

An ESL Online Classroom Experience in Oman during Covid-19

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Abstract

This paper aimed to investigate the online learning experience of a group of ESL students at a higher learning institution in Oman during the Covid-19. The paper studied the interaction between the students' preferred online learning style and the technologies the students experienced on the e-learning platform (Moodle) for the particular ESL course. The rationale for investigating the relationship between the students' learning styles and the technologies the students experienced is to evaluate if the learning style and the technologies complement each other. It is also aimed to provide an evaluation of an ESL e-learning course by considering the different technologies that can be incorporated into the e-learning classroom to meet the different learning styles. Data was gathered from 32 undergraduate students by utilizing Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory. The study included analysis of Moodle utilizing Warburton's Technologies in Use (2007) to develop an understanding of the technologies the students experienced online. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the students' preferred learning style is reflected in the technologies they experienced in the online classroom. As the relationship of the technology in use and the students learning style preference in the classroom complements each other, the study revealed that the emphasis of the particular skill-based pedagogy ESL classroom is on receptive skills (listening and reading). The lack of the students' productive skills (speaking and writing) is a cause for concern to the ESL course instructors, policymakers, and the wider community.

Keywords: ESL, Kolb Learning Styles Inventory, Oman, online classroom, Warburton's Technology in Use

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Introduction

The spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has led to profound changes in the education sector (Murphy, 2020). On March 24th, UNESCO announced that the pandemic affected 1.37 billion students and 60.2 million teachers in 138 countries (UNESCO, 2020). As part of the pandemic precautions of minimizing transmission of the virus, Oman Supreme Committee on COVID 19 announced the suspension for classes for schools and educational institutions for a month starting March 15th, 2020 (“Oman suspends schools, universities from Sunday”, 2020). Responding to the instructions of the Supreme Committee, the majority of higher learning institutions in Oman rapidly transitioned from the face-to-face classroom to online learning systems. Protocols for online learning were developed ad-hoc to ensure learning continuity while supporting teachers and students in coping with home learning. The crisis calls for countries worldwide to move towards digital and distance learning, which has brought about new challenges such as cost, the credibility of materials, and adherence to rules of the management and use of student personal data (Murphy, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In addition to these emerging challenges, there is also an urgent need to accurately assess the quality of the online course delivery (Thiele, 2003) on positive learning outcomes (Maddux, Ewing-Taylor & Johnson, 2002). Richmond and Cummings (2005) suggested that consideration of the relevance of student learning styles on the course instructional design and delivery helps to ensure the quality of the online course.

Objectives of the Study

The paper aimed to investigate the online learning experience of a group of ESL students at a higher learning institution in Oman during the Covid-19. Paramount to achieving the aim is an understanding of the students’ preferred online learning styles, and the technologies the students experienced in their online classroom. The specific objectives of the study are described below:

- a) To categorize the students’ preferred online learning styles utilizing Kolb (1984) Learning Styles Inventory,
- b) To interpret the technologies on the e-learning platform (Moodle) utilizing Warburton’s (2007) Technology in Use,
- c) To evaluate if the technologies the students experience on Moodle complements the students’ preferred online learning styles

The rationale for investigating the relationship between the students’ learning styles and the technologies the students experienced is to evaluate if the learning style and the technologies the students experienced complement each other. It is also aimed to provide an evaluation of an ESL e-learning course by considering the different technologies that can be incorporated into the e-learning platform to meet the different learning styles. This investigation is significant and timely as it reports the online learning experience of a group of ESL students by highlighting the complementary and contrasting relationship between the students’ learning styles and the technologies they experienced in their ESL e-learning course during the Covid-19.

Literature Review

This section of the paper begins with a review of the relationship among Kolb’s (1984) model of learning styles, the learning environments, and application to online courses, followed by Warburton’s (2007) Technologies in Use Framework. Because this study is situated in the

context of Oman during the pandemic, issues pertaining to English teaching and learning and, e-learning in Oman are considered too.

