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Teachers' Reflection of Students' Engagement in Online Language Learning: Multi-case Study

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Abstract: Learning engagement is one of the most important issues facing online learning, which has many distractions beyond the teacher's control and management. This study examined teachers' observations of their students' engagement in online learning and their efforts to engage them. Teachers can evaluate different factors and conditions that affect students' perceptions, engagement, motivation, and achievement. Language learning is influenced by several factors, such as teachers' rapport and interaction with their students, students' interaction and collaboration, and their engagement with social activities in learning situations. This qualitative multi-case study collected data from five language teachers by semi-structured interviews, teachers' self-reports, and observational notes about their experiences of students' engagement in their online lessons. It lasted for 15 teaching weeks in a Saudi intermediate school during the second semester of 2020-2021. The thematic analysis results in four main categories; (a) teachers' challenges, (b) students' responsibilities, (c) environment and system, and (d) attitude and excuses. These categories are built on 11 themes that provide insights into the factors, challenges, and threats, which influence learning engagement in online courses for teachers and students. The study recommends some techniques to maintain the learning engagement and provides some suggestions for future research.

Keywords: *EFL classroom, teachers' observations, online language teaching, educators' perceptions, Saudi education context.*

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Introduction

Learning depends on how students engage with learning activities and how they participate in learning environments (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Learning engagement is an important concept to improve education, boost positive feelings, and lead to success. Students' engagement is globally recognized as one of the main educational challenges because it is highly context-dependent and influenced by many factors, such as cultures, families, schools, peers, classrooms, and learning tasks and activities (Shernoff, 2013).

Learning engagement is a multifaceted model that consists of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions of engagement to describe how students think, act, and feel in class (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement refers to how students pay attention and work to complete classroom tasks; emotional engagement includes both internal and external indicators of students' enjoyment of the classroom and not having a negative effect; and cognitive engagement displays students' active thinking in making connections, solving problems, and answering questions (Fredricks et al., 2004).

In language learning, the social dimension plays a central role in students' language acquisition. Social engagement is the fourth dimension of engagement in Philp and Duchesne's (2016) multidimensional construct of engagement in addition to the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions. Svalberg (2009) considers social interaction as a main dimension of engagement to use the language and suggests a model of "engagement with language" (EWL) to go further beyond cognitive or behavioral dimensions by integrating all dimensions. EWL "is a cognitive, and/or affective and/or social state and process in which the learner is the agent and language is object, and may be vehicle (means of communication)" (Svalberg, 2009, p. 247).

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The students' use of the language, their learning, and their actions with it are evidence of EWL (Svalberg, 2009). For example, the desire of students to engage with learning opportunities around them supports their acquisition of English. Their engagement also allows them to focus their attention on learning, exert effort to achieve its objectives, progress in language acquisition, construct their learning independently, and interact with their peers and teacher (Svalberg, 2009). Egbert (2020) states that their active involvement in learning activities leads to positive feelings, high motivation, deep interest, and strong self-efficacy.

The importance of context in engaging learners in language learning processes is emphasized (Svalberg, 2009). In the face-to-face (F2F) context of language learning, it is difficult to keep learners engaged and focused on their learning (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). In such contexts, language teachers can control the classroom settings and deal with these challenges. For instance, they have some power to guide their students, observe their learning development, and provide them with engaging activities. The online learning context is not excluded. In the online learning context, language teachers face more difficulties in engaging their students. Indeed, online learning settings are full of distractions that destroy the teachers' efforts to promote students' engagement. Moreover, teachers' authority and guidance are restricted due to the nature of distance teaching and learning (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Luburić et al., 2021).

These issues of online learning are considered common drawbacks of online learning whenever it is intentionally chosen either as a learning setting or as a part of blended learning contexts, as shown in previous studies (Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Henry, 2019; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Ragan & Schroeder, 2014). Shifting learning into complete online learning during the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) was different (Al Shlowiy, 2021). On the one hand, it was a forced shift to this setting, not a selection. On the other hand, it lasted several weeks without preparation and a clear plan. In this emergency unprepared situation of language learning, students face many distractions that might cancel out their engagement even if they are highly motivated (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

The purpose of the study is to investigate the teachers' efforts to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) and how to engage their students in online learning contexts through COVID-19. In their online teaching sessions, teachers observe their students' actions, attention, and participation. They also witness different factors and conditions that create students' perceptions, facilitate their engagement, and influence their learning outcomes (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Moreover, this study aims to describe EFL teachers' rapport and interaction with their students in online learning contexts as well as students' engagement with authentic social activities and web-based uses of language (Henry, 2019).

