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Lived Experience: Students' Perceptions of English Language Online Learning Post COVID-19

Amr M. Mohamed

Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia, amr.abdeldaim@nbu.edu.sa

Saleem Mohd Nasim

Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia, s.nasim@psau.edu.sa

Rose Aljanada

Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia, sakurarose31@gmail.com

Aseel Alfaisal

Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia, mrs.aseel@gmail.com

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Lived Experience: Students' Perceptions of English Language Online Learning Post COVID-19

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess university students' perceptions regarding online learning post-COVID-19, with a focus on international relevance. 260 students were surveyed online across six dimensions of online learning using an online survey. The findings indicate that synchronous audio and video learning can be an effective alternative to traditional learning, especially for male students. Online learning success requires taking student demographics and digital equity into consideration in a competitive higher education landscape. In addition, the study recommends further research to determine the effectiveness of online learning across disciplines and diverse student populations. The findings of this study indicate that successful online learning outcomes in international educational settings require the incorporation of digital technologies and synchronous teaching methods.

Practitioner Notes

1. Implement digital technologies to meet the needs of diverse learners.
2. Increase student engagement and interaction by implementing synchronous audio and video learning methods.
3. Assess the limitations and drawbacks of online learning, such as limited student interaction, lack of motivation, and the role of the teacher.
4. Support online learning for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location.
5. Examine online learning's effectiveness across different disciplines and student populations.

Keywords

covid-19, EFL, online learning, university students' perception.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced higher education institutions worldwide to adopt online learning methods to ensure continuity of education. Saudi Arabian institutions are no exception, and as a result, there has been a growing need to investigate students' experiences and attitudes towards online learning in higher education. This research is of significance globally as it has the potential to inform the development of online learning approaches that prioritize students' needs, resulting in better outcomes and greater satisfaction with the learning process. Recent studies by Al-Ghamdi et al. (2022), Bashir et al. (2021), and Papavasiliou and Papavasiliou (2022) have also highlighted the importance of such research in improving the quality of online learning experiences for students.

During the pandemic, online learning platforms such as Blackboard have proven advantageous for students. Nevertheless, students have faced numerous difficulties, such as insufficient opportunities for collaborative learning, internet connectivity issues, IT equipment problems, and unfamiliarity with new pedagogical approaches (Pâquet, 2023; Yan et al., 2021). Research has mainly concentrated on examining students' views on online learning during the pandemic, with few studies investigating changes in attitudes towards this learning mode in post-pandemic higher education settings (Bautista Flores et al., 2022; Hussein et al., 2020).

This study examines the inclinations of EFL students in terms of their preference for online learning versus face-to-face instruction, as well as assessing the effectiveness and satisfaction levels of online learning after the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it investigates EFL students' difficulties and positive experiences in the online learning environment following the pandemic. Furthermore, it determines whether the perceptions of Saudi EFL students regarding online learning post-pandemic are influenced by their gender and GPA. This study aims to enhance the discussion on post-pandemic EFL education by answering these research questions.

Research Questions

Research Question 1. What do EFL students prefer, online learning or face-to-face classroom?

Research Question 2. To what extent do EFL students find online learning effective and satisfying post-COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 3. What are EFL students' challenges and positive experiences in learning online post-COVID-19?

Research Question 4. Do Saudi EFL students' gender and GPA influence their perceptions of online learning post-COVID-19 pandemic?

The significance of this study

A significant impact of this study will be on international higher education. Online learning has become necessary in language education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The

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study examines the benefits and challenges of online education and strategies to improve online learning outcomes in the context of EFL students' perceptions after the pandemic. Furthermore, the study highlights how Saudi EFL students' perceptions of online learning will differ based on gender and grade point average (GPA). Online learning approaches can be customized to meet the particular needs and preferences of diverse student groups based on these findings, improving the quality of online education and ensuring uninterrupted higher education in Saudi Arabia. Other international higher education settings can benefit from the insights this study provides, which extend beyond Saudi Arabia.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education to introduce multiple educational platforms, such as “Madrasaty” and “Ain channels,” to provide training programs for teachers, parents, and students to utilize online education technologies. This successful implementation has led to similar transformations in government, private, and international educational institutions. Saudi students have positively rated online learning systems for their usability, high-quality learning resources, interactive learning settings, and user-friendly interfaces. However, training programs are required to assist faculty members and students in effectively use these systems. Despite having enjoyed the freedom, flexibility, and ease of use provided by Learning Management Systems (LMS) for several years, educational institutions' overall usage remains modest and falls short of recommended levels (Al-khresheh et al., 2022; Al-Samadi et al., 2021; Al-Shalawi, 2021; Bousbahi & Alrazgan, 2015).

