of the most controversial topics around the world; accordingly, many researches have been conducted on the trends, attitudes, and perceptions of teachers and students towards online effectiveness and challenges. Farrah and Al-Bakry (2020) investigated Palestinian university students' opinion toward online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that great efforts should be made for improvements of the application of e-learning, and the technological infrastructure besides holding good training programs.

Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2020) investigated students' attitudes toward utilization of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesian education system. Hence, the study illustrates the challenges of 45 EFL students; the results revealed that the major challenges were weak internet networks and few direct interactions. Likewise, Zboun and Farrah (2021) examined students' perspectives about the advantages and challenges of a fully online classroom at Hebron University. The results indicate that students preferred face-to-face lessons. Due to the challenges, they face when using online learning such as poor internet connection, poor interaction, less motivation, less participation, and less comprehension.

Ghufron (2021) conducted survey investigations to detect non-English students' views on the implementation of EFL online learning amidst the COVID-19. To gather data, the researcher employed cross-sectional survey research designs employing questionnaires and interviews. The participants were 135 first-graders of the Islamic Education Program of a State Institute for Islamic Studies situated in Central Java, Indonesia. The findings indicated that the shift to online learning has undergone three main phases earning. The first phase was the preparation phase where the participants had high optimism of EFL online learning. In the second phase, the optimism turned into caution and forbearance at the implementation phase. At the third phase, the optimistic level increased. The researcher opined that teachers should be innovative in delivering instructions for learning, offering learning equipment, and selecting appropriate learning platforms.

Most of the above-mentioned studies explored benefits of online learning during COVID-19 at the university level. This study aims to examine the benefits of online language learning that is employed at schools as well as the difficulties of online language learning that is employed at schools. Additionally, it tries to offer some suggestions and solutions to overcome the online learning obstacles faced by teachers during the online learning transition.

Method

Research design

The researchers employed a mixed method design, which is an approach for examination that contains gathering qualitative and quantitative data as stated by Creswell (2013), quantitative data show an overall comprehension of an issue whereas qualitative data show a more detailed understanding of an issue. Collecting data by gathering both qualitative and quantitative methods give a better and complete understanding of the research problem rather than employing only one method because both methods show a different picture to the data (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Study population

The study population consisted of all teachers working in the schools of the directorates of the Palestinian Ministry of Education in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. 10% of the study population was selected as a sample of the study. The random number of the subjects of the sample became 418 male and female teachers. The data was collected in the second semester of the academic year 2020/2021.

Data Collection

According to McLeod (2018), the questionnaire is considered a very effective and fast examination tool. Accordingly, in this study the researchers used closed-ended questions in the questionnaire and presented by five points Likert scale. The items included in the questionnaire were inspired from particular studies related to the topic, such as Coman et al., 2020; Farrah & Al-Bakry, 2020; Zboun & Farrah 2021; Itmeizeh & Farrah, 2021).

The studies of Farrah and Al-Bakry, 2020, Itmeizeh and Farrah, 2021 had the largest influence on the development of this questionnaire. Farrah and Al-Bakry (2020) studied online learning for English language students in Palestinian universities during the Coronavirus outbreak: advantages, challenges, and solutions. Itmeizeh and Farrah (2020) studied the perceptions of English as a foreign language instructors and learners towards online applications at Al-Ahlia University and Hebron University in Palestine.

Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire

Before analyzing data using SPSS 25, validity and reliability of questionnaire was carried out. To validate the questionnaire, the researchers presented it in its initial form to 7 arbitrators from Palestinian universities who are experts in the field. They suggested some changes that were considered by the researchers. The scale included in its final form 59 items measuring English language teachers' attitudes toward online teaching in Palestinian schools (Promoting students' communicative competence, benefits, challenges, and solutions) (See Appendix A).

Meanwhile, reliability indicates that the value of the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for EFL teachers' attitudes toward online teaching in Palestinian schools (Promoting students' communicative competence, benefits, challenges, and solutions) was high, with a value of 0.92 which indicates that the scale has a high degree of stability and it is suitable for being implemented and being able to achieve the objectives of the study.