Research Questions

1. How did EFL teachers find their students' engagement in online learning during COVID-19?
2. To what extent did they engage their EFL students in online classes?

Literature Review

This section examines the literature to identify the main challenges in engaging students in language learning. Students' engagement is one of the most important challenges facing online learning in the 21st century (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Kebritchi et al., 2017). During COVID-19, for example, teachers and students were required to deal with many technical issues, including Internet disconnections, choppy audio, ambiguous instructions, and frozen screens (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021). These issues interrupted online learning sessions and delivery quality, as well as the lack of interaction and facial expressions. Also, students are always surrounded by various distractions and temptations that influence their engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Students' engagement refers to the quality of their connection to the endeavor of schooling and their involvement with people, activities, goals, and places that compose schooling (Skinner et al., 2009). Literature shows that students' engagement is influenced by different factors, such as teachers, learning environment, motivation, course content, fun, and interest (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Luburić et al., 2021; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Shernoff, 2013; Skinner et al., 2009). Svalberg (2009) calls the positive factors "drivers" and the negative factors "spanners." These factors lead students to encounter several challenges in their learning journey.

In online learning contexts, students face other challenges related to technological tools and the virtual space. White (2003) encourages teachers to guide their students to overcome online challenges including isolation, lack of social contact with peers, lack of access to regular classroom interactions, lack of support, lack of real-time feedback, problems with motivation, difficulties with self-discipline, frustration due to hitches or disconnection, and the need for effective time management. According to Kebritchi et al. (2017), online learning issues are categorized into three sets: student issues, teacher issues, and content issues. The first set of student issues includes engagement and participation, a sense of belonging to a community of learning, and a sense of isolation and disconnection.

Teachers must make extra effort to sustain the online teaching classes, maintain students' engagement (Ragan & Schroeder, 2014), and support their students to be self-motivated and self-directed to build their knowledge compared to F2F (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Online language teaching is more challenging because teachers need to involve their students in many interactive activities, collaborative practices, and authentic uses of the target language.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, both students and teachers had different challenges due to the sudden shift to online learning. Such a phenomenon is currently the focus of many researchers, educators, and policymakers who are investigating the advantages and disadvantages of online language teaching. This reminds us of the study by Hampel and Stickler (2005), which is considered among the first studies to identify the required skills for teaching language in online settings. According to Hampel and Stickler (2005), language teachers can overcome difficulties in online teaching settings by demonstrating (1) basic ICT competence, (2) specific technical competence for the software, (3) dealing with medium constraints and opportunities, (4) online socialization, (5) facilitating communicative competence, (6) creativity and choice, and (7) own style.

The pandemic forced teachers to do emergency teaching online that displayed their need for these seven skills for overcoming the challenges of online learning. The learners were not excluded. Duru et al. (2021) study the behavior of language learners within online learning platforms based on learning outcomes and engagement. They collect data from students' comments and discussions embedded in the content of each lesson. They also categorize the students by their proficiency in the English language. Different from the early methods that mainly analyzed numerical features of behaviors, including page views, video views, and assessment grades; they use baseline machine-learning algorithms for analyzing over 420,000 comments. They find it difficult to recognize students' features by using the comments alone because some students did not participate in discussions. They recommend using a combination of learners' activities to have a stronger predictive approach to students' behavior. This leads to extracting numeric features and predicting the learners' future performance in online learning.

Nakamura et al. (2020) studied the effect of choice on 24 EFL learners' task engagement. The students were required to complete two opinion-gap tasks by discussion and agreement. Their spoken interactions and questionnaires were analyzed to investigate the four dimensions of students' engagement: behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social; and how these factors connect. It is found that the interrelated, multidimensional nature of learner task engagement is important in the learning process.

