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INVESTIGATING THE ATTITUDES OF EFL IRAQI LEARNERS TOWARDS ON LINE LEARNING DURING COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The emergent situation of Covid-19 pandemic has affected all countries around the world. In fact, people from all different walks of life have been troubled by this outbreak. The educational systems as well have been imposed to transmit from on-site to on-line learning with poor preparation. Regarding the present educational situation, this study has been conducted with the aim of investigating the attitudes of EFL Iraqi learners towards on- line learning during Covid-19 pandemic. A descriptive research design has been used in this study. The study sample consists of (89) preparatory school students at Dr. Ali Al-Wardi high school for boys in Najaf – Iraq. The data have been collected by a questionnaire which consists of fifteen close ended items with three Likert scale: agree – neutral – disagree. These items include two essential topic areas: first, students' attitudes towards on-line learning (10 items), second, difficulties with on-line learning (6 items). The collected data were analysed via SPSS. The study results revealed that students welcome on-line learning during covid-19 pandemic and hold positive attitudes towards it. However, there are some drawbacks with on -line education concerning internet service/access, paying attention, workload, feasibility, and lack of social contact.

Keywords: *attitudes, EFL learners, on-line learning, Covid-19 pandemic*

INTRODUCTION

While most of countries around the world were suffering from Corona Virus pandemic, Iraq got its first COVID-19 case on February 24, 2020 in Najaf Governorate. This first confirmed case has generally changed our way of living. The reason behind this change is to keep physical distancing. In the field of education, this means to move from the stage of on-site into on-line learning. To ensure schools and universities are running well, Iraqi government has decided to shift from on-site to on-line learning by utilizing some platforms. Thus, the best solution to keep students learn throughout this abyss is to make them use on-line learning system as they stay home. But students didn't have enough time and

chances to cope with on-line learning because they were immediately plugged into several on-line platforms which their teachers adopt (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Since most educational institutions, students and teachers are unprepared for this massive change, it is worth to investigate this exceptional situation (Hodges, 2020).

On-line learning cannot alter the pandemic itself but rather to ensure physical distancing by restricting in person communications (Murphy, 2020). Consequently, the era of corona virus pandemic will result in a great deal of on-line education and knowledge; it has been noticed how the world has become as a global village throughout the pandemic. (Barnett, 2020).

According to the physical distancing principle, the standard of education has been changed; the process of learning has turned into another different stage. Due to the pandemic, students' daily life and their mental wellbeing are also affected; the beginning of on-line education has had a mental stress burden and fears of upcoming events on students. Moreover, the change of class system from traditional to virtual makes students more anxious because they miss face to face interaction.

The delivery of EFL in face to face pedagogical atmosphere demands different policy to reach a target by EFL learners to that of on-line class. (Castle & McGuire, 2010). This policy is different due to the actuality that learning, mental and physical resources are variously characterized; the delivery and management of on-line class is not as similar as to that of on-site one. (Hoffmann & Dudjak, 2012). This unexpected switch has also had an effect on EFL as students are confronted by new on-line codes which are different from the traditional learning process.

As a third world country, the plan which is made by the Iraqi government to activate on-line education and to prevent academic institutions from discontinuity is very challenging. One of the greatest challenges of this move is whether on-line learning will be a satisfying alternative to on-site

education. However, on-line education is a challenging grey area which demands a precise consideration. The best solution to get the profile of students' perspective about online learning is by conducting such research.

It is worth mentioning that on-line education before covid-19 pandemic has not been adopted as a main system by any school or university but rather a supporting one in the educational cycle of Iraq. As a result, covid-19 pandemic, that caused the lockdown and legitimized online learning, created many challenges for EFL students. These challenges need a review of online ELT approaches to meet the educational targets in online classes. Some research have been conducted on different dimensions of online learning, i.e., experts and teachers' perspectives, but the least research are made on students' attitudes towards on-line education. Therefore, to know their attitudes in respect of online learning is very vital. Hence, this study investigates these challenges from the EFL students' points of view by answering the research questions below:

Research Questions

1. What are Iraqi EFL students' attitudes of on-line learning?
2. What difficulties do Iraqi EFL students face during on-line learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