Findings and discussion

EFL teachers' attitudes towards online teaching in Palestinian schools

To answer the research question, the arithmetic means and standard deviations for measuring EFL teachers' attitudes towards online teaching in Palestinian schools (Promoting students' communicative competence, benefits, challenges, and solutions) were extracted, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for measuring the main domains

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Degree
Teachers' perceptions of the impact of online teaching on students' communicative competence	3.61	0.82	High
Benefits of online learning, as a teacher	3.81	0.75	High
Online learning difficulties for teachers and students	4.13	0.45	High
Suggestion and solutions to overcome the online learning obstacles	4.33	0.47	Very High

Total marks	3.97	0.48	High

The data in Table 1 indicate that English language teachers' attitudes toward online teaching in Palestinian schools came with a high score, with the mean overall score (3.97) and a standard deviation 0.48.

The results of the first question (Section A): To what extent does online learning utilized in schools meet students' communicative competence? To answer the question, arithmetic means and standard deviations were extracted to measure to what extent does online learning utilized in schools meet students' communicative competence, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of online learning to meet students' communicative competence

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Degree
Online learning helps shy students increase their interaction.	3.83	1.01	High
Online learning enables students' access information successfully.	3.75	1.07	High
Online learning helps students increase their confidence.	3.68	1.07	High
Online learning enables students to develop their inquiry learning skills.	3.68	0.94	High
Our students can learn 'Reading Skill' easily through online education.	3.61	1.07	High
Online learning helps in maintaining appropriate interaction with students.	3.61	1.03	High
Our students can learn 'Listening Skill' easily through online education.	3.55	1.23	High
Our students can learn 'Speaking Skill' easily through online education.	3.47	1.13	High
My students can use the online applications effectively.	3.44	1.17	High
Our students can learn 'Writing Skill' easily through online education.	3.43	1.26	High
Total marks	3.61	0.82	High

The data in Table 2 indicate that solutions to overcome the online learning obstacles scored a high degree, with an arithmetic mean of (3.61) and a standard deviation of 0.82.

As seen in Table 2, the highest score was for the item (Online learning helps shy students increase their interaction.) scored a high degree, with the arithmetic mean 3.83 and a standard deviation 1.01 with a high degree, while the lowest score obtained by the section (Our students. can learn 'Writing Skill' easily through online education.) It scored high, with the mean overall score 3.43 and a standard deviation 1.26.

The results of the second question (Section B): What are the benefits of online learning, as a teacher? To answer the question, the arithmetic averages, and standard deviations for measuring this question were extracted, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of benefits of online learning for teachers

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Degree
Online learning improves technological skills.	4.14	0.82	High
Online learning is an appropriate solution to rescue the educational process in emergencies.	4.08	0.98	High
I can effectively teach through online.	3.91	1.03	High
Utilizing online learning helps me in posting assignments easily to my students.	3.88	0.91	High
Utilizing online learning helps me in organizing my teaching strategies.	3.69	0.92	High
Utilizing online learning helps me in achieving the intended learning outcomes.	3.54	1.11	High
Utilizing online learning helps me in evaluating my students' learning outcomes.	3.45	1.28	High
Total marks	3.81	0.75	High

The data in Table 3 depict that the benefits of online learning, as a teacher scored a high degree, with the mean of the total score 3.81 and a standard deviation 0.75. As seen in table 3 that the highest score attained by the item (Online learning improves technological skills.), Where the arithmetic mean of the total score was 4.14 and a standard deviation 0.82 with a high degree, while the lowest score obtained by the item (Utilizing online learning helps me in Evaluating my students' learning outcomes. It scored a moderate degree, with an overall mean of 3.45 and a standard deviation 1.28.