In a Saudi university, Al Shlowiy et al. (2021) investigated educational issues and concerns that could potentially arise during emergency remote teaching. They asked 674 learners to rate the concerns based on how they had experienced them, and 61 teachers to rate how they perceived these concerns for their students. The findings show that teachers might not recognize the reason behind student disengagement and demotivation. Also, these concerns may diminish teachers' enthusiasm and students' seriousness.

Theoretical Framework

This study focuses on students' engagement in language learning. Among several dimensions that contribute to language learning management, this study uses sociocultural perceptions to discuss the social factors of engaging EFL students in online learning. Social factors include interaction, participation, and collaboration in the learning environment. Svalberg (2009) considers social factors the main contributors to language learning. To learn a language, sociocultural theories (SCT) emphasize different elements, such as social setting, learning context, language input, collaboration, participation, interaction, teachers' support, and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978).

According to SCT, this study looks at online learning classes as a contextual and social situation where language learners participate in meaningful communicative activities with other people (Lantolf, 2006). Interacting and participating in these activities develop learners' cognitive and higher mental functions (Lantolf, 2006). These virtual activities make language learning meaningful and provide EFL learners with a high input of English. When they use English to participate in these virtual activities, they are actively engaged in an authentic context that, in turn, supports their language development.

Inspired by SCT, this study explores how EFL students engage in online learning sessions through their teachers' eyes, how they are virtually immersed in a real-life social environment for acquiring the language, and how they collaborate to work on activities. The study also investigates how EFL teachers scaffold their students to boost their engagement, expose them to authentic language input, facilitate their participation in English activities, and support their communication with individuals and groups.

It is worth mentioning that teachers play different roles in online learning sessions. They should recognize their new roles by keeping updated with the new technologies to collaboratively prepare their students for the required skills of the 21st century. They should change their ways of teaching, achieving goals, constructing knowledge, finding resources, creating learning environments, assessing the progress, and helping students to develop their learning. Online learning forces them to have new pedagogical, social, administrative, and technical responsibilities (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021).

Methodology

Research Design

The researcher employed the qualitative case study design to conduct this research. He aimed to understand some cases of study by investigating some individuals in real-life situations (Creswell, 2007). To address the study questions that are descriptive in nature, some EFL teachers and classes were employed as a small group to perform several cases of the investigation. This multi-case study research helps in providing a comprehensive description and explanation of teachers' experience, reflection, and observation of students' engagement in online learning.

Participants and Study Context

Eight EFL teachers were informed about the study requirements. They were the target population of the study. They work in two intermediate schools in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia. Six of them expressed their interest in participating in the study and signed the consent form. One of them withdrew later. The teachers are Saudi males, aged 39–47, with 15–23 years of experience teaching English. Each one worked as a case study in this research. Pseudonyms were used to protect their names and their schools (Table 1). The study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The school curriculum was completely delivered online through the Madrasati Platform, which belongs to the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. This platform is similar to Blackboard. They were teaching the third grade of the intermediate school, which is the ninth grade in public education. Each class has four meetings a week, and each meeting lasts 35 minutes. One of them was teaching three classes, another one was teaching four classes, and three teachers were teaching five classes each (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' information

Case study	Participant's pseudonym	Age	Years of experience	School	Weekly classes
1	The 1 st teacher	44	21	A	12
2	The 2 nd teacher	42	18	A	20
3	The 3 rd teacher	41	18	B	20
4	The 4 th teacher	39	15	B	20
5	The 5 th teacher	47	23	B	16

These 22 classes were the setting of the study. Eight classes had 36 students in the first school, and 14 classes had 35–37 students in the second school. The total was 792 students, with a range of 36 students in the class, aged 14–15 based on the school registration. The students had been learning English since the fifth grade of elementary school. They used a textbook entitled *Super Goal 5* by McGraw-Hill Education, which focuses on the four skills, grammatical structures, and vocabulary with high-interest topics that motivate teens and young adults. They had been exposed to emergency online learning for the last two academic years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Collection

This study used several methods to collect data: semi-structured interviews, teachers' self-reports, and the researcher's observational notes. Employing different methods to collect data, which is known as a triangulation strategy (Creswell, 2007), increased the credibility of the findings. These methods helped to explore the participants' experiences and views on the research questions. The researcher collected the data over 15 teaching weeks during the second semester of 2020–2021.