Kolb's Learning Styles and Learning Environments

Previous studies found the relevance of learning styles to self-reported enjoyment in students enrolled in face-to-face courses as well as online courses (Cakiroglu, 2014; Chen, 2015; Simpson & Du, 2004). Eishani, Saa'd and Nami (2014) concluded that learning is enhanced when the specific learning style matches the style of teaching. This finding is also reflected in online courses where students who participated in online courses that matched with their preferred learning styles achieved better results than those who did not (Graf, Viola, Leo & Kinshuk, 2007).

According to Richmond and Cummings (2005), online courses have the most impact when it is based on instructional design decisions that may include "structure of course delivery, teacher-student communication, appropriate assignments and activities that are conducive to online learning, and effective use of online resources ... which accommodate student learning styles" (p.51). One of the ways to accomplish effective delivery of an online course on learner outcomes is to have a learning style framework incorporated into the teaching and learning such as Kolb's (1984) Learning Styles Inventory.

While Kolb (1984) did not draw the relationships among learning styles, learning modes, and learning environments, the study by Richmond and Cummings (2005) investigated these relationships and applied Kolb's theory of Experiential Learning to assess the quality and effectiveness of online courses. Kolb's (1984) four learning styles are a) Accommodating, b) Assimilating, c) Converging, and, d) Diverging. Each of these learning styles and its characteristics is described in turns.

1. *Accommodating Learning Style.* The accommodating learning style relies on other people for information, in doing things and getting involved in new experiences (Kolb, 1984), make intuitive decisions, and are adaptable to changing circumstances (Richmond & Cummings, 2005). They accomplish tasks by following directions (Kolb, 1984) and clear explanations before starting working on the task (Kozlova, 2018).
2. *Assimilating Learning Style.* The strength of the students who prefer assimilation is the ability to reason inductively with ideas and abstract concepts than through social interactions (Richmond & Cummings, 2005). They are able to create theoretical models (Kolb, 1984). Practical opportunities are valued less and they prefer working on their own (Kozlova, 2018).
3. *Converging Learning Style.* The convergent learning style prefers practical ideas (Richmond & Cummings, 2005). Their motivation for learning is on accomplishing tasks and finding solutions (Kozlova, 2018) than the emotional experiences. The students with this preferred learning style do not need to communicate with peers to complete the tasks (Kozlova, 2018).
4. *Diverging Learning Style.* Students who prefer the diverging learning style are imaginative (Kolb, 1984). They prefer observing, such as their peers, before doing the task (Kozlova, 2018). Their strength of learning modes are concrete experiences and

reflective observation (Richmond & Cummings, 2005), and they prefer to work in groups but receive individual feedback (Kozlova, 2018).

To accommodate all the four types of learning styles onto the classroom instructional design and delivery, Richmond and Cummings (2005) proposed the following framework.

Table 1. *Learning styles, learning environments and application to online course*

| Learning Style | Learning Environment | Activities | Content Delivery | Instructor Style |
|----------------|----------------------|---|--|--|
| Accommodating | Affective | Interactive tutorials that require autonomy | A blend of synchronous and asynchronous chat and discussions with peers and instructor. These students do not enjoy lectures. | Coach/ helper; role model |
| | Behavioral | Structured group projects and homework that applies to theories | | |
| Assimilating | Symbolic | Multiple Choice Quizzes, tests, and case study analysis | Lectures that focus on theories, broad concepts, interpretation. Prefers discussion without real-time interaction. | Top-down, didactic; expert opinion |
| | Perceptual | Online reading journal and lecture summaries | | |
| Converging | Symbolic | Multiple Choice Quizzes, tests, and case study analysis | These students can adapt to lectures that focus on theories and broad concepts and discussions with peers without real-time interaction. | The instructor is seen as a guide and role model. |
| | Behavioral | Structured group projects and homework that applies to theories | | |
| Diverging | Affective | Interactive tutorials that require autonomy | These students enjoy a blend of synchronous and asynchronous chat and discussions with peers and instructors, as well as lectures that focus on interpretations. | The instructor is a coach but also one who does not emphasize critical evaluation. |
| | Perceptual | Online reading journal and lecture summaries | | |