On-line Learning and Attitudes

Electronic learning is a kind of learning that takes place when the learner and the instructor are isolated from each other but are linked up with the medium of on-line technology (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p191). Triacca et al. (2004) add that e-learning is a kind of on-line learning, and these two terms can be used interchangeably. Benson (2002) and Conrad (2002) define on-line learning as a revised edition of distance learning that offers institutional chances to learners who are isolated in time/place. Other scholars like Carliner (2004) believes that online learning pertains to a process of learning with various backing materials which are accessible by the use of PCs (p.1). Recently, the outbreak of Covid-19 has brought a need to use on-line learning all over the world. However, to examine the effectiveness of on-line learning, attitudes towards it should be taken into account.

Attitudes as stated by Richards and Schmidt (2010) are expressions that someone has towards languages of others or his/her own language (p.314). Crystal (2008) adds that attitudes are divided into a positive and a negative one: if a foreign language is being important to someone, this reflects a positive attitude, whereas it reflects a negative attitude when a foreign

language is being hard to learn by someone. Moreover, it is vital to have information about attitudes in order to assess the possible achievement of a language learning/teaching process (p.266).

For the above-mentioned views, attitudes are paid an adequate attention by EFL/ESL researchers, and are regarded as one of the essential features that influence language learning. Besides, a foreign language can not be learnt with a negative attitude towards it. Therefore, attitudes are the cornerstones in the process of learning a foreign language. A great deal of studies has been done on attitudes and on-line learning during Covid-19 pandemic. Many are taken from teachers' points of view, but few are taken from learners' points of view. The following studies shades light on leaners' attitudes towards on-line learning.

Anwar, I.W., & Wahid, J.H.J. (2021) investigated students' realization of implementing on-line classes throughout the outbreak of Covid 19. Sixty-eight learners were selected from a programme of English study to represent the sample. The data were collected by the use of a questionnaire which consisted of open/close- ended questions. Descriptive qualitative procedures were used to analyse the collected data. The findings

indicated general positive attitudes of learners towards on-line education. The process of including on-line classes is regarded a cheap and successful method of gaining knowledge. However, a large number of students were frustrated because of the bad internet service which hinders their learning achievement. Students also had to improve their interaction and engagement with one another and with their teachers.

Haggag, Haggag & Bakr, Eman. (2022) examined university teachers and students' views towards the process of digitizing the curricula of EFL learners in Egypt during the outbreak of Covid-19. The instrument of this study was a survey with two scales of attitudes: the first was given to teachers whereas the second was given to students. The study sample consisted of 21 teachers and 82 students. The findings indicated that there were positive attitudes of teachers and students on digitizing the curricula of EFL learners. It is recommended to run workshops and training sessions in order to develop teachers and students' digital ability.

Widhiya Ninsiana et al. (2022) examined learners' viewpoints towards on-line education at high schools. The impact of on-line education on learners' overall English was also examined by this study. To reach target, 73 students were given a

placement test, and then 50 of them were chosen to represent the study sample. The sample under study was separated into two groups: a control group (25) and an experimental one (25). Then a pre-test of overall English was given to both groups. Afterwards, the experimental group students were taught on-line through WhatsApp application whereas the control group students were taught conventionally (on-site classes). Both groups were given a post-test of overall English after three teaching sessions. Besides, the experimental group students were given a questionnaire to investigate their attitudes towards on-line education, and also ten of them were interviewed. The findings of this study showed that the experimental group students are done better in the post-test than those of the control group one. The analysed data of the questionnaire revealed that learners had positive impressions towards on-line English learning. The interview showed three factors that face on-line learning: digital inadequacy, lack of fast and rapid internet, and inability to look at the screen for a long period of time.

Based on the researches mentioned above, learners have a positive attitude towards on-line learning. Moreover, these researches indicate that on-line learning can significantly make English learning easier in various situations. Although there

have been many advantages of on-line learning, learners encounter several difficulties which can cause negative attitudes. The undermentioned studies explain the challenges and difficulties of on-line learning amid Covid-19 pandemic.