The results of the third question (Section C): What are the online learning difficulties for teachers and students? The arithmetic means and standard deviations to measure online learning difficulties for Teachers and Students were extracted, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of online learning difficulties

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Degree
Lack of students' attendance is a real problem online learning.	4.41	0.74	Very high
Cheating is easy in online exams between students.	4.38	0.79	Very high
Wi-Fi/ internet/ networking are weak in Palestine for teachers and students.	4.36	0.73	Very high
Teachers increase their efforts in 'online education'.	4.26	0.84	Very high
Some students suffer from lack of privacy (noisy surrounding environment).	4.25	0.73	Very high
Students do not take online education seriously.	4.23	0.83	Very high
There is a Lack of equipment for online classes (smartphones, laptops, etc.)	4.23	0.76	Very high
Teachers cannot conduct assessment in a fair and objective manner in online learning.	4.15	0.79	High

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Degree
Parents do not take online education seriously.	4.13	0.87	High
There is an absence of reliable technical support for teachers and students.	4.12	0.81	High
Online learning does not give a true picture of the quality of learning.	4.11	0.85	High
There is a lack of appropriate training for students to use online applications.	4.06	0.83	High
There is a lack of sufficient training for teachers to teach online classes.	3.99	0.86	High
There is a lack of timely and appropriate feedback to students in online learning.	3.98	0.91	High
Online learning distracts our students' attention.	3.97	0.97	High
There is a difficulty of motivating students in online classes.	3.93	0.94	High
Online learning deprives low and moderate achievers from interacting and accomplishing their assignments.	3.91	0.93	High
Online learning makes it difficult to teachers to maintain proper interaction with students.	3.89	0.83	High
Total marks	4.13	0.45	High

The data presented in Table 4 indicate that online learning difficulties for teachers and students came with a high score, with the mean of the total score 4.13 and a standard deviation of 0.45.

As seen in Table 4 that the highest score obtained by the paragraph (Lack of students' attendance is a real problem online learning), where the arithmetic mean of the total score was 4.41 and a standard deviation 0.74 with a very high degree, while the lowest score obtained by the paragraph (Online learning makes it difficult to teachers to maintain proper interaction with students).

The results of the fourth question (Section D): What are the solutions to overcome the online learning obstacles?

Table 5. Means and standard deviations of solutions to overcome online learning obstacles

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Degree
The govt. should provide 'Teachers and students' with the basic technical support that they need in the online process.	4.47	0.72	Very high
The Palestinians need to strengthen their educational infrastructure, especially in 'online learning'.	4.41	0.68	Very high
There is need to develop online educational applications that prevent cheating in online exams.	4.41	0.73	Very high
There is need to encourage teachers to widen their resources meet the intended learning outcomes.	4.36	0.74	Very high

'Parents and Teachers' should motivate students to attend online classes.	4.35	0.75	Very high
There is a need to encourage parents to take online learning seriously and follow up with the requirements of online learning.	4.35	0.73	Very high
Our students and their parents need training in using the online platform and equipping them with the required technological skills.	4.32	0.75	Very high
There is need to improve an observing attendance system for students and sending them notification if they were absent.	4.31	0.72	Very high
There is need to build positive relationships between students and teachers.	4.31	0.81	Very high
There is need to develop online educational applications that offer all students to learn considering their abilities.	4.29	0.72	Very high
There is need to provide students with opportunities to show creativity.	4.29	0.75	Very high
Teachers need to build their capacity in online teaching and assessment.	4.27	0.75	Very high
There is need to encourage collaborative online activities.	4.26	0.74	Very high
There is need to grant students reasonable time to accomplish their assignments.	4.17	0.75	High
Total marks	4.33	0.47	Very high

The data in Table 5 indicate that suggestion and solutions to overcome the online learning obstacles came to a very high degree, with the arithmetic mean of the overall score 4.33 and a standard deviation 0.33.

As seen in table 10 that the highest score attained by the paragraph (The govt. should provide 'Teachers and students with the basic technical support that they need in the online process'). Where the arithmetic mean of the total score was 4.47 and a standard deviation 0.72 with a very high score, while the lowest score obtained by the paragraph (There is need to grant students reasonable time to accomplish their assignments) came with a high score, with the arithmetic mean of the overall score 4.17 and a standard deviation of 0.75.

Benefits, challenges, and solutions of online learning in Palestinian schools: qualitative insights

The researcher uses three open–ended questions as the third part of the questionnaire to identify teachers' opinions. The first is about the challenges that participants have faced, and the second one is about their opinions about the factors that could enhance the effectiveness of online teaching. Finally, a free question to express any thoughts they would like to add about this topic.