Note 1. Adapted from Richmond and Cummings (2005, p. 47 & p.52)

Warburton's (2007) Technologies in Use Framework

When designing online course activities and delivery, the relationship between technology, pedagogy, and students in the e-learning contexts to the learning outcomes is difficult to unpack for a course instructor. Having a framework, such as Warburton's (2007) Interpreting Technologies in Use help course instructors to draw that relationship. It is important to note that the term *technologies in use* refer to the technologies, tools, and learning activities that the students experienced on Moodle for the particular ESL course.

Figure one illustrates Warburton's (2007) framework which identifies the dimensions of the technology of learning activities, the pedagogy, and the role of the students in an online course.

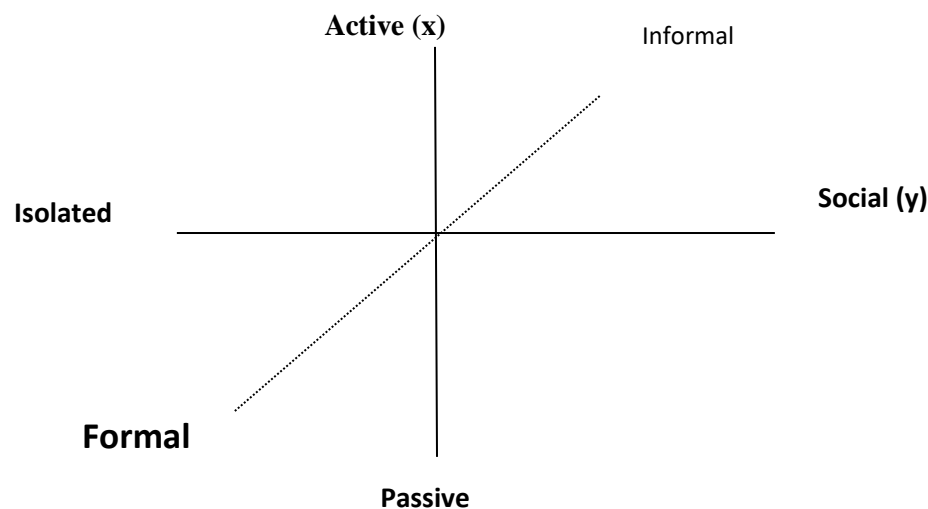


Figure 1. Warburton's interpreting technologies in use (2007, para. 2)

The three main dimensions illustrated in Figure one are:

1. *Isolated/individual – social*: learning activities experienced within the spectrum of isolated/ individual to social.
2. *Active-passive*: the range of learning activities that require active participation or engagement from the students to aspects of learning that require less participation from the students
3. *Formal-Informal*: the range of learning activities that vary in the degree of formality

The advantage of having these dimensions is that it helps course instructors to map the ways of using technologies or tools to assess learners' needs and ultimately, to achieve the learning outcomes. It also facilitates the decision-making on course design and delivery to meet the pedagogical strategy. Open University (2020) concluded that frameworks that foreground the relationship between technology and pedagogy such as Warburton's Interpreting Technologies in

Use (2007) and Conole's New Schemas for Mapping Pedagogies and Technologies (2008) challenge the criticism against online education that technology precedes pedagogy.

English Teaching and Learning in Oman

The linguistic landscape of Oman is composed of the multi-ethnic and multilingual identities of its population (Al-Issa, 2020). The status of English in Oman is widely recognized as second in importance to the Arabic language (Al-Issa, 2005) and not in the true context of ESL (English-as-Second Language) as defined in applied linguistics. Previous investigations found that a proportion of the population uses English as their second language, while some learners may experience contact with the English language only in the classroom (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). An internet survey of the research in English language teaching in Oman shows that ESL and EFL (English-as-Foreign-Language) are used interchangeably. The operational term that is used to define an online English proficiency classroom in this paper is ESL.