Destianingsih, A., and Satria, A. (2020) searched learners' needs for successful on-line English classes throughout Covid-19 pandemic. The way that is used to reach the target was a descriptive survey. The sample of this study consists of 116 learners from five various educational programmes. A questionnaire was used as a tool for collecting data. The study results showed many ways which can be utilized throughout on-line learning regarding the Internet accessibility of learners and teachers. The most appropriate platform which can be exploited to explain materials was Zoom application, whereas WhatsApp and Google classroom were more preferable to share and upload assignment. Several learning tools and activities were pointed in order to activate and engage learners in on-line learning. The study also pointed out how on-line English classes can be done effectively to avail students' needs. Finally, teachers may regard this study as a reference to prepare suitable on-line class materials.

Jalilinia, F. (2021) appraised EFL learners' realization of on-line education throughout

Covid19 outbreak. The study sample consisted of 60 high school students from Tehran, Iran. A questionnaire was used as a tool for collecting data, and is divided into two parts: the first, measured students' interaction with one another and with their teacher, the second, assessed learners' views towards on-line education. SPSS programme was exploited to interpret the collected data. The result showed a negative impression on the part of students towards on-line education. A large number of participants suffered from ineffective interaction, and had a bad experience towards on-line learning platforms. The present atmosphere of learning should be enhanced by involving students in on-line strategies during the pandemic.

Barzani, S.H.H., & Rayan Jalal Jamil, R.J. (2021) investigated the students' views of on-line learning against on-site one at universities in Kurdistan region. Two hundred (112 females and 88 males) university students were represented the sample of the study. A questionnaire of 15 items and an open-ended question were adopted to collect data. The gathered data were analysed by the use of SPSS. The result clearly demonstrated a large number of students' negative impressions of on-line learning. On-site learning was more preferable and effective for the students. The results also indicated that on-line learning is barely adequate for students'

needs. Last but not least, the students' challenge throughout on-line learning involved internal and external causes, such as time management, paying attention, and social issues that restrict opening cameras, besides electricity and internet connection problems.

On the whole, all the previous studies above showed a quick turnaround in ELT which needs appreciable researches. Therefore, this piece of work has something to contribute by exploring EFL Iraqi learners' points of view about on-line learning during Covid-19 pandemic.

Aim

This study aims at investigating the attitudes of EFL Iraqi learners towards on-line learning in respect of pedagogical and technical issues during Covid-19 pandemic.

Significance of the Study

1. The significance of this study is to attract teachers' attention to EFL Iraqi learners' impression towards on-line learning.
2. The findings of this study offer some insights to educational supervisors to act accordingly.
3. This study is hoped to be valuable to the experts who work in the field of education to develop their plans

during and after Corona Virus pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A descriptive research design has been used in this study, which is defined by Richards and Schmidt (2010) as a process of investigation to describe a phenomenon in a factual and precise way (p.164). It is related to the situations, trainings, viewpoints, tenets, or impressions (Tavakoli, 2012, p.160).

Research Sample

The study sample consists of (89) preparatory school students at Dr. Ali Al-Wardi high school for boys in Najaf – Iraq.

Data Collection Instrument

The data have been collected by a questionnaire. The questionnaire has been made to investigate the attitudes of EFL Iraqi learners towards on-line learning. It is consisted of fifteen close ended items with three Likert scale: agree – neutral – disagree (See appendix1). These items include two essential topic areas: first, students' attitudes towards on-line learning (10 items), second, difficulties with on-line learning (5 items). The fifteen items are put into the categories above in order to address the research questions.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Validity and reliability are regarded significant standards to judge the goodness and consistency of research tools. Validity concentrates on validity of research tools and to what extent the outcomes can be applied in a general manner. Whereas reliability guarantees stability of the study data and its consequences (Dörnyei, 2007, p.69).

To ensure the questionnaire validity, experts in the field of EFL were asked for consultancy on its content validity. After consultation, some items have been modified, added and excluded. Moreover, the questionnaire has been piloted among some students and they reported no ambiguity in it. The reliability of the collected data has been measured by Cronbach Alpha coefficient. It has been showed a value of 0.753 which is regarded significant according to Tavakoli (2012, p.136).

