

Challenges of ELT during the New Normal: A Case Study of Malaysia, Turkey and Palestine

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Abstract: Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019, which has since proved to be a pandemic of variants, the educational landscape has undergone a drastic transformation as educational institutions across the globe have shifted en masse into online learning, resulting in an unprecedented paradigm shift from on-campus face-to-face instruction to a remote teaching model. Pivotal and timely, this applied linguistic survey research, aimed to investigate this “forced immersion” into academic cyberspace and the challenges created by this “emergency adoption” of virtual education by exploring the experiences, challenges and perceptions of 50 English language faculty members affiliated with three universities in three different countries. The study sought to identify and document (1) the effectiveness of online teaching, (2) the difficulties of its implementation, (3) student interaction and engagement in the online environment, and (4) factors that could enhance its efficacy. The study employed a descriptive quantitative research approach. The study concluded that the success of online distance learning is contingent on several issues. This case study provides educators and educational leaders, based on the expressed perceptions and needs of faculty, with pedagogical insights, which could be of significance to institutional strategic planning and professional development. The study generates knowledge related to applied linguistic and educational research and furthers our understanding of the challenges of online learning.

Keywords: COVID-19; ELT; online teaching; online learning; perceptions; New Normal.

1. Introduction

Educational processes have undergone many changes due to technological developments during the last century. One major and drastic change, however, in the 21st century is the recent major shift from the traditional to online classroom since early 2020 (Ramli *et al.*, 2022) caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), identified at the end of 2019 in

Wuhan, China (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021), and its rapid spread across the globe, and since March 2020 has resulted in a closure of educational institutions and a ban on face-to-face teaching, leading to ‘an unprecedented massive “migration” from traditional in-class face-to-face education to online education (Bao 2020:113). COVID-19 has forced educational institutions across the globe to move entirely online and adopt online delivery for the foreseeable future.

This educational transformation from the physical to the virtual classroom environment has posed “a major challenge to the global education community” (Huang *et al.*, 2020), creating a novel experience and posing a challenge for many faculty, learners and educational institutions. Indeed, this unprecedented complete transformation in the act of teaching and learning has brought online education and its effectiveness for the first time under closer scrutiny, emphasising an earlier need for studies that deal with online teaching and its effectiveness (Frazer *et al.*, 2017; Wingo *et al.*, Moss 2017, Farrah and Al-Bakri 2020).

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to identify and document English language faculty challenges and perceptions of online teaching and its effectiveness in the language classroom, especially in the English language classroom, at Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia; Ibn Haldun University, Turkey; and Hebron University, Palestine. The study, therefore, aimed to shed light on the skepticism surrounding this “emergency adoption” of virtual education, seeking, in particular, to explore and compare English language faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of online teaching; investigate faculty perceptions of student interaction and engagement in the online environment; identify the difficulties of its implementation, and; determine the factors that could enhance its efficacy. This is to eventually provide some insights on the efficacy of online education/online learning — especially in the language classroom — and so inform strategic planning and professional development planning based on the expressed perceptions and needs of faculty. Understanding the expressed perceptions and challenges of faculty could benefit and provide educational institutions and other education stakeholders with insights about the kind of teaching and learning support, adjustment and innovation required by such stakeholders to mitigate such challenges. The study sought to generate knowledge related to applied linguistic and educational research and further our understanding of distance/online education.

2. Literature review

2.1 Online teaching/learning

Online learning or online distance learning (ODL) is any form of learning conducted partly or wholly over the Internet (Bates 2020). Online teaching and learning is no longer a new concept. In a study involving a systematic literature review of the definitions of online learning, Singh and Thurman (2019) trace back online learning as “a concept and keyword” for more than two decades, beginning in 1988. They state that the concept “online learning” as a term was first used in 1995 “when the web-based system WebCT was developed as the first Learning Management System (LMS), which later became Blackboard” (p. 289).

Online education has been defined by some researchers. Johnson *et al* (2000) define online learning as “a form of distance education delivered over the Internet” (p. 29). According to Carry and Willis (2001 as cited in Jamlan (2004), online learning is “any form of learning that utilizes a computer or technological network for delivery, interaction, facilitation” (p. 2). Becker (1991 as cited also in Jamlan 2004) views online learning as covering “a wider set of applications and processes, which include Web-based learning and virtual classrooms” (*ibid.*). Jamlan (*ibid.*) himself defines online learning as “acquisition and use of information distributed and perceived by technological means.” Online education, according to Preveen (2016) is typically classified into three modes: synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid.

Singh and Thurman (2019) define online education as learning experiences in synchronous or asynchronous educational environments using different technological devices such as mobile phones, tablets, laptops, desktops, etc. with internet access. In these environments, students can be anywhere (independent) to learn and interact with instructors and other students (p. 10).

Bolliger and Wasilik’s (2009 as cited in Dymont *et al.*, 2013) define online education as “a process by which students and teachers communicate with one another and interact with course content via Internet-based learning technologies” (p. 137).

2.2 Review of past studies

Available literature on online education suggests that there is a scarcity and that there are gaps in research concerning faculty’s experiences and challenges in teaching online, especially with the connection to the novel COVID-19 pandemic. Frazer and associates (2017), for example, state that “researchers on e-learning experiences involving faculty and students recommend a need for additional research” (p.2).