Prior to the 1970s, "education was predominantly imputed by the Islamic establishment where religion, Arabic language, and arithmetic were taught in mosques and private homes" (Nasser, 2019, p.1), with little documented information on the use of the English language in the country. When the late Sultan Qaboos came to power in the 1970s, English is recognized as the only official foreign language (Al-Issa, 2005), and it is used in the government, business, education, legislation, media and as a tool to serve the development of the nation (Al-Issa, 2005). The ability to communicate in English is perceived as high in the social hierarchy (Al-Issa, 2005). In 1998/1999, the Ministry of Education of Oman introduced the Basic Education System (BES), an education reform to overcome the English language deficit among the students (Al-Issa, 2005, Naseer, 2019).

A recent report by the Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index revealed that Oman ranked 92nd in the 100 countries participated (English First English Proficiency Index, 2019) while the IELTS test statistics report in 2018 indicated that the overall IELTS scores for Oman are 5.22 (IELTS, n.d.). The World Bank development report in 2013 indicated that the school graduates in Oman did not perform to the expected standards, both nationally and internationally. Previous investigations on the students' proficiency in English in Oman reported that the examination-oriented schooling system, standardized assessment instruments, and practices that dominated the educational framework in Oman are among the factors that limit students' learning (Al-Ani, 2017). The traditional methods of education, such as memorization of notes (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012) and limiting learning resources to textbooks only, are inadequate in meeting the requirement of tertiary education and the demands of the workplace (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). To address the current situation, Oman National Strategy for Education 2040 was established with the aim to prepare the students with the growing challenges of using English to be effective global citizens in the 21st century, and in the development of the Sultanate (The Education Council, 2018).

His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik's Royal Speech reiterates the importance of education in preparing students with skills for the future development of the Sultanate:

On top of our national priorities is the education sector, with all its types and levels. It will receive full attention, and it will be provided with a supportive environment that motivates

research and innovation. We will also provide it with all means of empowerment since it is the base upon which our children will be able to participate in meeting the requirements of the coming phase of development. (HM The Sultan Delivers Royal Speech, 2020, para. 9)

E-learning in Oman

Moodle is an open-source learning system (Al-Ani, 2013), and it is used widely in the higher learning institutions in Oman. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of the higher learning institutions in Oman used Moodle to support learning in face-to-face classrooms. The government of Oman perceives e-learning positively and considers Information and Communications Technology (ICT) an important aspect of improving the quality of education (Oxford Business Group, n.d.). According to Al-Musawi and Akinyemi (2002), e-learning helps students in Oman to access learning resources instead of “making people travel to education ... [in a] population [that] is spread thinly over a wide geographic area” (p.2). The majority of the higher education institutions in Oman have already incorporated blended learning and virtual classrooms to complement the existing face-to-face classrooms (Oxford Business Group, n.d.). In addition to that, the majority of the students in the higher education institutions in Oman are experienced in using electronic databases and e-learning platforms, as well as engaging with their peers online. Kothaneth (2020) adds that online learning “is not a new concept” (para.6) for the higher education institutions in Oman, and that “e-learning can help students ease Covid-19 risk” (para.1).

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced schools and universities to shut down, and inevitably disrupts the traditional forms of face-to-face learning. The present situation gives rise to online learning. While the advocates of online education view the pandemic as an opportunity for students to experience learning with a variety of applications and online tools, the abrupt move towards digital and distance learning received drawbacks and criticisms. Lau, Yang and Dasgupta’s (2020) report on “Will the coronavirus make online education go viral?” includes a comment from an Australian vice-chancellor that states, “face-to-face interaction will never be matched in quality by other modes of communication” – even if current “fads temporarily appear to be tilting the balance towards non-human interaction” (para.4). Wazzan (2020) summarized and addressed the present challenges as follows,

Students are distracted, teachers are not sufficiently trained and our technology infrastructure is far from fully ready to cooperate. I am concerned that some governments and providers are under pressure to move too fast to ensure uninterrupted learning, with little medium-term planning or ramp-up time. (para. 2)

This study demonstrates the dynamic interplay of the two frameworks, Kolb’s Learning Styles Inventory and Warburton’s Technologies in Use in reporting the quality of online learning experience of a group of students in an ESL classroom in Oman during Covid-19. The methodology of the study is explained in the following section.