Khalil et al. (2020) conducted a thematic analysis of online learning and identified four main themes: (1) the extent of pedagogical impact and (2) how to manage time during this learning style. (3) the quality of the problems encountered; and (4) future preferences and whether students prefer traditional education or online learning. All agreed that the time efficiency of virtual sessions led to better performance. However, they acknowledged various difficulties encountered during online sessions and assessments, such as content visualization and methodological, behavioral, and technical issues.

While some students prefer online learning, others favor traditional face-to-face classroom settings, highlighting the need for educators to consider the limitations and drawbacks of each modality (Abbasi et al., 2020; Al-Shalawi et al., 2021; Kite et al., 2020; Mohamed, 2023a). Technology-based learning can provide educational resources and support effective education through media and teaching methods but cannot entirely replace face-to-face lessons (Klimova, 2021). The role of the teacher is critical in ensuring quality teaching and educational institutions must provide teachers with the necessary mental, financial, and technical support (Asmah & Idayani, 2022; Mohamed, 2023b; Mohamed & Shaaban, 2023). Limited interaction among students in online learning can hinder effective communication, and lack of motivation is a common issue for online learners, affecting the effectiveness of online learning (Basar et al., 2021). Therefore, educators must address these challenges and support students and teachers for successful online learning with international relevance.

Research has shown that teachers and instructional factors impact online learning satisfaction the most, while learner-related factors have the most negligible impact (Mohamed, 2023a;

Shaaban & Mohamed, 2023; Yu, 2022). Learning satisfaction, defined as learners' perception of the learning process and their level of satisfaction with their desire to learn (Topala & Tomozii, 2014), is a crucial factor in online learning success (Parahoo et al., 2016). Learner satisfaction has been found to affect learning outcomes and the adoption of online learning (Ke & Kwak, 2013).

Several factors affecting online satisfaction have been investigated to provide a productive learning environment for learners, including student involvement, classroom interaction, course structure, facilitation, and teacher awareness (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009). Contact and interaction have been shown to enhance online learning enjoyment, and academic self-efficacy and participation in virtual classrooms have been found to elucidate the correlation between interaction and satisfaction with online education (Al-khresheh et al., 2023; Palmer & Holt, 2009).

The field of education may provide online courses. Students must, however, decide whether to enroll in synchronous or asynchronous courses based on a variety of factors, including their availability, learning objectives, course content, and teaching style (Cifuentes-Faura et al., 2021; Mospan, 2023; Pâquet, 2023). Asynchronous courses can be made more engaging for both teachers and students by using virtual live seminars. It is possible to support both synchronous and asynchronous learning through online learning.

The delivery of content, such as video, text, and images, should be varied to keep learners engaged. In synchronous learning environments, videos have been shown to increase social and educational engagement (Clark et al., 2015). Video-based communication improves fluency and pronunciation when learning target-like languages (Hung & Higgins, 2016).

Many higher education institutions offer hybrid and online courses to cater to cosmopolitan students, but it is essential to understand how students experience these courses to develop effective teaching strategies. Positive experiences include online interactions, course convenience, and teacher availability, while negative experiences include technology issues and feelings of confusion (ElMansour & Mupinga, 2007; Oguguo et al., 2023). Faculty and students need training in the online course environment to improve online courses.

Effective online teaching requires specific preparation and pedagogical allocation, and applying recognized online learning concepts and research findings to urgent online learning scenarios must be done with caution. Self-determination theory suggests that independence, efficiency, and social connectedness reinforce intrinsic motivation, influencing learning behavior (Pelikan et al., 2021). However, the novelty of online learning has led to decreased motivation and self-efficacy and increased anxiety among students, primarily due to obstacles faced at home, including internet connectivity issues (Mamolo, 2022; Pelikan et al., 2021). Pelikan et al. (2021) found that social bonding has the greatest impact on intrinsic motivation and that basic psychological needs satisfaction, internal motivation, procrastination, and perseverance are interrelated. Elfirdoussi et al. (2020) studied online learning platforms during COVID-19 containment in Moroccan institutions. Results showed that students and professors viewed online learning as less attractive than traditional education, and at least 50% of classes needed to be conducted in person.