Almost all the teachers' responses emphasized that the weakness of the internet connection and the lack of internet access for teachers and their students is the greatest difficulty that faced online education. Approximately 200 responses agreed that internet problems were the most popular difficulty for both teachers and their students.

Teachers highly expressed the obstacle represented by the carelessness of parents which reflects their children seriousness many parents are not interested in following up their children one teacher responded: "students don't take online learning seriously and they believe teachers will repeat everything when they come back to school". Teachers must repeat what they teach online, face to face so few numbers of students participate effectively and very few numbers of them do their homework or even submit exams. While other parents attend class instead of their children and do their homework, they interfere negatively in their children's learning process by providing them with the answer without giving them the chance to think.

In addition, more than 170 participants highlighted the problem of students' attendance, one teacher said: "more than 50% of my students do not attend online class". Some teachers expressed that ignorance from parents and poverty lead them to neglect their children's education. While most of the other students who attend classes attend as listeners only without participating, they attend classes while doing other activities (playing games, eating, chatting, etc.) one teacher responded: "I have 3-6 students that are participating and the others are silent".

Further, other responses illustrate the challenges of technological infrastructure problems and lack of equipment and devices for both teachers and students. There is a lack of suitable online teaching and learning devices for the number of students within one family. One response expressed: "most parents cannot afford smartphones or laptops for their children. Also, the devices we use are below the international measurements".

They also suffer from the lack of sufficient training for teachers, students, and parents. They have poor technological abilities. They do not have experience in using online application and communication technology methods. Moreover, teachers believe that the surrounding environment represents a huge challenge. one teacher said: "sometimes I don't have control over the noise around me, and it's not always easy to find a quiet place, nor is it easy to force the people in my house to stop being too loud".

Teachers emphasize the problems of time, assessment, and attractive motivating activities, one teacher responded: "preparing for online classes takes double time". Teachers express that preparing for every lesson needs more time than the traditional face to face classes as they must find suitable activities that can achieve the required objectives and attract students' attention and let them participate effectively in online classes, another responded: "as a teacher, I need more time to prepare PowerPoint slides for each class". Moreover, teachers point out the difficulty of having a good and fair evaluation. One teacher replied: "online learning is not fair from all aspects". Another said: "Ministry of Education change of mind in many decisions regarding the assessment of students based on online learning". Teachers believe that evaluating students in a good and fair manner based on the online learning is impossible.

Almost all the teachers' responses emphasized that solving the problem of the weak internet connection and increase the speed of the internet for teachers and their students is

the best solution to enhance online education effectively. One teacher responded: "supply internet services freely to teachers and students". Another teacher responded: "government should suspend and increase the salary for teachers also grant them free high internet".

Most of the teachers' responses emphasize the importance of having positive attitudes from teachers, parents, and students toward online education, teachers indicate the significance of raising society's awareness of the importance of online education which reflects on the students` seriousness, many parents are not interested in following up their children, one teacher responded: "increase the awareness between the families about the importance of online teaching during the difficult circumstances". There should be a cooperation between society and schools. Another teacher replied: "providing parents with a workshop regarding the importance of online learning to manage fairly well in emergencies situations as COVID-19".

In addition, most participants focused on the significance of students' real attendance, one teacher stated: "Ministry of Education should be more serious in connection with considering online learning as a formal system for learning. This would help teachers in forcing students to attend online learning classes". Teachers believe that should be rules to force students to attend online classes. Another responded: "the Ministry of education should impose sanctions on students who absent meetings". Some teachers recommend putting more punishment for students' absence, other teachers express that students should be encouraged by their parents and be more responsible so they would be active learners and participate more effectively. Some teachers suggest rewarding students who attend classes effectively such as giving them extra marks. One teacher expressed: "first of all and most importantly making students believe it's fun as well as a responsibility to study and cooperate with their teachers". Thus, teachers believe that raising the sense of responsibility in both students and teachers and their families is a very important factor.

Moreover, teachers' responses illustrate the resolution to the factor of technological infrastructure problems and lack of equipment and devices for both teachers and students by providing the families who are in need with sufficient devices. One response expressed: "providing our students and teachers with technological devices". Therefore, the government should supply teachers and students with the needed equipment.