Methodology

The paper aimed to provide an evaluation of an ESL e-learning course by considering the students’ preferred online learning styles, the technologies the students experienced in the ESL

online classroom, and to seek an understanding of the technologies the students experienced in the online classroom complements their preferred online learning styles.

Data Collection Procedures

The research population consisted of the students at a higher learning institution in Oman enrolled in an English proficiency classroom. The methods of gathering data for this research involved two phases. The first phase was administrating an online questionnaire of the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (revision 1985) to the respondents of the study (n = 32). The findings of the first phase of the study were analyzed using IBM SPSS V26 software. The data gathered from the online questionnaire generated information and scores for the students' preferred learning mode which were then tabulated. The tabulated scores were then further categorized into their learning style domains: accommodating, assimilating, converging, and diverging.

The second phase of the study was an evaluation of the technologies the students experienced on Moodle for the particular ESL course. This involved a close examination of the course content and activities on the e-learning platform (Moodle). The broad domains of the analysis of the course content and activities on Moodle were derived from Warburton's (2007) *Technologies in Use* framework namely isolated/ social, active/passive, and formal/informal. A "micro-level" (Hood, 2009, p.79) coding system was applied to tag units of data to organize and reorganize them to allow interpretation of the material.

Sample of Study

The study took place at a higher education institution in the Sultanate of Oman among 32 undergraduate students enrolled in an ESL course at the end of the Spring 2020/21 term. The factors that can affect the learning styles are categorized into the respondents' age groups and their disciplines. While all of the respondents enrolled in an ESL (skill-based course) at the particular higher education institution, their discipline/ field of study varied (e.g. Engineering, Business, Social Sciences, Law). The other factors such as gender and nationality were excluded as the majority of the students enrolled in the ESL course were female and Omani.

Summary of Findings

The learning styles across all of the respondents of the study reveals a strong preference towards Converging (53.1%), while the least preferred learning style is Diverging (6.3%). Table two summarizes the frequency count of the respondents' learning styles.

Table 2. *Learning style*

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid Accommodating | 8 | 25.0 | 25.0 | 25.0 |
| Assimilating | 5 | 15.6 | 15.6 | 40.6 |
| Converging | 17 | 53.1 | 53.1 | 93.8 |
| Diverging | 2 | 6.3 | 6.3 | 100.0 |
| Total | 32 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The cross-tabulation analysis illustrated in Table 3 presents information that the largest population of the respondents are between 21 to 23 years old, and that for the particular age group, the preferred learning style is Converging (14 respondents).

Table 3. *Learning style and age cross-tabulation*

| | | Age | | | | | Total |
|----------------|---------------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|
| | | 20 and below | 21-23 | 24-26 | 27-29 | 30 and above | |
| Learning Style | Accommodating | 0 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 8 |
| | Assimilating | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| | Converging | 1 | 14 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 17 |
| | Diverging | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | | 3 | 21 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 32 |

The data gathered from the respondents' discipline (e.g. Business, Engineering, Social Sciences) are used to find out if there is an association with their learning style. The Chi-Square test is applied with the following hypotheses:

Null Hypothesis (H_0):

There is no association between the respondents' discipline and their learning style.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1):

There is an association between the respondents' discipline and their learning style

The finding from the Chi-Square test reveals that the p -value is .021 (≤ 0.05) which indicates that there is an association between the respondents' discipline and their learning style, thus rejecting the null hypothesis. The r -value is at 0.780 which further indicates a strong correlation between the respondents' discipline to their learning style. According to Clark (2018), when a value of r is greater than 0.7, it is considered a strong correlation.

