

Digital Platforms in the Emergency Remote Education: the Students' Preferences

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Abstract

One positive side of the Covid-19 pandemic is the unprecedented opportunity it has offered to the Higher Education Institutions to experience digital learning like never before. During the pandemic, Distant Learning platforms, including Learning Management Systems and Video Conferencing Platforms, have been ubiquitous, and no single institution survived without them during the pandemic. Hence, one of the critical lessons that should be learned is the students' experiences with these platforms. This study aims to investigate the digital platform preferences of English major students in the College of Language and Translation at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia during the Emergency Remote Education due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Its significance lies in the fact that it underscores and addresses students' needs and preferences with regard to the digital platforms to be used for language learning, a pragmatic examination of which has been carried out in the following pages. It focuses on reasons for the preferences of the two leading digital platforms used in King Saud University: Blackboard and Zoom. A Survey with open-ended and closed-ended questions was designed to answer the questions of the study: which digital platforms do students prefer to use during Emergency Remote Education, and what were the reasons behind students' preferences? A total of 300 students from both male and female campuses at different levels of study participated in the study. The results showed that students preferred the Zoom to Blackboard. Reasons of preferences were mainly the ease of use, followed by supporting smartphones, then having an app for smartphones. The thematic analysis of the open-ended question showed that technical problems and connection latency were the main reasons behind students' preferences of the Zoom. The findings also indicated gender differences in reasons of preferences.

Keywords: Blackboard, digital platforms, Covid 19, emergency remote education, Higher Education Institutions, learning management system, video conferencing platform, Zoom platform

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Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declaration of Covid-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, has brought unprecedented experiences to different sectors and people worldwide (WHO, 2020). In education, and for the first time in history, millions of students, teachers, and administrators all over the globe faced the fact that they cannot meet physically and need to be all online or at a distance to do what they used to do physically or at school, colleges, or universities. In Saudi Arabia, all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) switched to distance or online on March 8, 2020 (Saudi Press Agency 2020), and the number of students affected by this order reached 1,620,491 based on UNESCO statistics on January 24, 2021 (UNESCO, 2021). All these institutions explored their assets in digital learning, namely their learning management systems (LMSs) and other possibilities to meet this Emergency Remote Education (ERE).

Blackboard was dominant at all these colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia (El Zawaidy, 2014; Aldiab, et al., 2019). The introduction of LMS, namely Blackboard, in Saudi public universities went back to 2006. King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah was the first Saudi public university to have Blackboard, then all other public universities followed (Aldiab et al., 2019). However, Blackboard has never moved beyond fashion, at least at King Saud University (KSU). The LMS never be a part of the curricula in almost all departments because of the absence of policies advocating colleges and departments to use it or utilize it in any manner. The shock was that Blackboard did not meet the ERE needs, particularly the synchronized meeting, due to different reasons. Among these reasons was the bandwidth, network latency, especially for users in remote areas, in addition to the lack of skills in using it by faculty and students, having the fact the Blackboard needs some training to use and it is not easy to use (Kasim & Khalid, 2016). Besides the uncertainty of when the pandemic is over, this fact frantically forced KSU and other public universities in Saudi Arabia to find other solutions. One of the solutions was to have other platforms besides working on fixing the issues of Blackboard. KSU adopted different digital platforms to execute ERE: Zoom, MS Teams, and Cisco Webex. All these platforms were available to all faculty members and staff at KSU in March 2020. Interestingly, all these platforms are mainly web-based synchronous video conferencing platforms with some tools and are not actual LMS like Blackboard. KSU and other Saudi public universities indubitably faced challenges regarding holding synchronous virtual classrooms, and their only available LMS failed to meet the need.

The Blackboard and synchronous video conferencing platforms have been used in KSU in ERE until the writing of this paper in the spring semester of 2021. The rationale of the research comes from its focusing on students' experiences during that pandemic. The significance of the study is that understanding these experiences, particularly the learners' preferences of these digital platforms and the reasons behind their preferences, would help all stakeholders to invest better in digital learning and making further better decisions. In addition, it fosters student-centered approaches in digital learning and transformation. Therefore, the goal of this study is to investigate these digital platforms. It first explores the students' preferences of all digital platforms used at COLT in KSU during ERE and reveals the reasons behind these preferences. Hence the research questions of this study are:

1. What is the digital platform that English majored students at COLT in KSU prefer during Emergency Remote Learning (ERL)?

2. What are the reasons behind students' preferences for a platform?

This present research aims to gain insight into the preferences of platforms and reasons behind the preferences of English major students at the College of Languages and Translation in King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, during the ERE. The research also investigates gender differences in platform preferences and the reasons behind them.

Literature Review

Learning Management Systems vs. Video Conferencing Platforms

Technology has been in language learning since the 1950s (Alshammari, 2007). Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has been the main field that refers to technology usage in language learning. However, during the pandemic, LMS, namely Blackboard and Video Conferencing Platforms (VCPs), have been dominant, at least in the context of this study. LMS is a centralized web-based software that manages learning content, student activities, interaction, employs assessment tools, and supports learning processes (Stone & Zheng, 2014; Kasim & Khalid, 2016). Asiri (2012) defined LMS as a web-based technology to assist in planning, distribution, and evaluation of learning. LMSs are not new to HEIs, and they have been in HEIs since they first emerged in the 1990s. Dahlstorm, Brooks, and Bichsel (2014) stated that LMSs today are ubiquitous, with 99% of higher education schools and colleges reporting they have one, mainly Blackboard.

