

Virtual Learning during the Period of COVID-19 Pandemic at a Saudi University

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Abstract : Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, a rapid, unexpected transition from face-to-face to virtual classroom (VC) teaching has involved several challenges and obstacles. However, there are also opportunities and thoughts that need to be examined and discussed. In addition, the entire world is witnessing that the teaching system and, more particularly, higher education institutes have been interrupted. To maintain the learning and teaching practices as usual, countries were forced to transition from traditional to virtual classes using various technology-based devices. In this regard, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is no exception. Focusing on how the current situation has forced many higher education institutes to change to virtual classes may possibly provide a clear insight into adopted practices and implications. The main purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate how both Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers and students perceived the implementation of virtual classes as a key factor for useful language teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic period at a Saudi university. The impetus for the research was, therefore, the need to find ways of identifying the deficiencies in this application and to suggest possible solutions that might rectify those deficiencies. This study seeks to answer the following overarching research question: "How do Saudi EFL instructors and students perceive the use of virtual classes during the COVID-19 pandemic period in their language teaching and learning context?" The following sub-questions are also used to guide the design of the study to answer the main research question: (1) To what extent are virtual classes important intra-pandemic from Saudi EFL instructors' and students' perspectives? (2) How effective are virtual classes for fostering English language students' achievement? (3) What are the challenges and obstacles that instructors and students may face during the implementation of virtual teaching? A mixed method approach was employed in this study; the questionnaire data collection represented the quantitative method approach for this study, whereas the transcripts of recorded interviews represented the qualitative method approach. The participants included EFL teachers (N = 4) and male and female EFL students (N = 36). Based on the findings of this study, various aspects from teachers' and students' perspectives were examined to determine the use of the virtual classroom applications in terms of fulfilling the students' English language learning needs. The major findings of the study revealed that the virtual classroom applications during the current pandemic situation encountered three major challenges, among which the existence of the following essential aspects, namely lack of technology and an internet connection, having a large number of students in a virtual classroom and lack of students' and teachers' interactions during the virtual classroom applications. Finally, the findings indicated that although Saudi EFL students and teachers view the virtual classrooms in a positive light during the pandemic period, they reported that for long and post-pandemic period, they preferred the traditional face-to-face teaching procedure.

Keywords : virtual classes, English as a foreign language, COVID-19, Internet, pandemic

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