Interviews

The first method to collect data was the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted online and face-to-face with the five EFL teachers. It allowed the researcher to ask different questions in a safe environment in which the teachers were comfortable expressing and sharing their stories and experiences about students' engagement. The researcher built an interview guide (Appendix) earlier to ask the participants the same questions. The goal was to acquire comprehensive responses, meaningful information, and a detailed description of the participants' thoughts, practices, experiences, and perceptions (Creswell, 2007). The teachers were interviewed twice: once face-to-face at the beginning of the semester and once online by the end of the semester. The interviews were recorded. The length of the interviews was 20-25 minutes, and the total interview recordings was 216 minutes.

Teachers' Reports

The second method of collecting data was the reports by the five participants. The participants were given other opportunities to comment on the conversations they had with the researcher. After each interview, the researcher emailed follow-up questions to every interviewee, asking if he would like to add more details to the interview. The researcher used some prompts built especially for each interview. This is a different method to collect written data by

giving the teachers time and freedom to reflect on any part of the interview or the given prompts. It might be called “participants’ letters,” “written reports,” or “reflection journals” (Creswell, 2007). Most teachers responded with short reflections or limited details, but they provided valuable details by responding to the prompts.

Researcher’s Observation

The third method to collect data was the researcher’s observations and notes. He attended 14 online learning lessons to observe the teachers and their students across the semester. In ten meetings, he was invited as a virtual guest through the Madrasati Platform and Microsoft teams. In the other four meetings, he was sitting with the teachers in their offices when they were delivering their classes. Moreover, the researcher watched other video-recorded lessons by those five teachers to take more notes about students’ behaviors. Observing and watching learning meetings provided many insights into students’ engagement, participation, interaction, and behavior. Also, some indicators were noted about teachers’ methods, questions, motives, and reactions.

Data Analysis

This study used descriptive and interpretive analysis due to the qualitative nature of the data. The analysis started during the data collection process, with the responses from the first interview. Creswell (2007) states that data collection and data analysis are not distinct steps, but they are interrelated and go on simultaneously. This means that data was analyzed as it was collected by carefully listening to the interview recordings, critically watching the recording lessons, and repeatedly reading the observation notes and teachers’ letters. Similarly, the researcher organized the data, categorized them, and took notes on a weekly basis. He followed a thematic approach (Creswell, 2007) to describe the data, classify them, and interpret them into codes. Such an approach provides rich details to answer research questions.

For reliability and validity of the data collection and analysis process, the researcher shared the qualitative data with three Ph.D. holders in Language Education. They provided a peer examination and reviewed the entire study (Creswell, 2007). They used a Microsoft Word table to investigate the study procedures, examine the collecting data, and compare the emerging codes. After many conversations, they agreed on specific categories and themes used below for the thematic analysis.

Results

The thematic analysis produced four categories and 11 themes (Table 2). The first category goes to teachers’ challenges that are classified into three themes: lack of power, the teacher’s new role, and online teaching tactics. The next category shows the students’ responsibilities in three groups: ethics and self-discipline, online culture and awareness, and training and support. The third category—environment and system—includes three themes: Internet and devices issues, course objectives, and parent involvement. The last category is attitude and excuses. It has two sides: one for teachers and another for students.

Table 2. The findings of the data analysis

Category	Theme
Teachers’ challenges	Lack of power
	Teacher’s new role
	Online teaching tactics
Students’ responsibilities	Ethics & self-discipline
	Online culture & awareness
	Training & support
Environment and system	Internet & devices issues
	Course objectives
	Parent involvement
Attitudes and excuses	Teachers’ side
	Students’ side

The next section discusses these categories and themes, relaying on the participants’ experiences and attitudes or the researcher’s notes and observations. It explains these findings with connections to the literature.

Discussion

The focus of this study is to explore students’ engagement in English learning during COVID-19 from their teachers’ perspectives. The study aims at answering two questions: how did EFL teachers find their students’ engagement in online learning during COVID-19? To what extent did they engage their EFL students in online classes? The findings offer some insights to answer both questions about engaging EFL students in online learning contexts.