Data Analysis

Google Forms are used to distribute the questionnaire to the students. Since the data collected numerically, they were analysed via SPSS. The analysis results are shown and discussed in the forthcoming sections.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Part I Students' Attitudes Towards On-Line Learning.

It is worth mentioning that this part of the questionnaire addressed students' attitudes towards on-line learning, which is the first research question.

Item 1 provoked a positive response from students; (50) of them were with the idea that on-line learning fosters students' hunger to learn. Regarding **item 2**, about (61) students agreed that on-line learning allows students to utilize a various number of sources which help them learning.

Similarly, **item 3** revealed that a great number of students (55) hold positive attitudes towards on-line learning. More than half of students (47) agreed to **item 4** which stated on-line learning can provide many beneficial and important aspects for the students.

In contrast, (43) students are disagreed with **item 5** that affirmed on-line learning is better than face to face learning in the long run. However, this means that students regard on-line leaning as good alternative to physical one in an emergency or specific circumstances.

Responses to **item 6** and **7** are very close to each other; (49) and (51) students agreed that on-line learning fulfills their

language needs, and interruption is never occurred in on-line learning.

Concerning **item 8**, a critical number of students (37) believes that elements of face to face classes are completely reflected in on-line ones. The number of students who are disagreed with this item is (26).

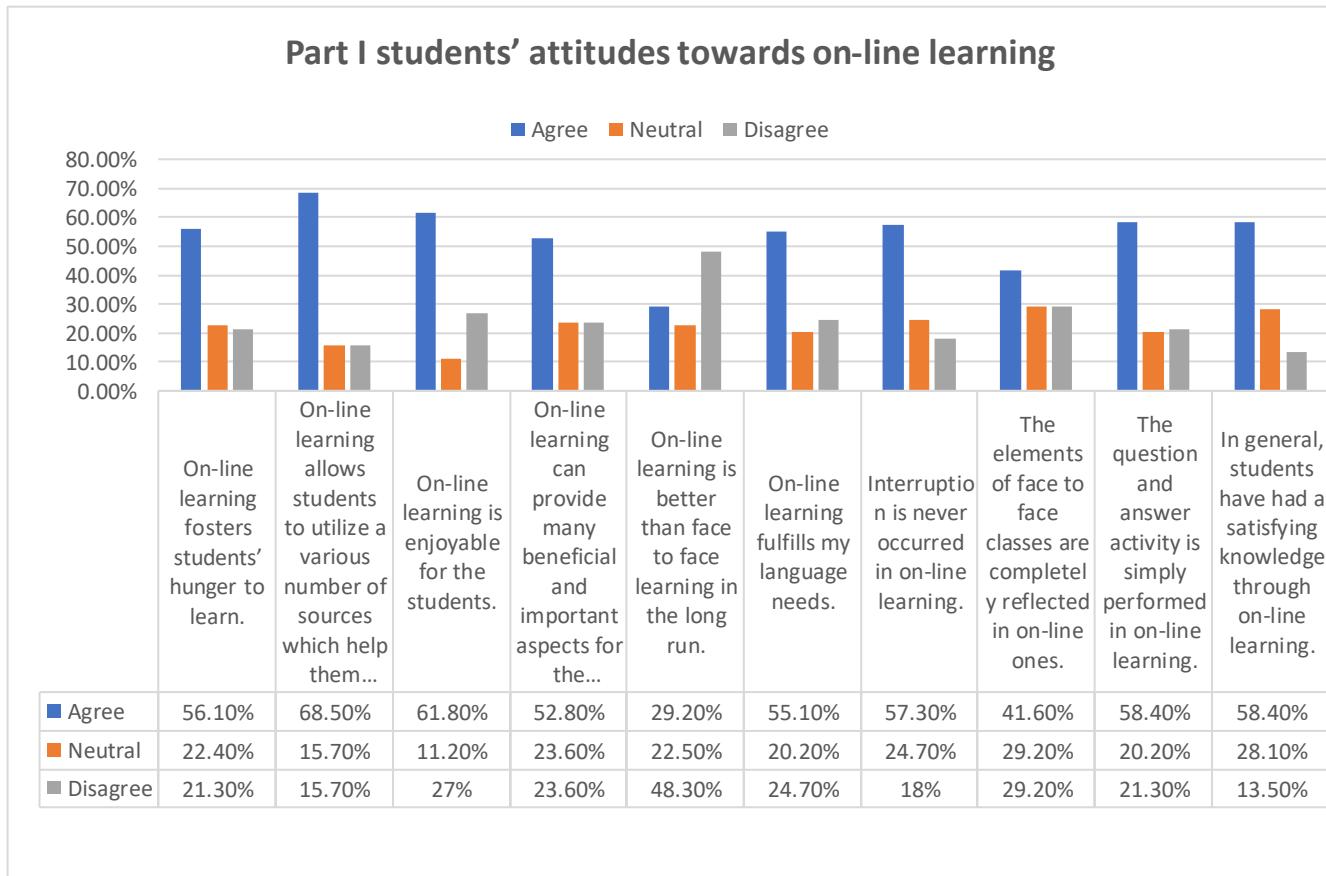
Students' responses to **item 9** indicated that the majority of students (52) find the question-answer activity is simply