In their research, Ilker and Akkaya (2022) investigated the experiences of 14 social studies teachers in Turkey during the pandemic about distance education. They employed interpretative

phenomenology design and semi-structured interviews and analyzed the data using content analysis. The teachers perceived distance education as a flexible system that allows for the use of various tools, but limited internet access and technology posed challenges. The most commonly used teaching methods were direct instruction and question-answer approaches, along with EBA, Zoom, and Web 2.0 platforms. The study identified issues related to internet connectivity, technology access, and family involvement, consistent with previous research. İlker and Akkaya's findings support the need for creative solutions to address the difficulties of distance education in all subject areas.

Research has explored the correlation between online learning and grade-based learning outcomes (Carver et al., 2017; Cavanaugh & Jacquemin, 2015). Cavanaugh and Jacquemin's study analyzed over 5,000 courses taught by over 100 faculty members and found little to no difference in grade-based student performance between online and face-to-face courses at a public, four-year university. The study also identified student GPA as the primary factor influencing individual course grades, with higher GPA students performing even better in online courses. Carver et al. analyzed data from 167 graduate-level education students and found that time spent in synchronous online sessions was the only significant predictor of receiving an A in the course. These findings suggest that online learning can be effective, and factors such as student GPA and synchronous online sessions contribute to student success. Personalized student support can be offered by educators and institutions making the shift to online learning by utilizing data-driven techniques and learning analytics. It is important to take into account the limitations of these studies, which include the sample populations and particular environments.

Research Method

The survey method was used in this study. It is a method of collecting data about variables within a population in order to determine their frequency, distribution, and connections (Coughlan et al., 2009). The purpose of this study was to determine how students perceived English language online learning post-COVID-19. Moreover, it also examined independent variables such as students' gender and GPA to determine the most prevalent factor of online learning.

To determine the impact of GPA on student perceptions of online learning, the study divided students into high- and low-achieving groups using a 3.5 GPA cutoff point. As a result of this method, we were able to create more effective evaluations of the data and to draw more reliable conclusions about the relationship between students' GPAs and their perception of online education (Johnson, 1997).

Research Design

To align with the objectives and research questions, the study used a Likert scale survey. As well as helping to develop a thorough understanding of the research problem, this method also makes the results more generalizable due to larger sample sizes.

Participants

The 260 Saudi Arabian university students majoring in English were selected through stratified random sampling. Of them, 117 were males and 143 were females. All relevant subgroups were

accurately estimated through stratified sampling (Taherdoost, 2016). All participants were native Arabic speakers, making them a homogeneous group with similar linguistic and social backgrounds. Participants were enrolled in the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, and participation was voluntary. Participants' demographics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

	Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	117	45.0
	Female	143	55.0
GPA	≤ 3.5	145	55.8
	≥ 3.51	115	44.2

Instrument

A survey was used as the primary instrument for the study to control variations and allow respondents to complete it at their convenience. Hence, a deeper exploration was possible. The survey consisted of 22 statements, divided into six sections: demographics, preferences, effectiveness, student satisfaction, effective methods of online learning, challenges and positive experiences. Based on previous research, students' attitudes toward online learning were assessed using Likert-type scales and multiple-choice questions (Amir et al., 2020). The questionnaire's reliability was assessed statistically with a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.764. Additionally, the items and dimensions were statistically significant, indicating reliability and validity

Table 2

Correlation coefficients of the items

Questionnaire's Dimensions									
Preference		Effectiveness		Learning Satisfaction		The most effective methods		Challenges and positive experiences	
Item No	Correlation coefficient	Item No	Correlation coefficient	Item N	Correlation coefficient	Item No	Correlation coefficient	Item No	Correlation coefficient
1	.634**	1	.438**	1	.636**	1	.587**	1	.719**
2	.463**	2	.534**	2	.621**	2	.499**	2	.694**
		3	.637**	3	.679**	3	.512**		
		4	.576**	4	.723**				
				5	.647**				
				6	.711**				
				7	.767**				

Procedure

The study used an online survey with 22 items to gather data for their investigation. It used a popular online survey tool called Google Forms to distribute the questions. The researchers disseminated the survey link via WhatsApp in order to broaden its accessibility and participant pool, as students in the area frequently use this communication app.

Collecting Data

This study used an online survey developed by Amir et al. (2020) to collect data. The survey had six dimensions of online learning: demographics, preferences, effectiveness, learning satisfaction, best online learning methods, and challenges/positive experiences. Through an online platform, the researchers distributed the questionnaire to 260 Northern Border University students. It took approximately 15-20 minutes for the participants to complete the survey.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis of the data included descriptive statistics, like standard deviations, means, and percentages, as well as inferential statistics, like regression analysis. Several methods were used to identify students' preferences, effectiveness, learning satisfaction, challenges, and positive experiences with online learning, including frequencies, mean scores, and content analysis. This study provides insight into key factors that contribute to the effectiveness of online learning and has important implications for educators and institutions that offer online learning. Designing and delivering efficacious online courses with international relevance requires consideration of students' preferences, satisfaction, and challenges.