Teachers’ Challenges

This study found that EFL teachers encountered various difficulties engaging their students in online learning during COVID-19. This is the first category of findings that show how the teachers behaved in this hard time with the sudden shift to online learning. This category includes three themes: lack of power, the teacher's new role, and online teaching tactics.

Lack of power. This theme resulted from the teachers' lack of control over their online classes and managing their students remotely. For example, one of the teachers stated, "The teacher does not know what they are doing behind the screen," and he added, "I do not have control over them." Another teacher complained saying that "I cannot guide someone away from my eyes." That was supported by a third teacher who showed that he "can teach, explain, answer, discuss, etc. and provide them with activities to engage them, but not sure if they are active or not, if they work seriously or not, and if someone helps them or not." The 4th teacher stated that "sometimes I do not feel that it is a classroom ... and I am not the teacher. I do not feel that I am part of the lesson."

These examples indicate how teachers were not able to control their classes. They also felt that they were isolated from their students and could not interact with them. According to Kebritchi et al. (2017), online learning reduces the teacher's ability to engage the learners, manage the learning classes, and avoid distraction. Teachers also struggle to accommodate individual differences and students' needs by providing a variety of language learning tasks (Nakamura et al., 2020). Such issues lead teachers to prefer traditional F2F classes where they understand the students' needs and can cope with other issues (White, 2003).

Teacher's new role. Having a new role in online teaching is the second theme that was repeated by all teachers. It grouped their feelings towards the new teaching situation, as seen in the last quote above, and how they should successfully behave in it. The 1st teacher felt that he was working alone. He indicated that online teaching "looks as if I must teach in one classroom and my students in the next classroom. How to serve them? How to deal with their needs through the door eye?" The 2nd teacher felt that "in online learning, I am not a teacher. I am a singer. Students look at me as a TV presenter or news reporter." He also stressed his frustration by comparing traditional learning and online learning. His comparison was "F2F, class activities can match students' interest and background, but in online I know little about my students." That comparison goes in line with the 5th teacher's comparison, which was: "Online did not help me to develop my teaching before Corona, but now I did a lot. I liked it and will choose online in the future if I have the choice."

Similar to other studies (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Henry, 2019; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Luburić et al., 2021; Ragan & Schroeder, 2014), teachers share these feelings and increase their use of technological tools and online resources. In addition, they use several platforms and social media to communicate with each other and with their students. They attempt to provide solutions to their problems after waiting a long time for official support and guidance, as reported in the study of Al Shlowiy et al. (2021).

Online teaching tactics. The third theme coded the expressions about teachers' strategies and approaches that they needed, learned, or applied in online teaching. Teachers' words show this theme, such as "I need to learn how to deal with feigning engagement in front of me" by the 2nd teacher, "I used some techniques when I call them or check their attendance," by the 3rd teacher, "is there a strategy to deal with any student who pretends to work on the book while he is not" by the 1st teacher, and "what are the ways to keep them staying alert in my class? It is may be difficult, but I should find anyway," by the 4th teacher. Moreover, some teachers were convinced to improve their required skills in this part, as indicated by the 3rd teacher who "did not have the required teaching approaches to create a stimulating learning environment where learners are likely to engage fully."

This agrees with the findings of Luburić et al. (2021) that show teachers' need for continuous professional development to cope with technology-based problems and students' needs. Compared to F2F, teachers need more time to prepare interactive online learning settings (Cavanaugh, 2005) that engage their students, scaffold them, and monitor their attention, although most students did not appreciate the learning opportunities. Without interaction in learning contexts, sociocultural theories claim that students do not progress in their language learning because they are isolated from participating in social activities or being a part of a speaking community (Ellis, 2003; Lantolf, 2006).

Students' Responsibilities

This category is the second finding of this study, which shows that students have some responsibilities in online learning situations. The study found that students should discipline themselves according to the ethics of online learning and be aware of the culture and procedures of the virtual world. Moreover, they are accountable for obtaining the required training and support.