performed in on-line learning. It is in agreement with **item 10**; about (52) students in general have had a satisfying knowledge through on-line learning.

In the light of students' responses above, it has been identified that students hold positive attitudes towards on-line learning. They agreed to the majority of items (8 of 10) which advocates on-line learning (See table 1 and chart 1).

Table 1 Students' attitudes towards on-line learning

Part I students' attitudes towards on-line learning.			
Item statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1. on-line learning fosters students' hunger to learn.	50(56.1%)	20(22.4%)	19(21.3%)
2. on-line learning allows students to utilize a various number of sources which help them learning.	61(68.5%)	14(15.7%)	14(15.7%)
3. On-line learning is enjoyable for the students.	55(61.8%)	10(11.2%)	24(27%)
4. On-line learning can provide many beneficial and important aspects for the students.	47(52.8%)	21(23.6%)	21(23.6%)
5. On-line learning is better than face to face learning in the long run.	26(29.2%)	20(22.5%)	43(48.3%)
6. On-line learning fulfills my language needs.	49(55.1%)	18(20.2%)	22(24.7%)
7. Interruption is never occurred in on-line learning.	51(57.3%)	22(24.7%)	16(18%)
8. The elements of face to face classes are completely reflected in on-line ones.	37(41.6%)	26(29.2%)	26(29.2%)
9. The question-answer activity is simply performed in on-line learning.	52(58.4%)	18(20.2%)	19(21.3%)
10. In general, students have had a satisfying knowledge through on-line learning.	52(58.4%)	25(28.1%)	12(13.5%)

Chart 1 Students' attitudes towards on-line learning

Part II difficulties with on-line learning.

Part two of the questionnaire devoted to explore students' difficulties with on-line learning, which is the second research question.

The collected data about **item 11** illustrated that most of the students (63) experienced some challenges concern the internet service/access.

In respect of **item 12**, a near-half of students (41) do not pay enough attention during on-line classes.

In terms of workload, (37) of students agreed and (33) disagreed on **item 13** that stated on-line learning is harder than face-to-face learning. Students appeared to be careful in response to this item as there are different points of view among them.

Concerning **item 14**, a large number of students (51) believed that on-line learning is not as feasible as face to face learning. Whereas (39) of students were consistent with **item 15** that claimed students feel

bored with on-line classes as they can not socialize with one another.