For the past two years, more or less, the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic has constantly been disrupting everyday life in all its spheres. Education is one area that has seen an enormous transformation in this context. A significant change in teaching methodology has been affected at the primary and secondary levels. At the college level and in the Higher Education Institutions, course teachers were required to create and utilize a new teaching approach to cater to their higher education institutions' needs in real-time (Johnson et al., 2020). They had to shift from long-established and blended teaching methodologies to a completely computer-generated and remote lecture series. Nonetheless, this sudden change to fully online, synchronous course delivery was not a natural occurrence. Teachers and educators were obliged to employ online learning technologies to revive and resume their course instructions. (Fitter et al., 2020). Camilleri & Camilleri (2021) examined the students' opinions on online learning through asynchronous learning management systems (LMS) and via synchronous video conferencing technologies like Google Meet, Microsoft Teams or Zoom, among others. They collected their data from a sample of 501 higher education students. A survey questionnaire was given to them. And after analyzing students' responses, they discovered that students had a very positive attitude in its favor, and they agreed to utilize remote learning technologies. They had realized the importance of continuing ongoing, collaborative learning with their teachers through synchronous technologies like video conferencing to make use of the two-way communication with their instructors and with their peers in real-time.

Ratnawati & Nurhsanah (2021) examined language learners' perception, preferences, and justifications for using learning platforms, tools, and activities in the context of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). The research findings point out that students positively responded to using Google Classroom Zoom Cloud Meeting. The researchers used a selective or subjective sampling technique and examined 25 third-year English language students at a university in

West Java. Collecting data through mixed questionnaires, classroom observations, and online interviews, researchers analyzed the responses and concluded that both platforms are effective and acceptable in the online atmosphere for ERT. In their findings on the efficacy of distant learning tools and their preferences by the language learners, Ratnawati & Nurhsanah (2021) expected other researchers and educators to employ them in classroom activities with analogous backgrounds and problems.

Raza et al (2021) believed that as student's competence in learning improved, they would be inspired to attain their study objectives by employing the LMS technology, particularly as the pandemic had socially isolated them. Hence, the advantage of using LMS would make them flexible in the future as well. Overall, there is a need for bettering the LMS proficiency to "increase its Behavioral Intention among students" (Raza et al, p.183). VCPs, on the other hand, are web-based platforms that enable users or groups to meet in real-time. They were mainly designed for business and have proven useful in educational settings, particularly in synchronous classrooms (Amin & Sundari, 2020). For example, in the early month of March 2020, the download of VCPs reached 62 million (Singh & Awasthi, 2020).

Interestingly, many may believe that VCPs are new to educational settings. VCPs have been used in education for more than 50 years (Roth, Pierce & Brewer, 2020), although at minimum levels before the pandemic. Sidpra et al. (2020) stated that the VCPs had been an educational tool in medical education since the 1960s, namely for surgical operations, trauma, and post-operative patient follow-ups. They gave the example of open-heart surgery in Texas in 1962 and viewed by medical practitioners in Geneva.

Many studies worldwide addressed the use of VCPs in HEIs and found that the VCPs proved effective in ERE during the pandemic (Mobo, 2021; Mpungose, 2021; Włodarczyk, et al, 2020; Medic, 2021; Hilburg, et al, 2020). Hilburg et al. (2020) listed several features that VCPs offer education (see Table one).

Table 1. *Features VCPs offer for education*

Feature	Description
Screen share	Allows either the meeting host or participants to share their device screen with other participants.
Whiteboard	The host/participant can create a white canvas seen by all participants. It can be used to draw with various colors, pens, or text. Drawings can be saved at the end of the meeting.
Polling	The host can write 255 character multiple-choice questions (single or multiple answers) with ten choices that can be shared with the group. Each poll can be launched/cleared as needed.
Breakout rooms	The host can separate the group into smaller groups for a specific time before reconvening as a larger group. Each group can communicate with the host to ask them to join their group to answer questions or discuss.
Annotation	Participants may use the same tools available to draw on the whiteboard to annotate on any shared screen.
Chat and file share	Similar to instant messaging, participants can share messages with the whole group or individual participants.
Nonverbal feedback	Participants can communicate with the host using preset reactions (e.g., yes, no, and raise hand).

Virtual background	The user uploads a photo or uses existing images (e.g., outer space) to change their background.
Recording	The session is recorded and stored on either the host's computer or Zoom Cloud account. If screen sharing is used, the screen is recorded with a thumbnail of the speaker in the corner. Chat sessions and an audio transcript of the session are also saved.

Note 1. Adopted from Hilburg et al. (2020, p. 414-415)

The Zoom has been one of the leading VCPs in ERE and proved to be successful in education as it has been in business. A statistic on the Zoom daily meeting participants by Dean (2021) showed that the number of daily participants on the Zoom platforms jumped from 10 million users on December 31, 2019, to 300 million on April 21, 2020. Currently, Zoom has 467,100 business customers and hosts over 3.3 trillion meeting minutes every year and more than 45 billion minutes of webinars (Dean, 2021).