Teachers also indicate the significance of offering effective training for the teacher, student, and their parents. The Ministry of Education should support teachers and students with encouraging courses on how to use and get the best benefits of educational applications. Many teachers emphasize the importance of designing applications for online teaching such as planning courses for teachers, providing more online recourses to save time in preparing for online classes to help them, providing appropriate objective assessment system for their students, and motivating activities to enhance the online teaching.

Many teachers express their concerns about the effectiveness of online learning in Palestinian schools. One teacher responded: "In our country, face-to-face education is better. We will not be able to reach the level of education in Europe and America". They believe that we are not ready for such an advanced kind of teaching experience. One teacher replied: "online learning is not the appropriate solution for teachers and students in Palestine yet". They think that we are so far from teaching online, another responded: "what happened in Palestine is trying to apply learning distance. And believe that it is successful".

Moreover, some teachers indicate their concerns about the side effects of online learning for both teachers and students such as wasting teachers' time and efforts, one teacher replied: "online teaching waste my time to teach my children and to have a great time with them". They also have fears of the effects of using electronic devices on teachers and students' health. Online learning makes students addicted to the net.

On the other hand, we have the majority of teachers who defend online learning and support it. They think it is the panacea for the lockdown of the schools to rescue the educational year, they indicate that in the current situation it is a disaster to leave students at home without education. One teacher responded: "having something is better than having nothing. Despite all the difficulties the whole community faces in online teaching and learning, it is better than doing nothing". While others expressed: "health is first and last".

Many teachers believe in online learning effectiveness if teachers tried their best and give it time and chance to get the desired results. One teacher replied: "in my opinion, the big role in changing this negative image is on the teachers themselves who must be patient and ambitious in this process of teaching, which will for sure be reflected on the students, parents and all the society".

While other teachers think online learning would be successful if the government supported it from all aspects. One teacher expressed: "government should support our education system especially, in this emergency case. It should provide teachers and students with the equipment needed; for example, computers and strong network, training programs for teachers. And special instructions for parents to follow up their kids in primary schools not to interfere in teaching English in a wrong way".

Finally, teachers express their happiness in using online learning and having great fun experiencing new methods of teaching. One teacher replied: "I really enjoyed using online teaching and I was happy for practicing it but I am not satisfied with the results of this method".

Teachers agree that online learning meets students' communicative competence. This is clear in their responses to the questionnaires and this conforms to the results of other studies, such as Erarslan and Arslan (2019) in which they searched the effects of students' online educational experiences on their study practices. It was found that online learning contributed to students' acquisition of independent electronic study skills. In the questionnaire teachers highly agree that online learning enables students to develop their inquiry learning skills. Teachers also agree that online learning enables students' access information successfully. Teachers highly agree that online learning helps shy students increase their interaction. For example, teachers believe that online learning enhances their students' confidence during the COVID-19 pandemic and this is evident in their responses to the questionnaire. In the questionnaire they gave a very high average for the items of online learning helps shy students increase their interaction and online learning helps students increase their confidence during the COVID-19 pandemic transition. Therefore, teachers keep appropriate interactions with their students.

Teachers also highly agree that online learning promotes students four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). In the questionnaire, teachers gave the highest score to reading skill then listening skill then speaking skill then writing skill and this conforms to the results of other studies such as Rodrigues and Vethamani (2015) in which they studied

the impact of online learning on students' development of speaking skills. They found that online learning gives better language proficiency and stronger self-confidence in the improvement of speaking skills. Also, Kurucova et al. (2018) found that online learning had an observable improvement in English language learning specially in students' performance as far as for the listening and speaking skills.

Regarding teachers' benefits of online learning during the transition of the COVID-19 pandemic from face to face to online learning, they highly agree in their responses to the questionnaire that online learning improves their technological skills, this item takes the highest score in that section and this generally resembles the findings of the study of Al-Bakry and Farrah (2020).

Teachers highly agree that online learning has become a magical solution to rescue the educational process in unprecedented global pandemic, as it allows teachers to hold their class at any time and place with no other alternatives available to continue the educational process in critical situations that impose lockdown and prevent face-to-face learning similar to what Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) and Zboun and Farrah (2021) conclude in their study.