This section aims to review literature that deals with the concept and use of online teaching or online education or any of its many related or synonymous concepts or terms such as “open education,” “distance education,” “distance learning,” “virtual learning,” “remote learning,” “online learning,” and “e-learning” (Jamlan, 2004), “web-based education” (Curtain 2002 as cited in Singh and Thurman, 2019), and more recently “flexible learning,” “cyberlearning” and “cyberteaching” (Huang *et al.*, 2020). The review involves key literatures produced pre and post-COVID-19; it also looks at studies that deal with the concept in terms of faculty perceptions of the online environment and its effectiveness and challenges, especially in the English language classroom.

Online learning as noted in the previous section is the experience of using different devices in synchronous or asynchronous environments where students can learn remotely and communicate with teachers and other students (Singh and Thurman, 2019).

Huang and associates (2020) in their study subtitled “The Chinese Experience in Maintaining Undisrupted Learning in COVID-19 Outbreak,” stated that the “Chinese Ministry of Education has launched an initiative entitled “Disrupted

Classes, Undisrupted Learning” to provide flexible online learning to hundreds of millions [sic] students from their homes” (p.1).

Though perceived by many as “a major breakthrough in teaching and learning” and is “gaining popularity,” some researchers such as Johnson, *et al* (2000) found that online instruction “is not free from criticism.” Studies have suggested that there are barriers and faculty concerns about the effectiveness and so the embrace of online education. Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) conclude that in developing countries “Internet bandwidth is relatively low with lesser access points, and data packages are costly in comparison to the income of the people in many developing countries, thus making accessibility and affordability inadequate [...] The affordability and accessibility for all the learners of varied economic background is identified as a challenge.”

In another recent study by Mishra, *et al.* (2020) from Mizoram University, one faculty member perceived that the change or move to online teaching and learning is “a very challenging task to accept” and that “it will take time from both sides to acquaint with new changes (5).” Another faculty member interviewed in the same study stated that “online classes are problematic [...] in certain subjects where the content is abstract, many concepts exist that need real face-to-face interaction for complete understanding” (6). Commenting on another aspect or cost of online education, this interviewee, an Associate Professor, observed that “relying on online interaction is detrimental to the health of the eyes and general body health too” (*ibid.*).

In a study by Evans *et al.* (2020) reporting their experiences as English language instructors in London, they stated that they were not ready or prepared to teach online and even cast doubts about whether their lessons were successful. According to a study by Wingo *et al.* (2017) about faculty perceptions of teaching online that presented the findings of “a synthesis of 67 empirical studies,” published between 1995 and 2015 about online teaching, it was stated that despite the increasing demand for higher education faculty in the United States are reluctant to teach online for several factors such as fear of change, concerns about the reliability of technology, technical support and workload issues.

In a study by Bao (2020), the researcher, after stating that the outbreak of the COVID-19 had caused “Chinese universities to close the campuses and forced them to initiate online teaching (p. 113)” and learning, discussed five principles needed to “effectively deliver large-scale online education” (*ibid.*). These principles as stated by the study are:

- (a) high relevance between online instructional design and student learning,
- (b) effective delivery on online instructional information,
- (c) adequate support provided by faculty and teaching assistants to students;
- (d) high-quality participation to improve the breadth and depth of student's learning, and
- (e) contingency plan to deal with unexpected incidents of online education platforms (*ibid.*).

And so for online teaching to be effective, Bao (2020) stated through the case analysis of Peking University's online education that those “five principles of high-

impact teaching practice” are required to “effectively deliver large-scale online education” (ibid.).

In a study on nursing (2017) in a university in the United States known for its experience in online learning environments, emphasized the role of active learning and the importance of providing timely feedback and having personal interaction. The participants in their study as reported by the researchers “viewed effective online teaching practices as an instructor who (a) facilitates student learning; (b) aims to feel connected with students in the classroom; (c) shares experiences; (d) is approachable; (e) establishes mutual comfort; and (f) is responsive to students’ needs” (p. 6).

In a 2017 study exploring the perceptions of 314 university faculty members as they relate to the online instructional environment, institutional and personal factors, along with student engagement and active learning, Walters and associates found that in terms of faculty satisfaction with the online educational environment (online environment scale), “[t]he highest levels of satisfaction were with accessibility for the teacher and the students. The lowest level of satisfaction was with the effectiveness of communication tools, with the second lowest overall satisfaction rate being with the reliability of online technology (p. 14).” The researchers concluded that “[o]nline support personnel may want to focus a substantial amount of their efforts on the reliability of online technology and the effectiveness of communication tools for both the faculty and students” (ibid.). The researchers also found that in terms of faculty engagement (personal factors scale) the faculty indicated “the highest confidence with general ability to teach in an online environment; the area rated lowest was the ability to provide feedback to students quickly enough” (p.11).