Results

This study evaluated Northern Border University EFL students' perceptions of online learning after the COVID-19 pandemic using six dimensions: demographics, preferences, effectiveness, learning satisfaction, best online learning methods, and challenges/positive experiences.

To illustrate the differences between mean scores for research samples and questionnaire dimensions, SPSS was used. A Likert scale was used based on four points of strong agreement, three points of agreement, two points of disagreement, and one point of strong disagreement. There are four categories of agreement: 1-1.74 strongly disagreed, 1.75-2.49 disagreed, 2.5-3.24 agreed, and 3.25-4 strongly agreed.

Preference

The study used arithmetic means to check the participants' preference for online learning, and standard deviations were calculated for the study axes. The result is shown in the following table:

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Estimation Level of Preference Dimension

No.	Item	Mean	Standard deviations	Estimation Level	Ranked
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1	Clarification sessions are ideal for online learning delivery.	2.72	1.166	Agree	1
2	Assessment is more suitable for delivered in online learning	2.57	1.208	Agree	2
Total Degree		2.65	0.915	Agree	

Table 3 provides valuable insights into EFL students' perceptions of online learning for different educational activities. Clarification sessions were perceived as more appropriate for online learning (mean=2.72, SD=1.166), while there was less agreement on the appropriateness of online learning for assessment (mean=2.57, SD=1.208). These findings suggest that online learning is well-suited for activities involving clarification and discussion, as perceived by EFL students, and has international relevance.

Effective dimension

To gauge how effective the participants perceived online learning, the researcher computed arithmetic means and standard deviations for the study axes and tabulated the results in the following table:

Table 4

Means, Standard Deviations, and Estimation Level of Effective Dimension

No.	Item	Mean	Standard Deviations	Estimation Level	Ranked
1	I do not feel stressed during online learning.	2.69	1.159	Agree	1
3	Online learning affords me more time to prepare learning materials before group discussions.	2.68	1.153	Agree	2
4	Online learning enables me to review all learning materials after class.	2.66	1.139	Agree	3
2	I do not encounter any issues during online learning.	2.52	1.171	Agree	4
Total Degree		2.64	0.719	Agree	

Based on the preceding Table 4, it is evident that statement No. (1) has a mean of 2.69 and a standard deviation of 1.159, indicating that participants do not experience stress while learning online. Statement No. (3) ranks second with a mean of 2.68 and a standard deviation of 1.153, while statement No. (4) ranks third with a mean of 2.66. In contrast, statement No. (2) ranks last, implying no difficulties with online learning. Moreover, post-COVID-19 pandemic, EFL students find online learning effective, with an average degree of 2.64 and a standard deviation of 0.71.

Satisfying dimension

The researcher used arithmetic means to check the participants' satisfaction with online learning, and standard deviations were calculated for the study axes. The result is shown in the following table:

Table 5

Means, Standard Deviations, and Estimation Level of Satisfying Dimension

No.	Item	Mean	Standard deviations	Estimation Level	Ranked
3	Online learning motivates self-directed learning and preparation before group discussions.	2.71	1.148	Agree	1
1	Online learning provides a similar level of satisfaction to classroom learning.	2.65	1.138	Agree	2
7	Online learning offers opportunities for cheating during assessments.	2.64	1.152	Agree	3
2	Blended learning can be implemented in the next semester.	2.63	1.134	Agree	4
4	Communication with teachers and classmates is more convenient with online learning.	2.59	1.134	Agree	5
5	Students prefer online learning to classroom learning.	2.56	1.140	Agree	6
6	Online learning is more efficient for studying.	2.53	1.102	Agree	7
Total Degree		2.62	0.574	Agree	

Table 5 indicates that statement No. (3) ranked first with a mean (2.71) and standard deviation of (1.148), suggesting that online learning facilitates self-directed learning and facilitates the preparation of learning materials. Moreover, statement No. (1) ranked second, indicating that both online and classroom learning are associated with similar levels of satisfaction. In statement number (3), a mean of 2.64 and a standard deviation of 1.152 were obtained, indicating that Online learning allows students to cheat during assessments. Studying online is more efficient than traditional learning because the mean value is 2.53, and the standard deviation is 1.102. In the post-COVID-19 pandemic, EFL students find online learning satisfying with a level of agreement, with a mean of (2.62) and a standard deviation of (0.574).