Another advantage is teachers' abilities to teach effectively through online. As online teaching also helps them in all of their teaching steps (organizing teaching strategies, posting assignments, evaluating, and achieving outcomes) and this resembles the findings of study of Itmeizeh and Farrah (2021).

As for the negative points of online learning and the difficulties faced teachers and their students during the COVID-19 outbreak, this study findings are similar to what the following studies conclude: Coman et al. (2020), Mahyoob (2020), Ferri et al. (2020), Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021), Erarslan and Arslan (2019) and Zboun and Farrah (2021). This is clear in the high average of the items in the challenges section in questionnaire. Teachers agree that technological issues represent huge obstacles for both teachers and students. They also agree that pedagogical problems and social issues prevent teachers from providing effective online teaching in emergencies.

In this study, teachers highly agree that the challenge of the lack of students' attendance is a real online learning problem and this is clear in the questionnaire in the closed – questions as this item has the highest average in the challenges category and in the open-ended question. Students and their parents do not take online education seriously. This is similar to what Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) discussed in their study. Another challenge which most of the teachers encountered is cheating in online exams between students which matches Al-Bakry and Farrah's (2020) study, they found that the evaluation and assessment system is not fair.

Another major aspect regarded as a negative point of online learning by the learners came under the category of challenges of online learning is the weakness of the internet in Palestine for teachers and students and the lack of internet access for teachers and their students and this is clear in the high mean of this item in the closed question and the open-ended question in questionnaire. This match up to with what other studies conclude such a Maatuk et al. (2021), Zboun and Farrah (2021), Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2020), Mahyoob (2020), Erarslan and Arslan (2019), and Ali (2020).

The findings of this study show very high mean of the item (The govt. should provide 'Teachers and students' with the basic technical support that they need in the online process) in both the suggestion section and the open-ended question in questionnaire. This is similar to what the following studies also conclude: Zboun and Farrah (2021), Al-Bakry and Farrah (2020), and Rahman (2020). The government needs to strengthen their educational infrastructure, especially in 'online learning' like Maatuk et al. (2021), Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2020), Erarslan and Arslan (2019), Rahman (2020), and Mahyoob (2020). There is a need to develop online educational applications that prevent cheating in online exams and offering observing attendance system for students and sending them notification if they were absent. Therefore, online education will be more effective when the government support students and parents and grant for them free high internet.

Conclusion

This research examined EFL Palestinian teachers' attitudes toward using online learning applications during COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers agree that online learning meets students' communicative competence and increases students' confidence and interactions. Further, online learning develops students' inquiry learning skills as they can use online applications and access information effectively. Teachers agree that online learning has many advantages and offer opportunities for the teachers and for their students. Teachers` technological skills improved so they can teach through online effectively. Online learning helps teachers in organizing their teaching strategies. They can post assignments and evaluate their students easily. Also, teachers agree that they can successfully achieve the intended outcomes through online learning.

However, online learning has many serious challenges for both teachers and their students. Teachers highlighted that the challenge of the lack of students' attendance is a real problem online learning. Also, there is a lack of equipment for online class, such as smartphones, laptops, etc. Another major challenge which most of the teachers faced is cheating in online exams between students beside the challenge of the Wi-Fi/internet/ networking is weak in Palestine for teachers and students. Further teachers' emphasis that students suffer from lack of privacy (noisy surrounding environment). Meanwhile, most of the teachers agree that 'online education' increase their efforts. They also cannot conduct fair assessment. Almost all the teachers highlighted the obstacle of the absence of reliable technical support and sufficient training for teachers and students.

The researchers feel that the government should provide both teachers and students with the basic technical support that they need in the online process. Also, it needs to strengthen the educational infrastructure, especially in 'online learning'. Moreover, the Palestinians need to develop online educational applications that prevent cheating in online exams, to improve the observing attendance system for students, and to develop online educational applications that offer all students to learn considering their abilities. Parents and students should be encouraged to take online learning seriously, take training in using the online platform, and motivate their children. Teachers should be encouraged to widen their resources to meet the intended learning outcomes, to build their capacity in online teaching and assessment, to grant students reasonable time to accomplish their assignments, and to build positive relationships between students and teachers.