Ethics and self-discipline. This is the first theme in the second category of students' responsibilities. Cheating, plagiarizing, copying from each other, and using Google Translator to complete their assignments were examples of this theme. In addition, it was observed that students were not paying attention to the teachers' instruction. The 3rd teacher reported that "I want to engage them and let them focus on the activities, but I am not able to fight the distractions at their hands." The 2nd teacher agreed when he said, "I really do not know what is going on behind the screen." The 5th teacher provided more details as he said:

Even if the student is sleeping or playing a game. They help each other quickly. Whenever I call a student, he gets help from his classmates. They call him or text him. They have a WhatsApp group for playing against the teachers and pretending to be present [active] in the classes.

Such behaviors are reported in the literature (see Al Shlowiy, 2021; Al Shlowiy et al., 2021). Al Shlowiy et al. (2021) show that cheating and plagiarism in online learning are major issues influencing academic integrity. It is noted that many students can submit virtual assignments that are not written by them or arrange with someone to complete online assessments. They may not recognize or feel guilty about their academic misbehavior. Some students are not self-disciplined in their education. They only focus on passing the online course, which leads them to feel overwhelmed (Luburić et al., 2021), and they participate in dishonest manners. Therefore, academic institutions must address cheating and any forms of academic dishonesty, make examinations with direct invigilation, adopt stricter policies and procedures, develop an honor culture of academic integrity, and support students' discipline and autonomous learning (Al Shlowiy et al., 2021).

Online culture and awareness. It was a product of the need to increase students' awareness of online learning and improve their perceptions of online teaching. The teachers stated, "Online teaching is not effective due to the nature of our students;" "We do not need programs or tools or platforms. We need to change our attitude. We need to develop our students' discipline and self-management in the online setting;" "They attend the virtual classes only for the purpose of attendance, not for learning or participating;" and "Randomly, I called different students and asked a question, which received silly answers most of the time. I always wonder about this behavior."

This finding is supported by Kebritchi et al. (2017) who state that online courses depend on several factors related to the students, including their readiness, perceptions, cultural backgrounds, and awareness. Therefore, students differ not only in their recognition of the culture of online learning but also in their participation in this culture. Some students might lack social familiarity with this culture, lose their attention and focus (Fredricks et al., 2004; Svalberg, 2009), and miss the meaningful interaction within the online learning environment (Lantolf, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978).

Training and support. This theme coded all expressions regarding the students' need for training and support. One of the teachers showed that "only a few students in my classes can work well in this new system," and he added, "many students and parents have been requesting help and sending issues to me, but I cannot help and I have nothing to do." It was stated clearly by the 4th teacher that, in his words, "all students are not well prepared to use the tools of the online platform." That was supported by the 2nd teacher who agreed that "even my students and their families did not have enough experience to deal with online schooling."

Many studies report the same issue of students' need for training and technical support (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Henry, 2019; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Luburić et al., 2021; Nakamura et al., 2020). Duru et al. (2021) also find that students were not ready to participate in online discussions and post their comments. They behave in different ways that are not suitable for online learning.

Environment and System

The third category of the findings displays the role of the context or environment in language learning. As learning is delivered through online learning systems, the Internet and devices play a major role in this context. Moreover, the learning context should be built on clear course objectives and strong family participation.

Internet and devices issues. This is the first theme in this category. It summarized the teachers' words about the technological issues they experienced during the study. All teachers suffered from Internet disconnection and weak networks that made it hard to deliver their lessons clearly and steadily. Their students also encountered the issue of the availability of hardware and devices to enable them to attend the online classes regularly. Moreover, these technological difficulties were noted during several visits by the researcher.

Literature shows this challenge has been a continuous concern since the early use of online sessions (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Ragan & Schroeder, 2014; White, 2003). Most teachers were disappointed and were not able to continue their teaching due to the device availability and internet connection. Instead of delivering their lessons and observing students' progress, they had to solve the technical issues, familiarize themselves with digital features (Al Shlowiy, 2021), and prepare their students with the required tools.

Course objectives. This theme clustered the researcher's observations and notes during his visits and attendance. It was found that many teaching sessions went by without stating the learning objectives or ensuring the students were engaged with the lesson. Another note was about students' recognition of the lesson: many students did not follow the teacher during the lessons. Most of them were not using their textbooks or the soft copies of the textbooks. According to the 4th teacher, "many students do not make any efforts during the class. They do not even open the book." The 1st teacher did not assume that his students would improve their skills without understanding the lessons.