In language learning, Zoom's features help English teachers make notes on their shared screen and get their lessons recorded on Cloud, which makes teaching attractive and interactive. They can also invite assignments on-screen, save them and assess them later to determine their students' strengths and weaknesses. Students can also reflect on their work and progress. Teachers can also show their lessons to other teachers to receive their feedback.

Zoom's screen sharing can give English teachers a great opportunity to develop medical students' intercultural skills by sharing engaging materials such as videos and articles, and presentations. Educators could also ask students to reflect on their lessons by recording a video and sharing it. (Guzacheva, 2020, p.458).

The Zoom platform has been and can be greatly helpful to EFL teachers and students alike in these many ways. In this way, Zoom has been very helpful during the Covid-19 pandemic in allowing English learners, teachers, and academic institutions easy and unfettered access to its multiple features through which academic teaching can be continued in a virtual classroom.

The post-corona era will not be the same as it was in HEIs. VCPs have penetrated every corner of the education processes and become an essential part of digital learning integration to the curricula, especially the integration of LMS with VCPs. Also, most LMS current providers or future providers would have no success if not having VCP in their systems' tools. Indeed, some LMSs have already integrated VCPs in their systems, namely Skooler® with Microsoft Teams, in addition to other Microsoft 365 tools. TalentLMS® has already integrated Zoom with its tools. Colleges and universities in the post-corona time would like to have one platform that includes both the features of LMSs and VCPs instead of what has been taking place in ERE.

Blackboard and Zoom in ERE

Several studies investigated the use of Blackboard and Zoom during the pandemic. Dahmash (2020) has discussed 12 EFL students' experiences at KSU with Blackboard and found that they faced different problems: difficulty getting into their classes, sound interruptions, and

incompatible devices. Almekhlafy (2020) studied 228 EFL students using Blackboard at the preparatory year program at Najran University in the South of Saudi Arabia and found positive perceptions. Khafaga (2021) investigated 311 English major students' attitudes toward Blackboard Collaborate-based Instruction in five Saudi universities and found they had positive attitudes toward it. Alhadreti (2020) examined 187 faculty members' perceptions of Blackboard usability at Umm Al-Qura University in the West of Saudi Arabia and found that the platform had inadequate usability during the pandemic. Alghammas (2020) examined the perceptions of 171 English faculty members' perceptions at different Saudi Universities toward the applications of online assessment through Blackboard and found that both men and women faculty members held positive feelings. At Taif University in the west of Saudi Arabia, Al-Salamat, Al-sowat, and Al-roqi (2020) investigated 804 male and female students at different colleges about the effectiveness of Blackboard during the ERE, and the results showed it had great effectiveness. They also found that male students valued the platform's effectiveness more than their female counterparts, and graduate students were higher than undergraduate ones. In Taibah University at Alula campus in the northwest of Saudi Arabia, Mahyoob (2020) found that 184 EFL learners faced many Blackboard problems during the pandemic. These problems were mainly technical, academic, and communication.

As for the Zoom platform, Alfadda and Mahdi (2021) studied the experiences of 75 EFL students at King Saud University during the ERE and found a strong positive correlation between Zoom and the students' attitudes and behavioral intention. They also found that the student's experience with the Zoom is positively correlated with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) variables. In Algeria, Benmansour (2021) studied Algerian EFL students' motivation toward Zoom in an asynchronous setting and concluded that they were highly motivated. Suadi (2021) used mixed methods to investigate 53 Indonesian EFL learners' perceptions of the Zoom at one of the Indonesian universities and found that they held positive perceptions. Participants also stated that the Zoom was effective and efficient in time, expense, and place and agreed that it helped them enhance their language skills and reduced their shyness when participating. Erito (2021) addressed 80 graduate English major students' perceptions of Zoom use in Indonesia. The results showed that students considered it a valuable tool in facilitating their classes, presentations, and communication. She also found that students held positive perceptions toward the use of the platform during the ERE. Another study in Indonesia by Helda and Zaim (2021) discussed the effectiveness of using Zoom in micro-teaching classes by 34 learners studying Indonesian language and literature, and they found that although the Zoom was less effective in micro-teaching lectures, it proved to be an effective online tool in ERE during the pandemic. Li, et al. (2021) stated that they developed six fundamental innovative teaching mechanisms and procedures in their teaching of pair programming via Zoom. These teaching mechanisms and procedures are the 1) effectively managing teaching resources, 2) strategically planning a course, 3) enhancing faculty responsiveness, 4) mandating online faculty training, 5) selecting reliable technology, and 6) accommodating learning disability students. They also stated they acquired valuable experience promoting active, engaging, and problem-based learning activities in a cloud environment. The research findings led by Allen and Seaman (2017) have found in Zoom a crucial technology that encourages collaborative teaching and pair work and allows learners to participate in the learning atmosphere through and learn together and independently. Students can see and listen to other students and record their responses.