The most effective methods for online learning

We will discuss in each of the axes, with frequencies and percentages, the extent to which females and males prefer each learning method.

Table 6*The most effective method for group discussion*

	Male		Female		Total	
	Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total
Asynchronous, text-based	22	8.5%	7	2.7%	29	11.2%
Asynchronous, audio-text-based	13	5.0%	7	2.7%	20	7.7%
Asynchronous, audio-video-text-based	13	5.0%	33	12.7%	46	17.7%
Synchronous, text-based	10	3.8%	6	2.3%	16	6.2%
Synchronous, audio-text-based	10	3.8%	18	6.9%	28	10.8%
Synchronous, audio-video-text-based	49	18.8%	72	27.7%	121	46.5%
Total	117	45%	143	55%	260	100%

The distribution of preferences for online learning modes among males and females is presented in Table 6. Both male and female participants preferred synchronous, audio-video-text-based online learning, with 18.8% of males and 27.7% of females choosing this method. Only 3.8% of male and 2.3% female participants selected synchronous, text-based as their least preferred mode. To accommodate students' preferences, educators should offer synchronous, audio-video-text-based online learning modes.

Table 7*Optimal Method for Conducting Group Clarification Sessions*

	Male		Female		Total	
	Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total
Asynchronous, text-based	22	8.5%	7	2.7%	29	11.2%
Asynchronous, audio-text-based	13	5.0%	7	2.7%	20	7.7%
Asynchronous, audio-video-text-based	13	5.0%	33	12.7%	46	17.7%
Synchronous, text-based	10	3.8%	6	2.3%	16	6.2%
Synchronous, audio-text-based	10	3.8%	18	6.9%	28	10.8%
Synchronous, audio-video-text-based	49	18.8%	72	27.7%	121	46.5%
Total	117	45%	143	55%	260	100%

Based on Table 7, synchronous, audio-video-text-based online learning was the most successful approach for group explanation sessions, as indicated by 45.5% of participants who were male and female. Second place went to asynchronous audio-video-text discussions (17.7%), and third place went to synchronous text-based discussions (6.2%). These findings also show that synchronous, audio-video-text-based learning is very successful in fostering real-time interaction between students and teachers and producing prompt feedback. Given the enormous sample size of 260 people, the study's findings are probably indicative of a larger trend. To increase group clarifying sessions and improve student learning outcomes, educators should use synchronous, audio-video-text-based online learning into their teaching practices.

Table 8*Best Method for Interactive Group Lectures*

	Male		Female		Total	
	Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total
Asynchronous, text-based	23	8.8%	6	2.3%	29	11.2%
Asynchronous, audio-text-based	14	5.4%	6	2.3%	20	7.7%
Asynchronous, audio-video-text-based	12	4.6%	34	13.1%	46	17.7%
Synchronous, text-based	11	4.2%	5	1.9%	16	6.2%
Synchronous, audio-text-based	11	4.2%	19	7.3%	30	11.5%
Synchronous, audio-video-text-based	48	18.5%	73	28.1%	121	46.5%
Total	117	45%	143	55%	262	100%

The best approach for group interactive lectures is synchronous audio-video-text online learning, according to Table 8. This learning modality was selected by 46.5% of the total respondents, both male and female. Conversely, with 17.7% of participants choosing this learning mode, asynchronous audio-video-text discussion was the second most preferred approach. Conversely, a negligible portion of the participants (6.2%) expressed preference for the synchronous text-based approach, indicating that this manner of instruction would be less successful for group discussions.

Challenges and positive experiences during online learning**A) Challenges during online learning**

The study used multiple response frequencies to evaluate the participants' challenges during online learning.

Table 9*Multiple response frequencies for challenges experienced in online learning.*

Items	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
More constraint	287	14.40%	67.40%
Unmotivating	276	13.90%	64.80%
Unsustainable	260	13.10%	61.00%
Unfair Grades	256	12.90%	60.10%
Poor communication	251	12.60%	58.90%
Unsuitable for exam	237	11.90%	55.60%
All of the above	221	11.10%	51.90%
Inefficient	203	10.20%	47.70%
Total	1991	100.0%	467.4%

As shown in Table 9, online learning has a number of disadvantages that are commonly perceived as drawbacks. There were 287 responses, and 67.30% of the sample agreed with the statement "More constraint," which received the highest percentage of responses both by number and

percentage. As a result of the absence of in-person interaction and structured learning settings, students perceive online learning as more restrictive than traditional classroom learning. “Unmotivating” received 276 responses and a percentage of 64.80%. Students may feel less motivated in an online learning environment due to a lack of social interaction between peers and instructors. The item “Inefficient” received the least number of responses (203) and percentage (47.70%). The results suggest that while students may feel online learning is inefficient, it is not as commonly perceived as the disadvantages.