In another study, Chiasson, Terras, and Smart (2015) formulated faculty perceptions in three conclusions. The first conclusion was that the “issues of time and incentives” was among the considerations of the faculty when it came to “moving a face-to-face class to an online course.” They stated that the teachers “thought that their workload increased” (p. 232). Therefore, they concluded that “compensation for course development was perceived as necessary” (p. 236). In their second conclusion, the researchers stated that depending on whether a teacher chose the synchronous or asynchronous mode of online delivery, “a face-to-face classroom experience is difficult to replicate in the online environment without adjustments” (p. 237). They found that for those who delivered the course synchronously, “online did not require different instructional tools like it did teaching asynchronously” (ibid.). In the third conclusion, they found that role of the teacher had shifted to facilitator; from that of the “knowledge dispenser” to that of the “resource provider,” and from that of “authority” to that of a “facilitator” (ibid.); which as postulated by the faculty, as reported in the study, made online teaching to have made them “more efficient and effective teachers” (ibid.).

In a study dealing with online teaching — teaching pre-service teachers — Dymont and associates (2013) while discussing the benefits of online education, also stated that research “also points to the significant challenges that present in this new world of online education” (p. 135).

In another recent study by Chahkandi (2021) sought to understand the perceptions of EFL faculty on the design and execution of online learning during COVID-19. The researcher reported challenges reported to faculty such as adaptability struggle, infrastructure, and pedagogical challenges such as the on-way direction of information transfer from tutors to students and the reluctance of students to participate in classes. The researcher also reported challenges related to students such as inadequate distribution of ICT, the lack of self-motivation, and lack of interaction where keeping students engaged was a challenge.

This review of the literature shows that despite the availability of such studies on various aspects of online education such as its benefits, challenges, criticisms, principles of high-impact online teaching, key elements of effective online teaching and learning, elements of engagement of both students and faculty, faculty perceptions of the efficacy of the online environment, there are still gaps in this area, especially in connection with the perceptions of English language faculty of online teaching and its effectiveness in the language classroom. There is no single study that adequately covers in-depth English language faculty members' perceptions of the online environment, and its effectiveness in the language classroom where light is also especially being shed on interaction, central to language learning. It is evident that further research on this pertinent issue is warranted. This, in addition to the current paradigm shift in the educational environment following the outbreak of COVID-19, provided the grounds for the present survey educational research to fill this void in the current literature — challenges of ELT during the New Normal amid the COVID-19 pandemic as perceived by English language faculty in the language classroom.

By exploring faculty perceptions, the study sought to achieve the following objectives:

1. Explore English language faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of online teaching.
 2. Examine if there are any significant differences in the perceptions of English language faculty of the effectiveness of online teaching in the language classroom at Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia; Ibn Haldun University, Turkey; and Hebron University, Palestine.
 3. Identify language faculty perceptions of student interaction and engagement in the online environment.
 4. Identify the difficulties of implementing online teaching/learning.
 5. Determine the factors that could enhance the efficacy of online teaching.
- To meet these objectives and to guide the inquiry of finding out about this paradigm shift in the educational process, especially regarding English language online faculty perceptions of teaching online amid COVID-19 and its effectiveness in the language classroom, this study posed the following five overarching research questions:
1. What are the perceptions of English language faculty of the effectiveness of online teaching in the language classroom, at Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia; Ibn Haldun University, Turkey; and Hebron University, Palestine?

2. Are there any significant differences in the perceptions of English language faculty of the effectiveness of online teaching in the language classroom at these universities?
3. What are language faculty perceptions of student interaction and engagement, central to language learning, in online teaching?
4. What are the difficulties of implementing online teaching/learning?
5. What are the factors that could enhance the effectiveness of online teaching?

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

This study sought to explore and compare the perceptions of English language faculty towards the efficacy of online teaching in the language classroom. The study took English language faculty at Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia; Ibn Haldun University, Turkey; and Hebron University, Palestine as cases for the study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a case study research explores an individual, environment, occurrence, phenomenon, or other forms of topic of review to infer essential themes and findings that help to forecast potential developments, uncover previously unknown problems that can be translated into applicable practices, and/or offer a pathway to better understanding a major research problem. Creswell and Creswell (2018) further explain that a case study research paper typically discusses a single topic of examination, but case study papers may also be conceived as a comparative study showing connections between two or more topics. The methods used to research a case may settle within an analytical framework of quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. The study used a descriptive survey research design with a quantitative approach. Descriptive research describes and interprets the current status (Charles 1998). It aims to describe a population, situation or phenomenon — faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of online teaching, in this case. The quantitative approach, according to Etikan, et al, (2016) is “intended to achieve breadth of understanding” (p. 3). Quantitative research is used when the goal is to quantify people’s views and attitudes or perceptions through the use of numbers. The study is also considered exploratory as it seeks to uncover opinions and facts.

3.2 Participants

The study was conducted in 2020/2021 at Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia; Ibn Haldun University, Turkey; and Hebron University, Palestine. The sampling method chosen for this case study is non-probability sampling. Non-probability is a sampling method which conducts non-random selection as per convenience and/or certain criteria to be followed in order to collect data easily. Using the total sampling method, a technique of non-probability or purposive sampling used “where the entire population that meet the criteria (e.g. specific skill set, experience, etc.) is included in the research being conducted (Etikan *et al.*, 2016:3),” the participants of this research were all the faculty members of the English departments at these universities (seventy faculty members). The use of the

total sampling method is justified by the relatively small number of cases investigated (*ibid.*).