However, few studies have compared LMSs and VCPs in ERE. In Saudi Arabia, Al Shammari (2021) compared different LMS and VCPs platforms in Saudi Arabia and found that students preferred Zoom (53.3%) to Blackboard (44.3). Interestingly, male students chose Zoom (67.6%) over Blackboard (29.7), whereas female students were for Blackboard (58.7%) against Zoom (40%). In comparing 340 medical students' preferences toward four platforms used in ERE, namely Blackboard, Zoom, Hangout, and Microsoft Teams, Ibrahim et al. (2021) found the Blackboard with 48.2% and Zoom with 47.1% were the preferable platforms by students in King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, few studies discussed the students' preferences of the platforms used in ERE in language learning in Saudi Arabia. Understanding these reasons would greatly help the inevitable integrations of digital learning into the curricula, mainly in choosing the platform that most satisfies students and fosters their education during or after the pandemic or any situation that may hinder face-to-face classes like weather conditions, wars, or any other ecological crises. HEIs policymakers need to benefit from the ERE experiences in their decisions on digital transformation in their institutions.

Methods

Design

The study aimed to find out English majored students' preferences of platforms and causes behind their references. The study also statistically explored any gender differences in these variables; the platforms were the dependent variables of the research, whereas gender was the independent one. For answering the questions of the study, an online survey was designed using Google forms. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were applied to answer the two questions of the study.

Participants and Setting

All participants were undergraduate English major students with different levels of study. The simple random sampling technique was used in the study. The survey was distributed to all English major students at different levels and campuses through their university email addresses and WhatsApp accounts. The total number of students who voluntarily participated in the study is 324: 174 male students and 150 female students from different study levels. A randomly selected sample was taken from male participants to equal the female participants to answer the study's research questions. Hence, the total number of participants in this study is 300 male and female students, after excluding 17 male participants to equal the female participants. Table one shows the structure of the respondents.

Table 2. *Structure of the respondents*

Gender	Number of Participants	Selected Sample	Population	Percentage to Population
Man	167	150	516	29.1%
Woman	150	150	802	18.7%
Total	317	300	1318	22.8% (to the total population)

The selected sample of male participants represented 29.1% of the total population of undergraduate English major students N=516. In contrast, the female participants represented 18.7% out of 802 English major students at the undergraduate level at the Women's Campus in the spring semester of the year 2021.

The study was held at the College of Language and Translation at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in January 2021, in the spring semester. COLT gives undergraduate and graduate degrees in different modern languages. The undergraduate degrees are English, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Turkish, Japanese, Chinese, Farsi, and Hebrew. The graduate degrees are English and French. All these degrees are available for male students at the Men's campus. Only three undergraduate programs are offered at the Women's campus: English, French, and Chinese. Graduate programs are offered on both campuses. This study was limited to undergraduate English major male and female students on both campuses.

Research Instruments

To achieve the objective of this paper, a survey was designed to answer its two questions. It consisted of three parts. The first part addressed the demographic data, specifically, the gender and age of participants. The second part of the survey was on participant's self-evaluation of computer skills and the possession of devices: namely smartphones, laptops, tablets, and desktops. The last part of the survey was on the preferences of platforms and the reasons behind the preferences. Six reasons were given to choose where participants could select more than one reason. These reasons were:

1. Ease of use
2. Supporting smartphones
3. Security and Privacy
4. Having an application for smartphones and tablets.
5. Integrations with other applications
6. Having other features rather than synchronous virtual classes

An open-ended question for causes of the preference of the platforms was available and optional.

The survey was then posted online through Google forms. All data in this study were collected electronically. Before distributing the survey, it was piloted to several students to ensure the clearance of the questions. The survey was published from January 20, 2020, until January 31, 2021. SPSS software was used to process the quantitative data, whereas thematic analysis was used in the open-ended question of the study. Most responses were collected in the first three days of the distribution.

Results

Platforms and Preferences

The survey asked participants to state their computer skills before answering the platform preferences and reasons behind their preference. The majority of them noted that they have average computer skills, (40%), followed by those who believed they have advanced skills in

computer (34%), then those who have very advanced skills (24%) and finally a percentage of 2% stated they possess weak computer skills. Figure one shows the participants' computer skills.