B) Positive experiences during online learning

To check the participants' positive experiences during online learning, the researcher used Multiple response frequencies, which are shown in Table (10)

Table 10

Multiple response frequencies for Positive aspects of online learning

Items	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Suitable for exam	251	11.10%	96.20%
Efficient	249	11.00%	95.40%
Sustainable	248	11.00%	95.00%
Less constraint	248	11.00%	95.00%
Likable	245	10.80%	93.90%
Motivating	244	10.80%	93.50%
Good communication	241	10.70%	92.30%
Reducing commute costs	229	10.10%	87.70%
All of the above	169	7.50%	64.80%
Time savings	138	6.10%	52.90%
Total	2262	100.0%	866.7%

The results presented in Table 10 provide compelling evidence of the most commonly perceived benefits of online learning. The highest percentage of sample responses by both number and percentage was for the item “Suitable for the exam,” with 251 responses and 96.20% of the sample agreeing with this statement. This finding suggests that students perceive online learning as well-suited for exam preparation.

The next highest-rated item was “Efficient,” with 249 responses and a percentage of 95.40%. This indicates that students believe online learning is an efficient way to learn, possibly due to the ability to access course materials and lectures anytime and from anywhere.

The item “Time savings” received the lowest number of responses (138) and percentage (52.90%), indicating that students do not primarily choose online learning for time-saving benefits. Students perceive online learning to be well-suited for exam preparation and an efficient way to learn.

Gender and GPA of EFL Students and their perceptions of online learning

To test whether gender and GPA variables affect students' perceptions of online learning, the study used a T-test and Chi-square test.

A) Gender variable**Table 11***T-test Independent Samples for Study axes due to Gender variable*

Dimension	Gender	N	Mean	S.D	T	Sig.*
Preference	Male	117	2.78	0.886	2.251	0.025*
	Female	143	2.53	0.925		
Learning Satisfaction	Male	117	2.69	0.509	1.993	0.047*
	Female	143	2.55	0.617		
Effectiveness	Male	117	2.70	0.701	1.377	0.170
	Female	143	2.58	0.731		

*. At 0.05, there is a significant difference.

Table 11 displays strong evidence of gender-based variations in the “preferences” and “satisfaction with online learning” categories. The significant difference values for males and females were 0.025 and 0.047, respectively, below the significance threshold (0.05). Consequently, it is evident that there is a statistically significant discrepancy between males and females, with males having higher scores in these categories. These results imply that, generally, males prefer and are more content with online learning than females. Additionally, Table 11 indicates no notable difference between male and female scores in the “effectiveness” dimension, with a significance level of 0.170, higher than the significance threshold (0.05). Therefore, males and females do not differ significantly in terms of effectiveness.

Table 12*Chi-Square Test: Effective Online Learning Method by Gender*

The most effective method for:	Chi-square	Df	Sig.*
group discussion	23.547	5	0.000**
group clarification session	23.547	5	0.000**
group interactive lectures	22.634	5	0.000**

*. At 0.05, there is a significant difference.

** . At 0.01, there is a significant difference.

Table 12 indicates statistically significant differences at a level of 0.05 regarding the relationship between gender and the most effective method for online learning dimension. The values of significance were 0.00, 0.00, and 0.00 for preference, satisfaction with learning, and gender, respectively. This value is below the significance threshold of 0.05, indicating a relationship between the dimensions of preference and satisfaction with learning and gender, suggesting that these dimensions depend on the student's gender.

B) GPA variable**Table 13***T-test Independent Samples for Study axes due to GPA variable*

Dimension	Gender	N	Mean	S.D	T	Sig.*
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Preference	≤ 3.5	145	2.8138	0.84563	3.383	0.001**
	≥ 3.51	115	2.4348	0.95862		
Learning Satisfaction	≤ 3.5	145	2.7741	0.68991	3.460	0.001**
	≥ 3.51	115	2.4696	0.72332		
Effectiveness	≤ 3.5	145	2.7064	0.53420	2.745	0.006**
	≥ 3.51	115	2.5118	0.60727		

*. At 0.05, there is a significant difference.

** At 0.01, there is a significant difference.

The results presented in Table 13 indicate that there are statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in GPA scores for the dimensions of “preference,” “satisfaction with learning,” and “effectiveness” in favor of students with a GPA of ≤ 3.5 over those with a GPA of ≥ 3.51 . The significant levels were 0.001, 0.001, and 0.006, respectively. According to these results, students who have a GPA below 3.5 are more likely to favor online learning, are happier with their experience, and believe that online learning is more successful than traditional classroom instruction.