The rationale behind the inclusion of more than one university was to corroborate the results of the study about the perceptions of effectiveness. As for the selection of these three universities, in particular, for this study was that these universities rely largely on the physical classroom or face-to-face learning rather than the online environment. COVID-19 has forced almost every educational establishment across the globe, including these three universities to “shift on-campus instruction to a remote teaching model” (Lederman 2020), thus creating a challenge for these three universities whose educational practices were largely on-campus and in-person. The choice of language faculty, in particular, was besides limitations of the study, justified by the nature of interaction required in language classes as interaction is the genesis of language learning — and actually all kinds of learning for this matter. Active engagement and interaction are not only facilitative in the process of language learning but also causative. The study, therefore, sought to see if the online environment could be interactive enough.

3.3 Instruments

Survey-questionnaire was employed in this linguistic applied survey research to collect perceptual data from English language faculty perceptions of the efficacy of the online teaching environment and its effectiveness in the language classroom vis-à-vis on-campus or in-class face-to-face instruction. Surveys can elicit information about attitudes or perceptions that are otherwise difficult to measure using observational techniques (McIntyre 1999). However, this type of research method is not simply amassing and tabulating facts but includes proper analyses, interpretation, comparisons, identification of trends and relationships. The questionnaire survey, as a tool for data collection that is “usually in written form, consisting of open and/or closed questions and other probes requiring a response from subjects” (Nunan 1992), is time and cost-efficient; convenient for respondents; relatively easy to construct; and can be easily administered to a large number of subjects; yielding data that is manageable, and relevant to obtain accurate quantitative measures (Dörnyei 2007; Bryman 2016). “The results of a questionnaire survey are typically quantitative, although the instrument may contain some open-ended questions that will require a qualitative analysis” (Dörnyei 2007:101).

3.4 Data collection procedure

Based on the method employed in this study, a questionnaire was developed by the researchers. The questionnaire was properly designed based on the literature review conducted, and the research objectives and questions to help elicit the kind of data required for answering these research questions and so achieve the objectives. The questionnaire was developed entirely by the researchers. This was again to ensure that the specific questions and objectives of this survey research would be addressed and met. The questionnaire comprised 38 items constituting six constructs: Faculty Perceptions of Institutional Readiness and Support; Faculty Perceptions of Online

Teaching and its Effectiveness; Faculty Perceptions of Self-efficacy about Online Teaching; Faculty Perceptions of Student Interaction and Engagement in the Online Language Classroom; Faculty Perceptions of Challenges of Online Teaching/Learning; and Faculty Perceptions of the Impact of Online Teaching on Students' Communicative Competence, followed by a section about demographic data.

The questionnaire consisted of two types of items: Likert or closed-ended (35 items) and open-ended (3 items). The inclusion of certain partially open-ended items was meant to serve as a cross-triangulation method to elicit richer exploratory/descriptive survey data as this would require a qualitative analysis, which would increase the validity of the research findings, and thus strengthen the stand of the researchers. The use of qualitative data can help to increase the accuracy of data analysis and its findings. The questionnaire was scored on a typical five-point Likert response scale, consisting of: 1) strongly disagree; 2) disagree; 3) neutral; 4) agree; and 5) strongly agree. The questionnaire was constructed and distributed through Google Forms, a tool used for creating and analyzing online survey. Being distributed through Google Forms, however, ensured flexibility in time and location. In general, the questionnaire took approximately four weeks to be developed and another four weeks for data to be collected. The time allocated for completing the questionnaire was approximately 15 minutes. The data was obtained through administering an online questionnaire, distributed via e-mail.

Designed using Google Forms, the survey questionnaire was meticulously constructed to be applicable to the study's population in terms of the perception of the efficacy of remote teaching in the language classroom. To ensure validity, the first draft of the questionnaire was thoroughly examined by the co-researchers in a 4-hour videoconference via Google Meet (initial piloting of the item pool). Clarity and relevance were checked at this stage and revisions and modifications were suggested by the co-researchers, resulting in a second near-final version of the questionnaire. This was then sent to a pilot group (final piloting) to examine the reliability of the questionnaire, leading to some further fine-tuning. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient, a measure of the internal consistency of the items across scales, was used to assess the questionnaire's degree of reliability. The overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.83, indicating high reliability.

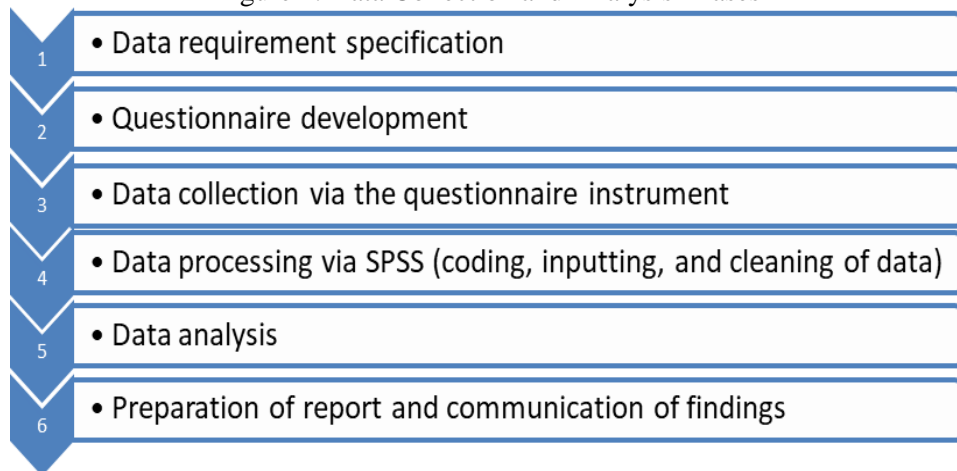
Using email, the final questionnaire was sent to the participants (all English language faculty at the designated universities) via Google Forms links through the respective researchers working at each of Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia; Ibn Haldun University, Turkey; and Hebron University, Palestine.