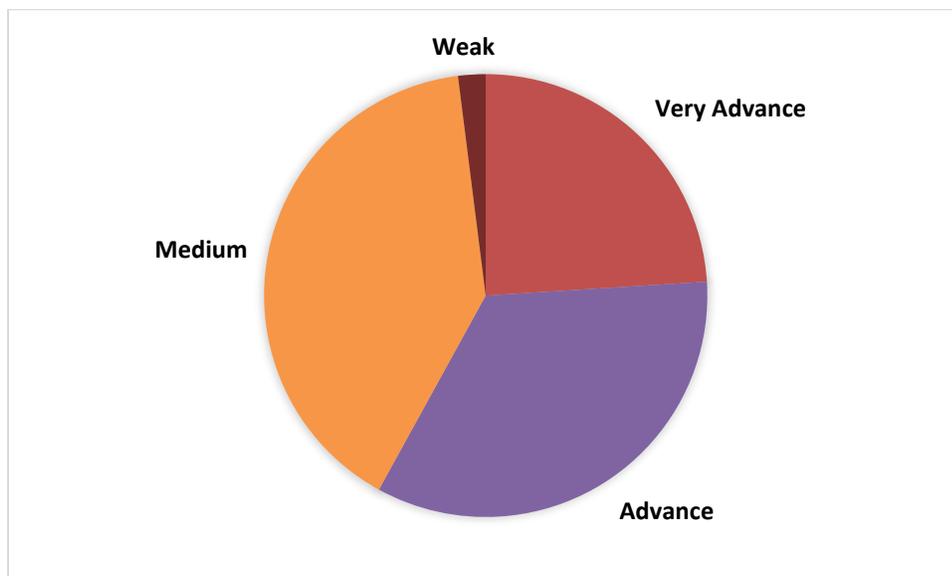


Figure 1. Participants' computer skills

The survey also asked students to tell the devices they used most in ERE. The findings showed that laptops were the most used devices with 50%, followed by smartphones with 27%, then came desktop computers with 14%, and finally tablets with 10%. Figure two represents the most used in ERE.

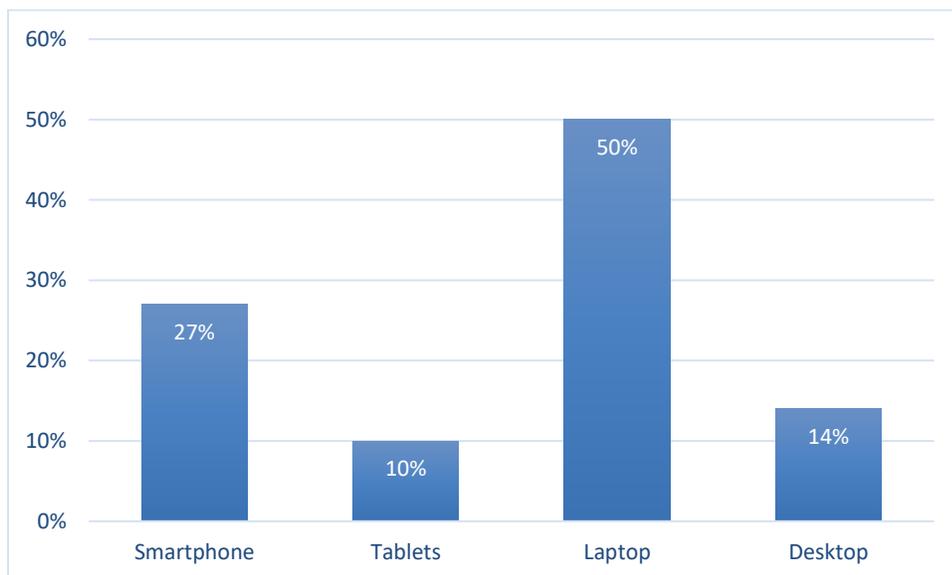


Figure 2. Devices used by participants in ERE

For the first question of the study concerning the platforms preferred by students in ERL, the results indicated that Zoom was the most preferred platform with 57.6% by all participants, followed by Blackboard with 40.6% and finally came other platforms with 1.6%. Figure three shows the findings of the most preferred platforms.

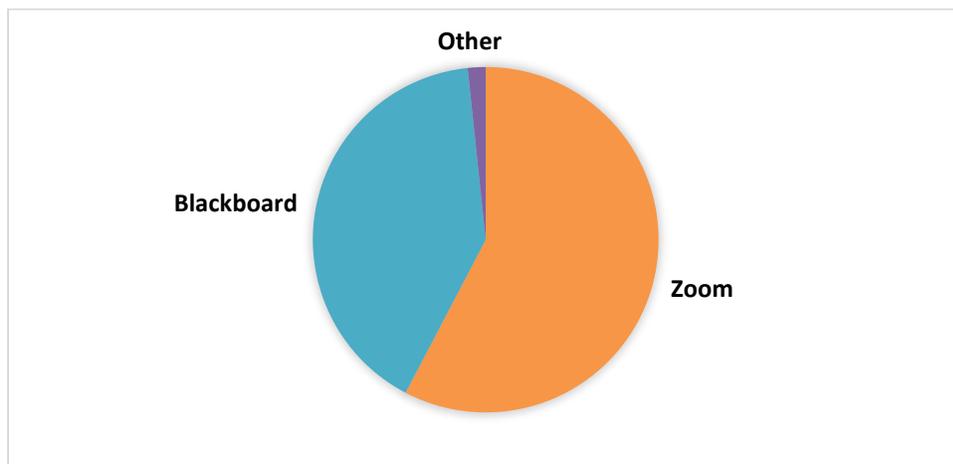


Figure 3. Most preferred platforms by participants

Regarding the gender differences in preference of platforms, the data analysis also indicated that female students preferred Zoom most with 66%, followed by Blackboard with 32%. As for their male counterparts, Zoom and Blackboard were equal with 49.3% each.