According to the findings, students with lower GPAs can see online learning more favorably than students with higher GPAs. Table 13 displays the results, which indicate that there were statistically significant variations in the GPA values between the two student groups on the aspects of "preference," "satisfaction with learning," and "effectiveness." The degree of variation between the two groups is indicated by the significant levels for each measure. According to the results, students who had a GPA below 3.5 were more likely to be in favor of online learning than students who had a higher GPA.

Table 14

Chi-Square Test: Effective Online Learning Method by GPA

Item	Chi-square	Df	Sig.*
1	19.315	5	0.000
2	19.319	5	0.000
3	15.078	5	0.000

*. The difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 14 shows statistically significant differences at level (0.05) regarding GPA and the most effective method of online learning dimensions. These differences were preferred at significant levels (0.00, 0.00, 0.00), respectively. This value is less than the significance threshold (0.05), which indicates that there is a relationship between the dimensions, “preference” and “satisfaction with learning” and GPA, which indicates that these dimensions depend on the GPA of the student.

Discussion

This study examined EFL students' perceptions of online learning concerning six dimensions: (a) demographic information, (b) preferences, (c) effectiveness, (d) satisfaction with online learning, (e) the most effective method of online learning, and (f) challenges and positive experiences during online learning.

Study results indicate that EFL students prefer online learning for various reasons. Online learning has numerous advantages over face-to-face education. It allows students to complete coursework and attend classes as conveniently as possible. It makes education more accessible to those in remote areas or who have busy schedules. Additionally, online learning saves students' money on travel, textbooks, and other expenses. Furthermore, online learning provides students with immediate feedback. Thus, students can track their progress and identify areas for improvement objectively, transparently, and consistently (Bashir et al., 2021; Papavasiliou & Papavasiliou, 2022).

The first research question examined EFL students' preferences for online learning, and the results indicate that students strongly favor this method. The study recommends that institutions offer online clarifications so students can operate effectively within the digital learning environment. This study, however, contradicts previous work by Elfirdoussi et al. (2020) and Al-Shalawi (2021), which found that students preferred traditional education. In spite of this, the results of this study provide valuable insights for institutions seeking to enhance their online learning offerings and ensure their students are satisfied with their education.

EFL students prefer asynchronous audio-video-text online learning because it enables real-time interaction between teachers and students, providing immediate feedback and discussions that improve learning outcomes and retention. This preference coincides with studies by Hung and Higgins (2016), Oguguo et al. (2023), and Khalil et al. (2020) and could enhance student motivation and participation in higher education settings internationally. Compared to classroom learning, online learning does not cause stress among students and allows for easier preparation and review of learning materials, but it also allows cheating during assessments. Based on the findings of the study, blended learning can be implemented in the next semester, with students benefiting from online learning's efficiency and facilitation of communication. In general, EFL students find online learning satisfactory, even after the COVID-19 pandemic, as stated by Alam (2022), Bautista Flores et al. (2022), and Klimova (2021).

The third research question was used to determine EFL students' perceptions of online learning, and the results revealed that they perceived online learning as "more restrictive." This result is not surprising because students may not be familiar with this method of learning and because online learning usually lacks face-to-face interaction and a structured learning environment. Even while most students thought online learning was beneficial, they faced a big obstacle since it needed to be more inspiring. This can be the result of poor communication and low student motivation. It is in line with the discovery made by Rahman et al. (2021) that in-person instruction stimulates pupils more than online instruction. It highlights the significance of using online learning to increase student motivation.

The sample's most often answered item was "suitable for the exam." This might be as a result of the higher averages of online exams compared to traditional exams, as proposed by Amir et al (2020). Additionally, because online test questions are simpler than those on traditional tests, students can think that online learning is appropriate for exams. Lastly, one benefit of online learning that was stated was "time-saving." The result is consistent with previous studies, such as those by Amir et al. (2020). It emphasizes one of the key benefits of online learning: its flexibility, allowing students to manage their time more efficiently.

To summarize, this study suggests that although EFL students find online learning less motivating and more restrictive than face-to-face learning, it is still helpful for exams and saves time. Educators should prioritize student motivation in online program design and provide sufficient support and communication to enhance engagement and satisfaction. This finding aligns with Tratnik et al.'s (2019) research.