3.4 Data analysis procedure

In quantitative data analysis, raw data is converted into meaningful data using a set of statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics, as the data analysis procedure, was calculated/run for all the questionnaire items, utilising the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software (Version 26). The data obtained was quantitatively analyzed not in a positivist inferential sense, but as a means to develop or summarise descriptive statistical data (Table 1, 2, 2, 3, 4 and 5) that

helped answer the research questions. Frequencies, mean scores and standard deviation were utilised in the analysis of each item of the questionnaire. Statistical findings of the questionnaire are reported in Table 1 and then discussed. Below is a diagram of the procedures or distinct phases involved in the linear process of quantitative data collection and data analysis.

Figure 1. Data Collection and Analysis Phases



Regarding the qualitative data, it was coded and analyzed based on the thematic analysis. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, the researchers analyzed the collected data into emerging themes. This qualitative data analysis method allowed the researchers to identify topics and issues under relevant themes and analyze them. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), theme addresses something noteworthy about the data that is related to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.

4. Results and discussion

This study set out to answer five questions pertaining to English language faculty perceptions of the efficacy of online teaching as induced by COVID-19. Quantitative data was obtained from questionnaires. This raw data was analysed using SPSS. In this section, descriptive findings in terms of percentages of the participants' responses to the questionnaire — frequencies, mean scores and standard deviation — are provided. The findings are graphically presented and discussed according to the order of each research question as follows:

4.1 Research question 1

The first research question sought to explore the perceptions of English language faculty of the efficacy of online teaching at three universities in three different countries: “What are the perceptions of English language faculty of the effectiveness of online teaching in the language classroom, at Sultan Idris

Education University, Malaysia; Ibn Haldun University, Turkey; and Hebron University, Palestine?”

Table 1 summarises descriptive statistics for the overall perceptions of English language faculty of the efficacy of online teaching at the said universities.

Table 1. Perceptions of English language faculty of the efficacy of online teaching

Statement	Percentages (%)			Mean	St. Dev
	SD,D	N	A,SA		
Faculty Perceptions of Institutional Readiness and Support					
1. My institution's response to the shift from face-to-face to online teaching, amid COVID-19, was prompt.	10	4	86	4.30	1.074
2. My institution has suitable digital learning resources.	12	20	48	3.78	1.166
3. Generally, the internet infrastructure is reliable.	20	12	68	3.64	1.045
4. There is adequate technical support for online course teaching	22	14	64	3.58	1.180
5. My institution offers us training to teach online.	18	24	58	3.56	1.248
Faculty Perceptions of Online Teaching and its Effectiveness					
6. Online teaching is a suitable system to carry out the educational process when there is a crisis (such as that of COVID-19).	10	-	90	4.30	1.035
7. Students take online learning seriously during COVID-19.	22	22	56	3.46	1.147
8. I strongly believe that online teaching has potential.	12	16	72	3.96	1.068
9. Online teaching requires more time than face-to-face teaching	24	14	62	3.64	1.367
10. Lack of resources for online teaching has a negative impact on students' learning.	24	22	54	3.42	1.401
11. Lack of technical help for students hinders their educational performance and progress.	20	22	58	3.64	1.241
12. Methods of teaching in the	14	34	52	3.58	1.032

online environment motivate
my students.

Faculty Perceptions of Self-efficacy about Online Teaching

13. I am able to build relationships with my online students.	12	20	68	3.78	1.112
14. I am familiar with online teaching pedagogy.	12	18	70	3.84	1.076
15. I think developing an online course is easy.	46	30	24	2.74	1.065
16. Online classes are effective in helping me reach the learning objectives of the course.	24	28	48	3.44	1.128

Faculty Perceptions of Student Interaction and Engagement in the Online Language Classroom

17. Face-to-face classes are better and more valuable, especially in terms of interaction.	16	24	60	3.74	1.175
18. Students feel comfortable asking questions about course content.	18	20	62	3.64	1.225
19. It is easy to motivate my students in the online class. (disagree)	40	32	28	2.86	1.050
20. I find my online language classes highly interactive.	28	26	46	3.20	1.229
21. Online teaching helps me keep my students involved all throughout the course.	30	26	44	3.22	1.200
22. Class participation and discussion in the online environment is good.	24	22	54	3.44	1.181
23. My students are enthusiastic about their online learning.	32	16	52	3.34	1.136