Reasons for preferences

Quantitative Analysis

The statistical analysis of the survey showed that all participants stated that ease of use of the platform was the most important reason behind their preferences with 30%. The results showed that the platform supporting of smartphones was the second reason behind students' preferences with 20%, then came platform offering apps for smartphones and tablets (18%), followed by the other features that platforms have in addition to synchronous virtual classes (14%), then platforms security and privacy (13%), and finally the platform integration with other applications (6%). Figure four represents the findings of students' reasons behind their platform preferences.

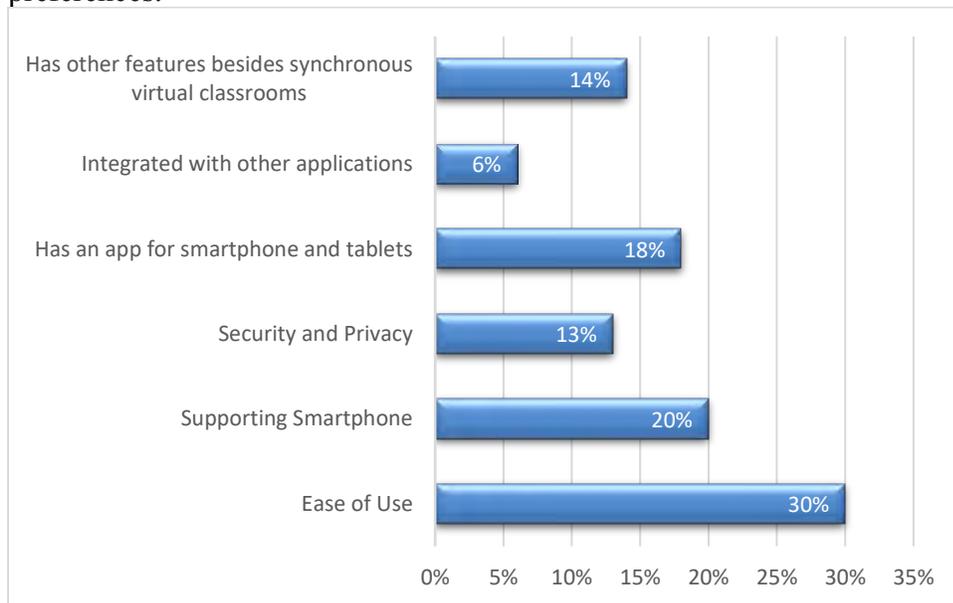


Figure 4. Reasons for platform preferences.

As for the gender differences for preferring platforms, there was no difference regarding the first two reasons: the platform ease of use and platform supporting smartphones. The platform ease of use came first for women students with 31% and 29% for men participants. The platform supporting smartphones came with 18% as the second reason of preferences of women students and with 22% for their men counterparts.

The research findings showed a gender difference in the ranking of the third reason for preferences. Besides synchronous virtual classrooms, the platform's other features were the third reason for female students' preferences (16%). In contrast, the platform with an application for smartphones and tablets came third of the reasons for male participants' preferences (20%). The same is with the fourth reason for choices. The platform's security and privacy came fourth in preferences for male students (13%) while having an application for smartphones and tablets came as the fourth reason for female students' preferences (15%). Female participants put security and privacy of the platform as the fifth reason for their preferences (13%), whereas platform's features besides synchronous virtual classroom were for male students (11%).

There were no gender differences in the last reason: platform integrations with other applications. Men students came with 5% and women with 6%. Figure five shows the male participants' reasons for platform preferences, and figure six reveals their female peers.