According to the fourth research question, females and males differ statistically significantly in terms of “preferences” and “satisfaction with online learning.” Statistically, males have higher averages on these dimensions than females. Due to this, males prefer online learning and are more satisfied with it than females (Chung et al., 2020; İlker & Akkaya, 2022). Regarding the most effective online learning method, there is a statistically significant difference between this dimension and gender. Moreover, the gender of the students influences these dimensions of “preference” and “satisfaction with online learning.” In contrast, the “Effectiveness” dimension does not show significant differences between males and females. They do not differ significantly in the effectiveness of online learning.

The study found that students with GPAs under 3.5 preferred online learning and found it more effective and satisfying than those with higher GPAs (Woods & Frogge, 2017). In traditional face-to-face settings, educators could use the finding that students with a GPA below 3.5 prefer and find online learning more effective to provide a customized and effective learning experience for struggling students. In addition to providing equal learning opportunities for all students regardless of academic performance, the study's findings could encourage institutions to consider online learning. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of integrating digital technologies and online teaching methods into higher education to meet the diverse needs of students.

Our study has global relevance to diverse educational settings worldwide, where online learning offers advantages such as flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and suitability for assessment. Institutions can consider these benefits when designing online learning programs to improve accessibility and affordability. Synchronous audio and video-based learning methods for interactive lectures are preferred globally, emphasizing the importance of real-time interaction, immediate feedback, and engagement in online education. Challenges and positive experiences, such as the perception of online learning as restrictive and less motivating, are shared by students worldwide, and educators can use these insights to enhance student engagement and satisfaction. Gender differences in preferences and satisfaction with online learning also emphasize the need for tailored approaches for diverse student populations. While our study focused on Northern Border University and Saudi Arabia, its principles, challenges, and potential solutions can guide further exploration and adaptation in international settings. As education systems integrate online learning, our findings can inform decision-making, policy development, and instructional practices across different countries and cultures (İlker & Akkaya, 2022).

This study found that teacher-related factors significantly impact students' satisfaction with online learning, while learner-related factors have the least impact. Academic self-efficacy, participation in virtual classrooms, and interaction were identified as factors that enhance online learning satisfaction. The study also emphasized the effectiveness of synchronous and asynchronous learning methods and the importance of using multiple approaches to content delivery. Considering students' GPAs when designing online courses was found to be significant. These

practical findings have important implications for educators and institutions to design efficacious online courses that meet learners' diverse needs and preferences. Further research is necessary to explore these factors in different contexts and cultures to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the online learning experience with international relevance.

Limitations and recommendations

There are several limitations to this study. As a first limitation, the study includes no sample of non-respondents. There may be some differences in opinions among non-respondents. The second limitation is that the study is drawn from a single university. Students' opinions may differ in other universities. Furthermore, students' perceptions of the English language major cannot be generalized to students in other majors, so a more extensive study that includes a larger sample, more universities, and different majors is recommended.

Pedagogical implications

This study has significant pedagogical implications for Saudi Arabia's higher education system after COVID-19. Especially for male students, online learning appears to be an effective alternative to traditional learning. Educators need to explore ways of leveraging online learning to meet diverse learning styles and preferences while providing equal educational opportunities to all students. Additionally, synchronous audio and video learning is important for effective online learning. Educators should use such methods to maximize student interaction and engagement in online classes. Online education can be improved and made more effective as a teaching tool by doing this. Moreover, further research is necessary to explore online learning's effectiveness across different disciplines and student populations. Researchers can develop tailored online learning strategies for specific subject areas and student groups based on such research.

A critical pedagogical implication of this study is the importance of integrating digital technologies and synchronous online teaching methods into Saudi Arabian higher education while also considering student demographics and digital equity. Finally, the study emphasizes that students, regardless of their geographic location or socioeconomic status, should have equitable access to digital technologies and resources. Online courses should be designed and delivered to students' unique needs and circumstances.

Conclusion

With international relevance, this study explores EFL university students' opinions on online learning after COVID-19, using an online questionnaire developed by Amir et al. (2020) and focusing on Northern Border University students. The results indicate that students, especially males, find online learning more effective than traditional learning despite its limitations and prefer synchronous audio and video learning. The study emphasizes the need to consider students' demographics and digital equity in the competitive higher education market and recommends exploring the perceptions of larger student samples from different majors. Online learning offers convenience, flexibility, and easy access to study resources, with previous research indicating its growing popularity worldwide. While challenges exist, undergraduate EFL students adapted to online learning and found it effective, suggesting the potential for blended learning in modernizing the education system in international settings.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicting interests. They declare no use of artificial intelligence in writing this article.

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