The mapping of the technologies in use on Moodle for the ESL course involved 13 tags marked as (x) in Figure two. These tags range from the social repository (YouTube), Virtual Learning Environment (Big Blue Button), Productivity Tools (Ms. Office, Ms. Ppt.), Personal Learning Environment (e.g. search engines, recorded video lectures), Shared Applications, Website to Discussions and Chats. These tags are identified and mapped using Warburton's (2007) Technologies in Use framework. Out of the 13 tags, six tags are placed in the spectrum of isolated (individual task) and the role of the students is a passive recipient. Three tags are placed in the spectrum of isolated but the role of the students is the active recipient. As an active recipient, the students are required to respond and participate in the learning activity.

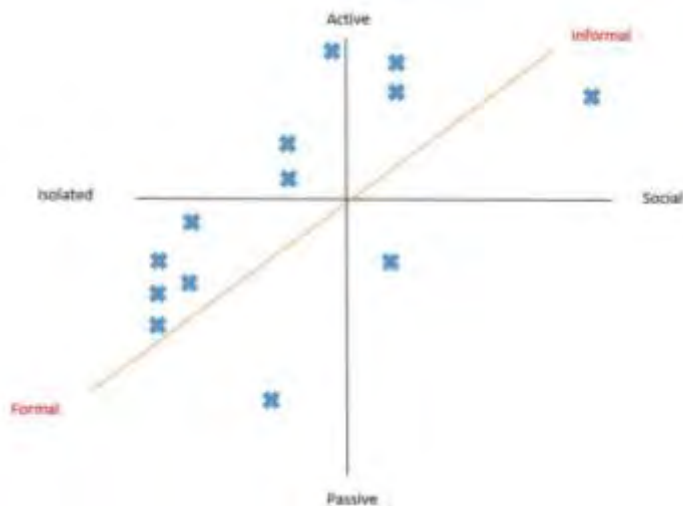


Figure 2. Mapping of the technologies in use for the ESL online course

The findings from the mapping of the technologies for the particular ESL online course appear to complement the majority of the students' preferred learning style: Converging (53.1%) of the respondents. In total, nine out of the 13 tags are placed and categorized as isolated in the mapping of the technologies in use, while six out of the 13 tags are placed in the spectrum of the isolated task, and passive recipient. Figure 3 presents the findings of the relationship between the technologies the students experienced in the ESL online course and the majority of the students' preferred online learning styles.

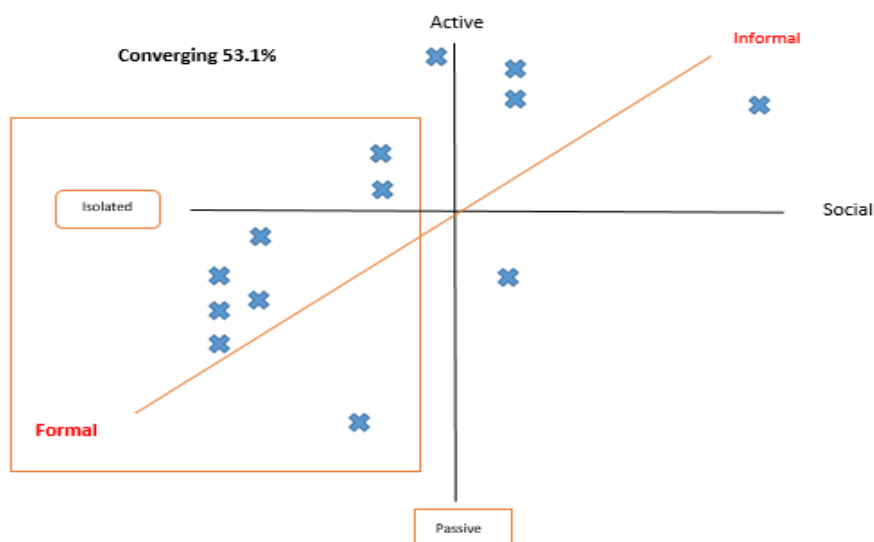


Figure 3. Evaluation of the technologies in use for the ESL course and students' preferred online learning styles

Discussion

The majority of the respondents of the study were female between the age of 21-23-year-old. The findings revealed the majority of the students' preferred learning style was Converging (51.3%). The majority of the students enrolled in the particular ESL course were from the Business field of study. The study found a strong correlation between the students' field of study and their preferred learning style. This finding is consistent with Jones, Reichard, and Mokhtari's (2003) study of community college students in the U.S. that there are significant differences in students' learning styles preferences across disciplines.