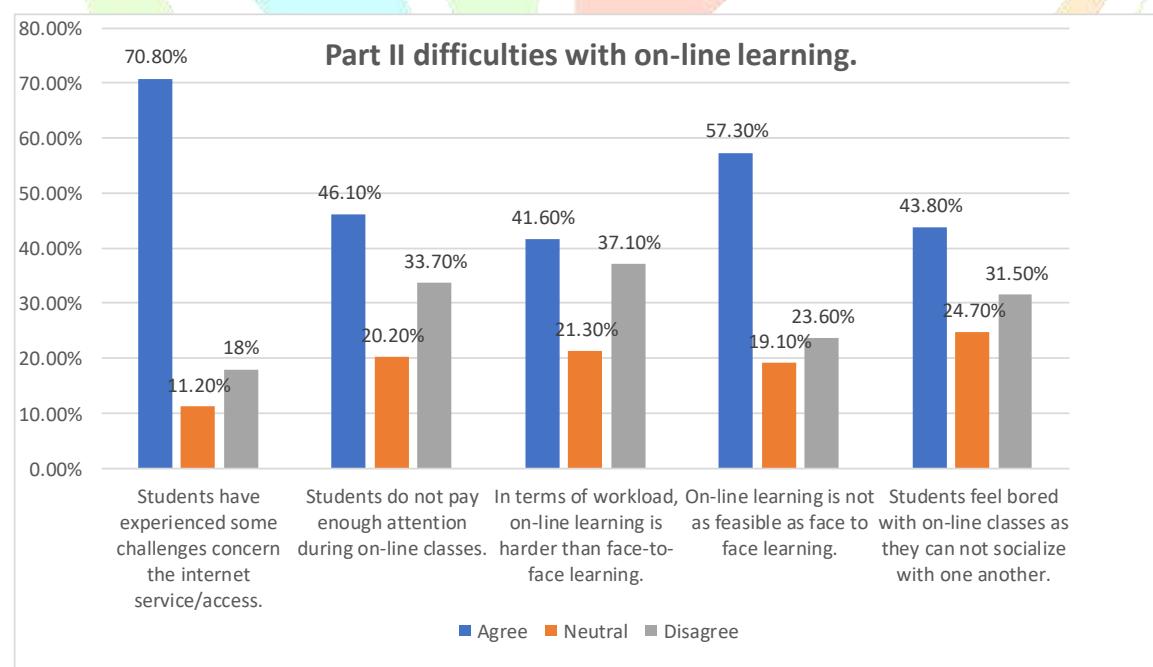
Based on the collected data from part II of the questionnaire, it has been noticed that students face actual difficulties during on-line learning. These difficulties are put into

five categories: internet service/access, paying attention, workload, feasibility, and lack of social contact. However, item 13 showed a variety of opinions which fluctuate among 37 of students agreed, 33 disagreed and 19 neutral (See table 2 and chart 2).

Table 2 Difficulties with on-line learning.

Part II difficulties with on-line learning.			
Item statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
11. Students have experienced some challenges concern the internet service/access.	63(70.8%)	10(11.2%)	16(18%)
12. Students do not pay enough attention during on-line classes.	41(46.1%)	18(20.2%)	30(33.7%)
13. In terms of workload, on-line learning is harder than face-to-face learning.	37(41.6%)	19(21.3%)	33(37.1%)
14. On-line learning is not as feasible as face to face learning.	51(57.3%)	17(19.1%)	21(23.6%)
15. Students feel bored with on-line classes as they can not socialize with one another.	39(43.8%)	22(24.7%)	28(31.5%)

Chart 2 Difficulties with on-line learning.



CONCLUSION

On-line education is considered as a novel way of teaching/learning process in Iraq. The sudden emergence of corona virus pandemic paves the way to utilize on-line learning in all educational systems. The study results uncover some significant information about on-line learning. Students welcome on-line learning during covid-19 pandemic and hold positive attitudes towards it. A large number of students favours on-line learning as it fosters their desire to learn, and allows them utilizing a various number of sources. Moreover, on-line learning for most of them is enjoyable and can provide many beneficial and important aspects. According to them, on-line learning fulfills their language needs as the elements of face to face classes are completely reflected in on-line ones. Besides, interruption is never occurred whereas the question-answer activity is simply performed in on-line learning. In conclusion, it is no exaggeration to say that on-line learning avails students to learn under Corona virus pandemic. Meanwhile, there are some drawbacks with on-line education concerning internet service/access, paying attention, workload, feasibility, and lack of social contact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Schools, universities and institutions should be supplied with Internet by the government.
2. On-line classes should contain interesting materials which attract students' attention and make them attentive.
3. Students are sometimes complaining about their heavy workloads, therefore, teachers should take this matter into consideration.
4. On-line learning can be feasible if the government conducts seminars for its awareness among students.
5. On-line classes should be varied to avoid boredom, and students should be encouraged to have on-line conversations with one another about course materials.

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