Faculty Perceptions of Challenges of Online Teaching/Learning

24. I have concerns about the effectiveness of online education. (equal)	42	16	42	2.94	1.284
25. Online teaching increases my workload. (agree)	32	16	52	3.32	1.449
26. I have difficulty maintaining students' interaction in the online learning environment.	28	22	40	2.94	1.236
27. I think online teaching isolates	24	30	46	3.32	1.186

students and faculty.					
28. Online teaching reduces educational standards.	48	30	22	2.62	1.141
29. I have concerns about intellectual property in online teaching. (disagree)	40	28	32	2.88	1.206
30. I find testing and assessment an issue in online education.	18	30	52	3.52	1.111
Faculty Perceptions of the Impact of Online Teaching on Students' Communicative Competence					
31. The online learning experience improves students' speaking skills.	32	28	40	3.16	1.201
32. The online learning experience improves students' listening skills	16	34	50	3.46	1.034
33. The online learning experience improves students' writing skills.	32	32	36	3.16	1.235
34. The online learning experience improves students' reading skills.	24	30	46	3.30	1.111
35. The online educational environment improves students' language proficiency.	28	36	36	3.14	1.143

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

The data presented in Table 1 indicates that majority of the participants agreed with the items in every aspect although there are mixed responses for the challenges of online teaching and learning. Majority of the participants agreed that their institutions were responding efficiently towards the shift to online learning as shown by their readiness and support for the faculty members. Item 1 showed the highest agreement reported which is 86% showing that the institutions responded immediately by changing the traditional teaching and learning to online mode upon their closure due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This shows that the institutions are not hesitant to shift as opposed to the findings in the study by Wingo *et al.* (2017) in which they found that faculty is reluctant to teach online due to inevitable challenges and concerns.

In terms of the faculty perceptions of online teaching and its effectiveness, the majority agreed (90%) that upon facing crisis, a suitable system to conduct the educational process is through online teaching. The flexibility of the online instructions to reach out to at-home-students who are affected by COVID-19 in order to avoid learning disruption was also stated in the study by Huang *et al.*

(2020). Most of the participants also responded positively towards the self-efficacy about online learning.

However, the respondents had different opinions in relation to Item 15 in which the majority (46%) were in disagreement that developing an online course is easy. This is corresponding to the study by Bao (2020) in which the researcher found that one of the principles required for an effective large-scale online education is the high relevance between the design of online instructions and the learning of the students. The sudden shift towards online instruction may have caused difficulties for the faculty to develop an online course as they had limited time to assess the requirements for the students' learning. This may have increased the workload of the faculty which has also been reported in the studies by Wingo *et al.* (2017) and Chiasson *et al.* (2015).

Although, in overall, the participants responded positively towards student interaction and engagement in the online language classroom, it is to be noted that the majority (40%) disagreed that it is easy for them to motivate their students during the teaching and learning sessions. This is probably in line with the study by McQuiggan (2007) as cited by Dymont *et al.* (2013), in which the researcher found the importance of face-to-face contact with the students to maintain engagement. The perceptions of the faculty members towards the challenges of online teaching and learning were divided into certain statements. Despite the challenges stated, the majority of the respondents disagreed (48%) that the educational standards are reduced through online learning. This is corresponding to the findings by Gallick (1998) as cited by Johnson *et al.* (2000) in which online teaching may be a threat that could reduce the standards of education or result in devalued university degrees.

4.2 Research question 2

The second research question sought to examine if there were any significant differences in the perceptions of English language faculty of online teaching and its effectiveness at the said universities: "Are there any significant differences in the perceptions of English language faculty of the effectiveness of online teaching in the language classroom at these universities?" Table 2 presents significant differences in the perceptions of English language faculty of online teaching and its effectiveness.

Table 2. Significant differences in the perceptions of English language faculty of the efficacy of online teaching

Statement	Sultan Idris Education University		Ibn Haldun University		Hebron University	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
6. Online teaching is a suitable system to carry out the educational process when there is a crisis (such as that of COVID-19).	4.50	.519	4.88	.342	3.70	1.342
7. Students take online learning seriously during COVID-19.	3.43	.852	4.06	.929	3.00	1.298
8. I strongly believe that online teaching has potential.	4.07	.829	4.56	.814	3.84	1.142
9. Online teaching requires more time than face-to-face teaching	3.86	1.292	3.56	1.504	3.85	1.356
10 Lack of resources for online teaching has a negative impact on students' learning.	4.36	.745	3.25	1.571	2.90	1.334
11 Lack of technical help for students hinders their educational performance and progress.	4.21	.802	3.31	1.448	3.50	1.235
12 Methods of teaching in the online environment motivate my students.	3.79	.975	3.81	.911	3.52	1.118

Note: *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation

The data presented in Table 2 shows that there were statistically significant differences between groups on certain statements as demonstrated by one-way ANOVA. The faculty members from the three universities surveyed had different perceptions whether online teaching is a suitable system for educational process in a crisis $F(2,47) = 7.8, p = .001$, students' seriousness with online learning $F(2,47) = 4.3, p = .019$, belief in the potential of online learning $F(2,47) = 6.6, p = .003$ and the agreement that lack of online resources impacting students' learning negatively $F(2,47) = 5.5, p = .007$. Meanwhile, the perceptions of the faculty were non-statistically significant for the rest of the statements. A Tuckey post hoc test showed that the faculty members from Hebron University had lower perceived agreement than, either or both, the two other universities for the statements with significant differences.

4.3 Research question 3:

The third research question sought to investigate faculty perceptions of student interaction and engagement in the online environment: "What are language faculty perceptions of student interaction and engagement, central to language learning, in

online teaching?" Table 3 provides descriptive statistics for faculty perceptions of student interaction and engagement in the online environment.