According to Richmond and Cummings (2005), the activities that best suit the Converging Learning Style are Multiple Choice quizzes, tests, Case Study analysis, structured group projects. Richmond and Cummings (2005) describe one of the characteristics of the students who prefer the Converging learning style is that they prefer practical learning activities. Their motivation for learning is on accomplishing tasks and finding one right solution (Kozlova, 2018), rather than the emotional experiences of learning. To these students, the course instructor is seen as a guide and role model of the course.

Although the findings of the study offered a positive complementary relationship between the technologies in use and the students' preferred learning style, it also revealed the focus of the particular classroom is on the receptive skills (listening and reading) with nine out of 13 technologies in use. The students' experience with productive skills (speaking and writing) is minimal. In a skill-based pedagogy, the aim is to get students to reach automaticity through extensive practice, which, as the findings suggest, the students did not experience sufficient output for productive skills, nor do they prefer participating in the learning activities that aim to get them skilled at speaking and writing in English. Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2014) observed, "unfortunately, higher education students [in Oman] continue to graduate with very weak oral and written communication skills, thus making them unfit for employment in many types of jobs" (p.1). This is a cause for concern to the teachers, policymakers and the wider community as the National Strategy for Education 2040 aims to produce competent graduates that align with the needs of the labor market.

In contrast to the findings of the study, the IELTS test statistics report in 2018 indicated that the overall IELTS score for Oman is at 5.22. Out of the four skills: Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking, the highest score is Speaking skill at 5.22. The lowest score is Reading skill at 4.93 (IELTS, n.d). This warrants for future research that includes a larger sample of the study, the various field of study/ disciplines, and age groups that look into Omani students' preferred online learning styles. The information gathered would help inform ESL course instructors to include different technologies in the classroom to meet the learning styles of different students.

Conclusion

The paper investigated the online learning experience of a group of ESL students at a higher learning institution in Oman. Specifically, the paper studied the students' online learning styles. This is followed by an evaluation of the technologies the students experienced in their ESL online classroom. The findings suggest that the technologies the students experienced in their ESL online

classroom complements the majority of the students' preferred online learning style. The findings also revealed that there is a strong correlation between the students' field of study with their learning style preference. The majority of the students who participated in the research prefers Converging learning style, and that the technologies the students experienced were isolated/ individual tasks instead of group work. The role the students played in the online classroom was passive recipients and the pedagogy was delivered formally.

Although the study focused on a small sample of female Omani undergraduate students, it has important implications for research and pedagogical practice for ESL online classrooms in Oman. First, the data from the study represented what the students perceived as their preferred learning style. An avenue for future research is to document the students' *actual* learning style in an ESL skill-based pedagogy classroom. Second, one of the ways to encourage life-long learning, an important aspect of Oman Vision 2040, is to enable students to take control of their learning strategies which is influenced by having awareness of the different learning styles. Thus, higher education institutions in Oman could incorporate in their agenda to increase awareness of the students' learning styles as a means to motivate the students' own learning. One of the ways to accomplish this is by including learning styles inventories on the website. For example, the majority of the higher education institutions in the U.S include different learning style inventories on their websites to encourage students to discover their own learning styles. This aids students in making decisions and selecting courses that would best fit their learning style. Finally, as course instructors for ESL classrooms, it is essential that we accommodate the different learning styles of the students through various technologies and teaching strategies. Having information about the students' learning styles will help us design and deliver the online course effectively. This, in turn, helps us to achieve the learning objectives as well as contributing towards positive online classroom experience.

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