This agrees with the findings of Kebritchi et al. (2017) and Luburić et al. (2021). According to Kebritchi et al. (2017), some teachers are not able to deliver their online lessons in effective ways similar to those in the F2F environment. Their

students do not achieve the lesson outcomes and objectives in the online environment. Their trouble concentrating does not empower them to achieve the learning objectives (Luburić et al., 2021). This environment is distant from students and does not help teachers connect the learning content with students who use the environment for fun and entertainment beyond the teacher's control (Al Shlowiy, 2021).

Parent involvement. It resulted from teachers' need for parent participation in the education process. Teachers did not feel any support at their students' homes. They complained about this issue. The 1st teacher showed that most of his students were not supported at home. He also stated, "They did not get help from their parents or siblings." Another teacher wondered about family engagement in their children's learning processes. All teachers agreed that many students were not observed by their fathers and mothers.

Such difficulty was reported in previous studies (see Al Shlowiy, 2021; Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Kebritchi et al., 2017) who found that many students were not able to continue online learning due to the lack of parent assistance. Their parents are not experienced in providing a supportive environment for their children or managing their daily routine during this period. Kebritchi et al. (2017) claim that parent assistance is a central factor for young students in online learning, in which they motivate their children, remove the distractions, reduce the pressure, and contribute to their performance.

Attitudes and Excuses

The last finding goes to the attitudes and excuses that existed during the study. Both teachers and students have different attitudes toward using the online learning system during COVID-19. On the other hand, teachers used various excuses to overcome the difficulties of teaching over the pandemic. The students were the same, using their reasons to excuse themselves.

Teachers' side. Teachers had different attitudes toward online learning and students' engagement. Some teachers did not feel comfortable delivering their lessons through online learning systems. They used several excuses not to blame themselves, as stated by the 2nd teacher: "Online teaching is not effective due to the nature of our students. They do not work hard." This goes in line with the 5th teacher's words: "Although of using several learning sources and interactive videos, I could not engage students." The 1st teacher frankly showed that he did not find a benefit in integrating several tasks into his online lessons.

As discussed in the literature (Henry, 2019; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Luburić et al., 2021; Nakamura et al., 2020; Ragan & Schroeder, 2014), some teachers find it difficult to teach online and do not enjoy the experience. It takes more effort to create an inspiring and engaging learning environment than it does to solve technology-related problems and combat learning distractions. They should interact with their learners virtually and develop communicative activities to employ their students (Lantolf, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978).

Students' side. All teachers claimed that most students were always off-task. They agreed that their students easily "drift off the activity" and "their emotions are not involved." Many students, according to the 1st and 3rd teachers, were neither interested nor involved in online learning systems. The 2nd and 4th teachers found only a few active students who participated in the learning classes, while "most students do not expend energy and attention to understand the instructions, even I repeated them several times."

During the researcher's visits, it was noted that (a) only 4–6 students regularly participated in most activities, (b) usually 3–4 raised their hands to answer the questions, (c) mostly many students did not respond when calling their names, and (d) often they did not write in the chatting box when the teacher informed them. Such notes are found in several studies (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Al Shlowiy et al., 2021; Henry, 2019; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Luburić et al., 2021; Nakamura et al., 2020). These notes might lead many students to fail online courses. For those students, online courses challenge and demotivate them from self-isolation or being a part of a speaking community (Ellis, 2003; Lantolf, 2006). Their attitudes toward online learning activities shape their engagement in online courses.

The findings have several implications for EFL courses, teachers, and students. Online classes might be delivered in several ways that enable social interaction and communication for the development of the language, as suggested by SCT (Ellis, 2003; Fredricks et al., 2004; Lantolf, 2006; Svalberg, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers are able to create a virtual learning community to tie students with lesson contents and objectives. Such a community can provide learning opportunities for different preferences and learning styles, as well as engage students in the authentic practice of the language and motivate them. Belonging to a learning community is a requirement that guides students to achieve their learning goals and develop their language (Kebritchi et al., 2017).