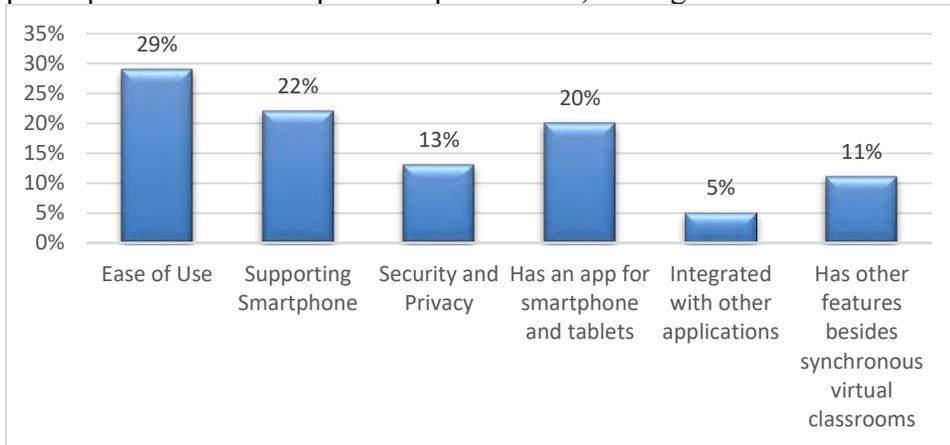


Figure 5. Men students' reasons for platform preferences

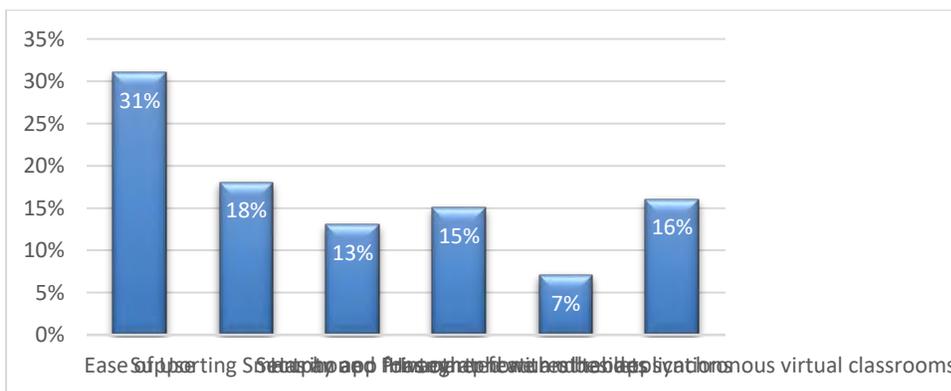


Figure 6. Women students' reasons for platform preferences

Thematic Analysis

Using thematic analysis was to analyze and generate knowledge from the open-ended question in the survey that asked students to list reasons behind favoring a platform over another. The six-step process of Braun and Clarke (2006) was adapted. A sum of 63 students answered the optional open-ended question regarding their reason for preferring one platform to the other: 20 favored Blackboard, 42 chose the Zoom, and one student stated that his preferences are based on the device he used in the ERE.

The analysis results showed that participants who favored Blackboard came under one theme: *It is an LMS*. One student said, *"Blackboard is a platform designed mainly for teaching and learning, whereas other platforms are not."* Another participant stated, *"On Blackboard, I can see the homework and my teachers' feedback. In addition, knowing my grades"*. One of the 20 participants said, *"Everything is there on the Blackboard, and all are registered and documented; my courses, attendance, grades, and my files."* *"No need for links to meet, all I need is my student info and password to join my classes"* another student added.

Those participants' answers to the open-ended question who preferred the Zoom came under two themes: technical problems and connection latency. One of them stated, *"I had never had problems entering my classes on the Zoom compared to Blackboard. I faced technical problems entering my class in Blackboard, which cost me some grades."* One said, *"When there are many students registered in one course, it is challenging to join Blackboard. The Zoom has no such problem at all"*. As for connection latency, one of the participants noticed, *"I can be more focused on Zoom than Blackboard since I have no problem of lagging. It is very light on my computer and connection"*. Another student added, *"Zoom was very flexible with poor internet connections. It is excellent with students with poor and slow connection compared to Blackboard."* Only one participant linked his preferences with the device he used in the ERE. He stated, *"I favored Blackboard on the desktops and laptops, but Zoom on the smartphone."*

Discussion

This research was aimed to discuss the reasons and causes of 300 English language major students' preferences of platforms used during the ERE in COLT at KSU in Saudi Arabia. It compared six different reasons of preferences: 1) ease of use, 2) supporting smartphones, 3) security and privacy, 4) having an application for smartphones and tablets, 5) integrations with other applications, and 6) having other features rather than virtual classes. In addition, it probed other reasons that students might have for their preferring. The study also addressed the gender differences in preferring the platforms and the reasons for the preferences. The study was conducted in the spring semester of 2021 and after students completed almost two semesters using these platforms.

The study findings showed that Zoom came first in students' preferences with 57.6%, and came Blackboard with 40.6%, and last were the other platforms. The results came in line with Al Shammari's (2021) finding and contrary to Ibrahim et al. (2021). As for gender differences in the first question of platform preferences, the results indicated that female students preferred Zoom (66%), followed by Blackboard (32%). On the other hand, male students came with the same Zoom and Blackboard preferences with 49.3% each. These findings came were the opposite of the result of Al Shammari (2021), in which he found that women students chose Blackboard first with 58.7% against Zoom (40%), whereas men students were for Zoom (67.6%) against

Blackboard (29.7%). The results here indicate a real need for one platform that has features of both LMSs and VCPs. Students had to go to one cyber place to attend classes, check grades, see homework, find feedback, communicate with teachers and colleagues, and find all related information. Jumping from one place to another to meet the need for learning during the ERE has dispersed students.

Hence, one lesson of the pandemic for policymakers in HEIs is to move beyond their current LMS that failed to meet the needs during the ERE. They should think of only platforms that have both features of LMS and VCP. In the case of the context of this study, the Blackboard at the KSU failed to meet the needs during the ERE because of the absence of a light synchronous virtual class; otherwise, the KSU would not buy other VCPs, and students would not choose Zoom as the most preferred platform in the ERE. Luckily, technology is one of the most rapidly changed sectors, and mergers and acquisitions are standard practices. Therefore, some new or integrated platforms definitely will evolve, benefiting from the learned lessons of the pandemic.

For reasons behind students' preferences of platforms, the quantitative results of analyses demonstrated that the ease of use, the first reason, was the dominant one with 30% of all participants. The platform supporting smartphones was the second reason behind students' preferences with 20%, then came that a platform has an app for smartphones and tablets with 18%. The fourth was the features that a platform offered besides the synchronous virtual classroom (14%), then was the privacy and security of a platform (13%), and finally came the platform Intergradation with other applications with (6%). The findings here show that both men and women students agreed that ease of use and having an app for smartphones and tablets are the most important reasons to be found in any platforms used in digital learning. Hence, any criteria for future LMS should consider these two conditions. Indeed, one of the reasons for preferring Zoom in ERE and other contexts was its ease of use: all that a person needs to join a synchronous meeting is to click on a link from a desktop, laptop, smartphone, or tablet. In addition, smartphones today are an essential part of students' life and their mobile learning, and no feasibility of any platform without mobile devices supported, mainly smartphones.