Table 3. Faculty perceptions of student interaction and engagement in the online environment

	Statement	Percentages (%)		
		SD, D	N	A, SA
1	Students feel comfortable asking questions about course content. (Item 18)	18	20	62
2	Face-to-face classes are better and more valuable, especially in terms of interaction. (Item 17)	16	24	60
3	Class participation and discussion in the online environment is good. (Item 22)	24	22	54
4	My students are enthusiastic about their online learning. (Item 23)	32	16	52
5	I find my online language classes highly interactive. (Item 20)	28	26	46
6	Online teaching helps me keep my students involved all throughout the course. (Item 21)	30	26	44
7	It is easy to motivate my students in the online class. (Item 19)	40	32	28

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

The data presented in Table 3 indicates that the most reported agreement on faculty perceptions about the interaction and engagement of the students in the online environment is Item 18 (62%). Participants are in the opinion that the students are more comfortable to ask questions when online showing that the instructors were able to practice effective online teaching. This is in line with the findings by Frazer *et al.* (2017) where they reported that few of the effective online instructional practices are delivered by an instructor who can facilitate the student learning, approachable and responsive to the needs of the students.

However, the majority of the participants were also in agreement (60%) that interaction is better and more valuable in face-to-face classes based on the responses for Item 17. This may be corresponding to the study by Walters *et al.* (2017) in which they found that the faculty member was not confident that they could provide immediate feedback to the students in online teaching mode. Most of the participants also agreed that class participation and discussion is good although conducted in online environment (54%). This could be explained by the finding in the study by Chiasson *et al.* (2015) where it was not a problem to conduct online classes synchronously since it was relatively similar to classroom teaching.

4.4 Research question 4

Research Question No. 4 aimed at identifying the difficulties of implementing online teaching/learning: “What are the difficulties of implementing online teaching/learning?” Table 4 provides descriptive statistics for faculty perceptions of such difficulties or challenges.

Table 4. Faculty perceptions of the challenges of online teaching

	Challenges of online learning	N	Percentages
1	Internet reliability	23	19.20%
2	Communication issue	13	10.80%
3	Student’s participation	12	10.00%

The data presented in Table 4 indicates that the three most reported challenges of online learning according to the faculty members of the three universities are: (1) the reliability of the Internet connection, (2) communication issues among the instructors and the students and (3) the students’ commitment to participate in the online learning. The concern regarding the reliability of the Internet access for both students and faculty members tops the most reported challenges of online learning and this is in line with the study conducted by Brandt (1996) as cited by Johnson *et al.* (2000). The researcher stated that online learning environments lack stability which may hinder effective online teaching and learning to be conducted.

The second most reported challenge of online learning is communication issues. This difficulty was also reported in the study by Walters *et al.* (2017) where the faculty members rated the effectiveness of communication tools as the lowest level of satisfaction showing that it is one of the major problems of online education. Last but not least, the third most reported challenge is concerning the students’ commitment to participate in online learning. Without active participation by the students, it may be difficult to assess the students learning for effective online learning as stated in the study by Bao (2020). Such findings corroborate those arrived at by Mardiah (2020) in which inadequacy of Internet access, lack of interactive teacher-student talk, motivation, and engagement were reported as learning barriers.

4.5 Research question 5:

Research Question No. 5 sought to determine the factors that could enhance the effectiveness of online teaching: “What are the factors that could enhance the effectiveness of online teaching?” Table 5 provides descriptive statistics for faculty perceptions of such factors.

Table 5. Faculty perceptions of factors that could enhance the effectiveness of online teaching

	Factors to enhance effectiveness of online learning	N	Percentages
1	Better Internet reliability	16	14.50%
2	Improved staff training	14	12.70%
3	Better technical support	10	9.10%

The data presented in Table 5 shows that the three most reported factors to enhance the effectiveness of online learning according to the participants' perceptions are: (1) better Internet access, (2) better training for the staff and (3) better technical support. The majority of the faculty members believed that the most important factor to enhance the online learning effectiveness is to have better Internet access which may include the necessity for reliable/stable online technology and virtual communication tools. This is corresponding to the study by Walters *et al.* (2017) where they concluded that those aspects need to be improved to increase the satisfaction by faculty members and students for effective online education.

The participants also perceived that it is important for better training and support to be provided especially to the faculty members. In a study by Wing and associates (2017), faculty perceived technical support needs as one of the concerns when it comes to online teaching. As stated by Brandt (1996) in Johnson *et al.* (2000), it was also a concern which hinders effective learning when both students and instructors have a limited understanding of what they need to know for successful participation in online education. Hence, better training and technical support for both faculty and students play important roles to enhance the effectiveness of online learning.

5. Conclusion, implications and recommendations

Everything has changed over the last two years, and many of us now spend our days at home in front of our laptops or computer screens. COVID-19 pandemic and its evolving mutations or variants have forced educational institutions to shift instruction from traditional approaches to online learning. But the virtual classroom environment or simply online learning is exhausting and can also be frustrating, and besides, the impact of this mode of learning on students' learning is in question. This study attempted to explore and document ELT faculty's challenges and perceptions in the computer-mediated instructional virtual environment. This study, therefore, sought to shed light on the scepticism surrounding the global shift amidst COVID-19 to online education and its effectiveness.