Supporting those findings, teachers need to cope with managing issues, distractions, and new roles because of lacking the power in online classes. They need to nurture students' motivation, boost their self-discipline, and reduce their frustration (White, 2003). At their home, parents should be aware of online resources and platforms to be employed if there is a need or in the event of disasters because they can support student learning and provide the required inspiration and responsibility for achieving the learning objectives (Al Shlowiy, 2021). These factors contribute to successful student academic performance, supportive social interaction, emotional comfort, and continuous nurturing (Henry, 2019; Luburić et al., 2021; Nakamura et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This paper discusses some EFL teachers' reflections about students' engagement as well as observational field notes. It defines engagement as an active and multidimensional concept that involves cognition, affect, behavior, and social interactions. It is considered the main force of the learning process to guide students' attention to knowledge construction. In language learning, several factors play a crucial role in students' engagement, such as learning settings and teaching approaches. Language learning settings in F2F or online must be engaging for students.

Moving to emergency online teaching during COVID-19 gradually made online learning a must in the education process. Online learning is not an option anymore. It was the only educational system and setting to adapt. Among many challenges that exist in online learning settings, students' engagement becomes dominant for many teachers. Teachers need to encourage their students to be active and engaged learners who are accountable for their learning. Succeeding in online language learning requires autonomous and motivated students who socially connect with themselves and with their teachers and engage with the learning content. They should participate in learning activities and speaking opportunities to establish rapport during online exchanges and obtain constant access to regular classroom interactions.

Teachers are also required to develop technical skills to play their new roles in the 21st century rather than being traditional teachers. As suggested by Hampel and Stickler (2005) to have at least some basic skills to teach online, teachers must consider their learners' needs and emotional needs. Teachers should support their students' technological needs and prepare them for lifelong learning. Also, they are required to enhance students' levels of communicative competence and critical thinking by choosing engaging exercises and creating authentic materials that improve online learning settings to engage and inspire their students. Some insights were discussed to enable EFL students to develop further and faster as well as to benefit from deeper interest, greater motivation, and stronger self-efficacy and persistence (Egbert, 2020).

Recommendations

It is recommended that studies be conducted with different types of participants in other locations for generalization purposes about students' engagement. It is also suggested that researchers utilize quantitative designs or different types of analysis, including exploratory, multimodal, critical, and phenomenological perspectives. This will assist in obtaining comprehensive studies about the issues of EFL students' engagement, their interaction with the learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978), learning with each other (Lantolf, 2006), and participating in social activities (Ellis, 2003), as well as their strengths and limitations.

Limitations

Limitations can arise in any type of research (Creswell, 2007), which might come from the researcher, the research design, context, data analysis, or participants. The participants might not provide enough details to have thorough interpretations of the Saudi EFL context that includes different educational levels for male and female students. As this is a qualitative study, limitations might occur in the methods of data collection and analysis. Therefore, findings were primarily situated in teachers' perceptions as a single viewpoint.

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Appendix*Interview questions:*

What do you use to keep them focused on any learning activity?

How do you describe the focus and concentration of your students?

How can you get the learners' attention to your lessons?

What do you feel if your students are (not) interested in your class?

How do you check your students' engagement?

What are their reasons of disengagement?

What do you do with disengaged students?

What are their reactions to your teaching methods if they have talked about them?

How often do they (participate in activities, ask questions, answer your questions, share with each other, collaborate, interact ...)?

Do they like (to participate in or to withdraw from) activities?

How do you find pair work and group-work in the class?

How to (support/reduce) students' engagement?

How do you help them to complete the activities?

To what extent are they independent learners?

How many autonomous students who care for their learning and construct their knowledge?

Have you observed any progress in their learning, mistakes, pronunciation ... ? Explain

Describe your voice, intonation, body language, facial expressions, turn-on camera ...?

How often do your students sleep during online classes?

Do they help each other? Support each other in learning?

In your opinion, which factors influence students (both positively and negatively) to engage with the course materials and solve tasks continuously?

Which factors influenced your students' engagement during this period?

What did you find challenging when engaging your learners?

What should teachers do to help their learners during online learning?

Did students find the online course engaging? How did students evaluate the online materials and the course as a whole?

What activities do your students engage with? And what impact do these activities have on their learning?

What are the major issues and challenges that affect teaching online courses?