There were no differences in the first two reasons of preference for gender differences in the ranks of reasons behind students' preferences. Both women and men students put the platform ease of use as the first reason behind the preference (31% and 29% respectively), followed by the platform supporting smartphones (18% and 22% respectively). However, a gender difference quantitatively existed in the ranks of the other four reasons. Women students brought the features besides synchronous virtual classrooms that a platform has in the third place with 16%, whereas men students put the platform with an application for smartphones and tablets in the third place (20%). The same was with the fourth reason: female students chose the platform having an application for smartphones and tablets as the fourth reason of preference (15%), while male students thought that privacy and security of a platform should be in the fourth place (13%). The fifth reason of preferences also brought a gender difference. Female students believed that privacy and security of a platform came as the fifth reason of choices (13%) compared to male students who put features that a platform offers beside synchronous virtual classroom in the same place with 11%. No gender difference was found in the remaining reason of preferences: integrating a platform with other applications. Both women and men at

COLT put in last place with 6% and 5% respectively. The results here demonstrated other reasons to be considered when selecting "post-coronavirus education platforms". The four reasons for platform preferences, though they vary in their ranks based on the gender of the participants, serve as criteria for platform selections in the future. Policymakers at HEIs should pay heed for these reasons. For example, sharing screens that Zoom offers has become a norm in virtual classes. With this feature, teachers can present what they used to show in a real classroom. Polling is another feature that offers teachers immediate feedback from students during the pandemic and has become essential. The reasons of preferences also tell that platforms with an application for mobile devices: smartphones and tablets are the ones to succeed in education. Realistically, we live in the age of apps, and most of the time we spend using technology, mainly via smartphones for many people, we deal with apps. Participants' considerations of privacy and security of a platform give policymakers a great lesson on this issue. Indeed, reported hacks of the most preferred platform in the study, Zoom, have interrupting several classes worldwide and harassing several students.

The thematic analysis results indicated that most participants who answered the open-ended questions were for Zoom (42 participants), then came Blackboard with 20 participants. Two themes were found in the answers of students preferring Zoom: technical problems and connection latency. They stated that Zoom had fewer technical issues and worked well regardless of the speed of the internet connections, especially in classes with many students. For the participants who preferred Blackboard, the analysis showed that their answers came under one theme: it is an LMS. They believe that Blackboard is an LMS with features that students need and not merely a place to attend a class. However, one student linked the preference of a platform with the devices he used for the ERE. The finding of the thematic analysis showed that a higher percentage of participants were for Zoom. This indicates that Zoom has features that are not available to the Blackboard. Being a new platform to the students that appeared during the first days of the pandemic, students seem highly motivated to use it based on their answers. As for Blackboard, students have experienced it since they joined the university, so half of the participants in the open-ended question of the study were for it. However, the themes of the thematic analysis should be added to the selection criteria of the "post-coronavirus platform." Being light on the connection and system is one of the features that any application seeks to have, let alone an education platform. Even today and after decades of using the Internet, many still have problems with the speed of the Internet worldwide, especially in remote areas like villages, small towns, and the countryside. This is mainly because most Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are for-profit organizations. Remote areas are not attractive for most ISPs unless some public policies push them to serve these areas. Hence, policymakers should put this in mind when deciding on the platforms. The pandemic will foster digital learning, and many courses will be either partially or entirely online.

Conclusion

This research aimed to gain insight into the preferences of platforms and reasons behind the preferences of English major students at the College of Languages and Translation in King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, during the ERE. The research also investigated gender differences in platform preferences and the reasons behind them. The seismic shifts that the Covid-19 crisis made have given HEIs great lessons on digital learning and teaching. Several

lessons should be learned from these lessons. Among them are the insights of students and their experiences with different dimensions.

The finding of this study indicated that Zoom was most prominent. The Blackboard, although being there for years, came second in the preferences. Reasons for the preferences were varied among students. The most substantial reasons for male and female participants were the ease of use, followed by supporting smartphones. Other reasons: features that a platform offers and having an application for smartphones and tablets were the third and fourth reasons based on the gender of the participant. Privacy and security, and integration of the platforms with other platforms were also other reasons participants consider in their preferences of a platform. The thematic analysis of the study showed that technical problems and connections were the issues of preferences of participants favoring Zoom, compared with participants who were for Blackboard because it is an LMS and not only a VCP.

Recommendations

All reasons of preferences should be given high importance by HEIs policymakers in digital learning and transformation. In addition, platform providers, especially VCPs, should consider them for their sake to enter the arena of higher educations and work to make them more than VCPs, but a VCP with LMS tools. For the developers of Blackboard, the pandemic has given them a real test of Blackboard in actual settings worldwide. The VCP features should be a vital tool in the LMS or fade, whether Blackboard or any LMS.

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