Accordingly, this survey research aimed to achieve the objectives of this quantitative study on English language faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of online teaching in the language classroom during COVID-19, at three universities in three different countries: Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia; Ibn Haldun University, Turkey; and Hebron University, Palestine. The responses of faculty in the three universities showed that they agreed on most of the advantages of online learning. Overall, the present study highlighted the fact that the faculty in

the three universities (countries) felt that online learning is considered very effective to meet their expectations during COVID-19. Unsurprisingly, most of the participants agreed that their institutions responded promptly and shifted to online learning. Moreover, they considered online learning a suitable system to carry out the educational process during crises similar to COVID-19. The study also revealed that language faculty held positive views towards student interaction and engagement as they were able to practise online teaching; and their students were given the opportunities to ask questions comfortably. The benefits of online learning are evidenced in its potential to offer greater flexibility to learners and to have easy access to their instructors, institutions and resources.

However, there are some challenges facing this sudden migration, making the New Normal far from normal in the ELT landscape. The study found that implementing online teaching/learning was fraught with difficulties or challenges. Although there are undeniable benefits as perceived in previous studies and perceived by many as “a major breakthrough in teaching and learning” and is “gaining popularity,” the study revealed that online instruction is far from criticism and is rife with limitations and challenges that threaten its success and outcomes. Three major technical and pedagogical challenges that were identified in the study are: (1) the reliability of the Internet connection, (2) communication issues among the instructors and the students and (3) the students’ commitment to participate and interact in the online learning.

The study concluded that given the fact that “many academics report a strong sense of missing the face-to-face contact with students and perceive a struggle to maintain student engagement, and the staff view of face-to-face interactions provided in class as “the most valuable learning experience for [...] students,” instructional achievement in the online instructional environment is at best under question. According to Chahkandi (2021), “(s)Student-student and teacher-student interaction is a necessary ingredient in language learning; however, making connections with students through a screen can be a challenge for faculty as was shown in 2.3% of the postings (716).” The online environment makes interaction difficult. Cocooned behind their cameras, students are reluctant to interact. This low learning engagement or lack of active engagement in dialogic interaction affects learning in general and the development of language proficiency in particular as interaction is not only *facilitative*, but also *causative* to language learning (Saville-Troike 2006). The motivation for online learning depletes as classes lack participation in academic activities that is usually found in face-to-face engagement with instructors and peers (Adnan & Anwar 2020). Participation in the language classroom is very important as students will only be able to improve their language competence by interacting.

These findings are also supported by other recent studies such as that of Ramli and associates (2022), who conclude that despite its apparent benefits, the conduct of online learning also poses challenges for students, educators and institutions. Therefore, despite the advantages of online education “for both students and educational institutions” in terms of increasing the “accessibility for non-traditional students who are combining work with study” and “who live in

remote or regional areas” and in terms of offering “a more student-centred environment,” and developing “students’ abilities in a technology-driven workplace” (Dyment *et al.*, 2013: p. 134), its effectiveness at present is questionable (Joshi *et al.*, 2020). Lack of active engagement, motivation to participate, and Internet connectivity or digital divide, along with a host of other challenges reported by many researchers such as poor comprehensibility of learning content/less understanding, ineffective class monitoring, lack of developing social or interpersonal skills, student’s teacher’ digital literacy, health problems (Zboun & Farrah 2021) and the discomfort and distractions that can hinder a student’s ability to engage actively with the class from home, creating divergent learning experiences for different students, all make this paradigm shift or the limitations and challenges of this migration into academic cyberspace a serious issue in the 21st century.

The study revealed significant differences in the perceptions of English language faculty of the effectiveness of online teaching in the language classroom at the three universities with the faculty from Hebron University showing lower agreement with some statements than the two other universities.

This study identified some factors that could enhance the efficacy of online teaching. The study revealed many ifs which make the success of the online platform conditional on a number of issues such as access to technology resources; stability in online learning environments; simplicity of networked systems; adequate planning; well prepared online courses and learning materials; robust technological infrastructure; sufficient technical support; manageable class enrollments; risk of cheating during online assessments; issues of time and incentives; reasonable workload and compensation; responsiveness to students and quick feedback; high relevance between online instructional design and student learning; contingency plans to deal with unexpected incidents of online education platforms; creating a learning atmosphere that can mimic real-world situations; bolstering the teacher’s image; fostering social interaction among students through the addition of social or peer-engaging activities; incentivizing students to take advantage of local opportunities for real-world experiences; and preserving academic integrity and cyber security through the adoption of effective oversight and secure platforms. However, the participants in the three universities, in particular, perceived that the three most important factors to improve the effectiveness of online learning are: (1) better Internet access, (2) better training for the staff and (3) better technical support. Therefore, this study recommends addressing the abovementioned factors to know how to face similar pandemics in future.

Finally, as with the majority of studies on linguistic and educational research, the design of the current study is subject to limitations. This study aimed to discover the instructors’ perceptions in three universities using a quantitative approach. Therefore, a more comprehensive picture could also be obtained if such studies on perception were first to investigate a broader range of universities and educational institutions, and second to employ qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups for a *depth of understanding* (Eriksson, Boistrup and Thornberg 2018).

Other studies can also investigate the perception of learners towards online learning. Finally, a different method of data collection such as interviews and reflective entries could be taken into consideration for future research.

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