The researchers believe that there is a need for more future research to explore some new approaches/methods or ways to facilitate the transform towards the online language learning and teaching process. Other studies are needed to explore ideas about maximizing interaction among students. Moreover, researchers can investigate the perceptions of high school students in order to improve online learning in the EFL context. Finally, practical research and class-observations may provide more insight about this matter. Finally, to enhance online education there is a need to offer workshops sessions and training courses for teachers, parents, and students to develop their technical skills and increase their awareness about the importance of online learning.

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Appendix. Teacher and student questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to gather information about English language teachers' attitudes toward online teaching in Palestinian schools (***Promoting Students' Communicative Competence, benefits, challenges and solutions***).

The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers' attitudes toward online teaching and to provide solutions to overcome some of the difficulties of utilizing online teaching. Your answers will be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only. Thank you for your cooperation.

Part one: Demographic data
Please answer these questions first before you continue on to the following questions:
- Gender: male: ☐ / female: ☐
- Age: ☐ 22-30   ☐ 31-40   ☐ 41-50   ☐ 51 + 61

- I received sufficient training to teach online.

☐ Yes   ☐ No
- I am satisfied with my online teaching experience.
  ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- I have strong Wi-Fi connection:
  ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- I have the necessary technological devices (smartphone, laptop, etc.) that I need for online teaching.
  ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- Educational level.
  ☐ PHD   ☐ BA   ☐ Diploma
  ☐ MA   ☐ High Diploma
- Level I teach:
  ☐ primary level   ☐ high school level

  City: ....

Part two: Section A. Teachers' perceptions of the impact of online teaching on students' communicative competence

	Items: Students	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Our students can learn 'Listening Skill' easily through online education.					
2	Our students can learn 'Speaking Skill' easily through online education.					
3	Our students can learn 'Reading Skill' easily through online education.					
4	Our students can learn 'Writing Skill' easily through online education.					
5	My students can use the online applications effectively.					
6	Online learning helps students increase their confidence.					
7	Online learning helps shy students increase their interaction.					
8	Online learning enables students to develop their inquiry learning skills.					
9	Online learning helps in maintaining appropriate interaction with students.					
10	Online learning enables students' access information successfully.					

Section B: Benefits of online learning, as a teacher:

	Items: Teachers	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	I can effectively teach through online.					
2	Utilizing online learning helps me in organizing my teaching strategies.					
3	Utilizing online learning helps me in posting assignments easily to my students.					
4	Utilizing online learning helps me in evaluating my students' learning outcomes.					
5	Utilizing online learning helps me in achieving the intended learning outcomes.					
6	Online learning improves technological skills.					

7	Online learning is an appropriate solution to rescue the educational process in emergencies.					

Section C: Online learning difficulties for teachers and students

	Items: Teachers and Students	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Teachers increase their efforts in 'online education'.					
2	Online learning makes it difficult to teachers to maintain proper interaction with students.					
3	There is a lack of sufficient training for teachers to teach online classes.					
4	Teachers cannot conduct assessment in a fair and objective manner in online learning.					
5	Online learning does not give a true picture of the quality of learning.					
6	Cheating is easy in online exams between students.					
7	Online learning deprives low and moderate achievers from interacting and accomplishing their assignments.					
8	There is a lack of timely and appropriate feedback to students in online learning.					
9	There is a lack of appropriate training for students to use online applications.					
10	There is an absence of reliable technical support for teachers and students.					
11	There is a difficulty of motivating students in online classes					
12	Some students suffer from lack of privacy (noisy surrounding environment)					
13	Lack of students' attendance is a real problem online learning					
14	Students do not take online education seriously.					
15	Parents do not take online education seriously.					
16	Online learning distracts our students' attention					
17	There is a lack of equipment for online classes (smartphones, laptops, etc.)					
18	Wi-Fi/internet/networking are weak in Palestine for teachers and students.					

Part three: Open-ended items

1. *In your opinion, what are the three most important challenges you and your students have already faced during online teaching?*

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2. *In your opinion, what are three factors that could enhance the effectiveness of online teaching?*

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3. *Is there anything else you would like to add?*

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