Exploring EFL Students' Attitudes Toward Internet-based Courses in Comparison to On-site Courses

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Abstract

In spite of its ubiquity, the role of technology in education has been challenged and characterized by skepticism; however, the present critical situation in the world (Covid 19) reaffirmed its paramount importance in several aspects of the present life especially in educational arenas. Utilizing a focused essay technique, this study aimed to explore the college students' attitude toward the four-month internet-based courses offered by their university instead of on-site courses due to the Corona pandemic. The participants of the study were MA (N=7) and undergraduate (N= 21) ELT (English Language Teaching) male and female students within the age range of 19-32. Two themes a) advantages and b) disadvantages of internet-based synchronous and asynchronous courses emerged as a result of content analysis. The findings may provide courseware designers, faculty in higher education and administrators with insights to pinpoint the barriers and enhance the efficiency of these forums to promote learning in the changing world.

Keywords: *Internet-based learning, technology, synchronous, asynchronous.*

1. Introduction

Technology has been in use in education and language learning for a long time. However, it had an ancillary role in comparison to face-to-face classroom until the Corona pandemic hit the whole world and transferred the education to the virtual world. Although generation Z learners are known as digital natives, who have smartphones and are familiar with social media at very young age [1], when it came to fully on-line courses in educational arenas, including universities, they expressed reluctance to participate. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand university students' attitude toward on-line courses they took during this pandemic. Studying attitudes is significant because they may be conducive to behavioral intentions [2]. The results might reveal misconceptions and barriers to using technology in education and pave the path for making better use of it in future.

The research question addressed by this study is:

What is the EFL undergraduate and postgraduate students' attitude toward on-line courses offered by the university during Corona pandemic?

2. Methodology

2.1. Context and Participants

The study used a qualitative methodology to explore EFL university students' attitude toward on-line courses. The data were collected in two undergraduate (N=21) and postgraduate (N=7) classes, majoring in English Teaching in Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran. The classes were made up of male and female students within the age range of 19-32.

2.2. Instrument

Participants were asked to write about their attitude toward on-line learning. Implementing a focused essay technique, they were required to answer why they liked it or why they didn't like. What kind of problems they faced and their experience in general. In focused essay technique "a respondent is asked to write a few lines about a specific event in some detail" (p.570) [3]. A time period of one week was given to students to write their focused essays in English. They were also asked to write their names, major and age in their document. Having gathered the writings electronically, they were all transferred to a word file. Using Creswell's [4] six steps of content analysis, the essays were analyzed and two main themes emerged: a) advantages b) disadvantages (see table 1).

Main categories	subcategories
1. Advantages	a. Comfort b. Taking advantage of telecommuting c. Having access to the content d. Learning new technical and behavioral skills e. Learning in a multimedia environment
2. Disadvantages	a. Lack of order and discipline b. Glitches c. Social isolation d. Lack of computer and the internet literacy e. High cost and unavailability of devices

3. Results

The following two categories and some subcategories emerged as a result of analysis:

Advantages

Comfort
Some students (21%) found on-line courses very convenient and comfortable because they did not have to dress for the class. They also said they enjoyed the comfort of their own room and devices. In addition, on-line learning can provide a chance for students to be involved in meaningful language practice in low-risk, face keeping contexts [5]. As one of the students said, "When I'm in the classroom, I feel anxious to join the discussions even if I know my opinion is good enough, but in the on-line class, I felt confident enough to talk and when I was not inclined to talk, I would write a text in the chat box." (ID, 4, undergraduate).

Taking Advantage of Telecommuting
Most postgraduate students (32%), especially those who had to travel to the campus from different cities, expressed their satisfaction with on-line classes believing that it gained them time, so they could spend enough time on their studying and work. They also said it saved money because they did not have to pay for accommodation and transportation.

Accessibility of the Content
Both undergraduate and graduate students (21%) supported the idea of accessibility of the lesson content. As the presented lessons were saved and used for later references, it provided the chance for students to download them when they were not able to participate synchronously. One of the students who was also a teacher at school said "Sometimes I had to miss the class because it interfered with my school; with on-line classes I can manage both my job and education" (ID, 7: postgraduate).

Learning New Technical and Behavioral Skills
Both undergraduate and postgraduate students (23%) believed that on-line classes caused them to learn new computer skills. One of the students wrote "At first, I found the system very frustrating and challenging; I missed face-to-face classes, but at the end of the course, I found that I had learned a different skill besides my own subjects" (ID, 2: undergraduate). In addition, some of them (18%) reported that they learned how to be self-disciplined and self-motivated to follow the courses.

Learning in a Multimedia Environment
Both undergraduate and postgraduate students (28%) commented that in on-line classes the instructors presented the lessons in different modes such as power points, videos and audios, text which enhanced their comprehension and made the lesson enjoyable. One of the students commented "Some Instructors do not usually use technology even power points presentations in face-to-face classes and they just use white boards and textbooks but even those instructors had to present their lessons through power point in on-line classes" (ID, 20:undergraduate).

Disadvantages

In spite of the fact that the students benefitted from on-line classes, they also complained about the shortages and problems they experienced during this period.

Lack of Order and Discipline

Strangely enough, all students (100%) commented that on-line classes lacked the order and discipline of face-to-face classes. Some of the students (15%) wrote they fell asleep during the class or they did not attend the class because they would have access to the material asynchronously. One of them complained about the distractors at home such as TV, the people at home, noise and many other fun things. The other one wrote "We need high motivation, self-discipline and time management skills to be successful in these classes. I can't benefit from these classes. I need a serious environment to study" (ID, 24: undergraduate).

Glitches

Similar to previous studies [1], some students (35.7%) complained about the failures in the system. They wrote that the speed of the internet was not fast enough, and they experienced several times of disconnection which caused them to quit the class. One of the students wrote "I needed to log in thirty minutes sooner than the class time or I wouldn't be able to connect" (ID, 16: undergraduate).

Social Isolation

Social isolation has been defined as "lack of meaningful social contacts" [6]. This contact at university context is between instructors and students and among students. Both undergraduate and graduate students (42.8%) complained about social isolation. They commented teachers would see the students' facial expressions and gestures in face-to-face classes, so they could adjust their lectures, but this was not possible in on-line classes. Some of the students (17%) wrote that interaction between teachers and students in on-line classes is mechanical and devoid of any emotions, which is boring and depressing. One of the students wrote" I want to interact and collaborate with my teachers and peers face-to-face. I feel isolated in my room behind my laptop" (ID, 3: undergraduate).

Lack of Computer and the Internet Literacy

Some undergraduate students (17.8%) mentioned lack of computer and the internet literacy as one of the barriers to participate in on-line classes. They stated they experienced anxiety and frustration which led to their loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

High Cost and Unavailability of Technology

Both undergraduate and postgraduate students (32%) wrote that the devices (laptops, smartphones, the internet) they required for on-line classes were unaffordable. One of the students commented "I live in a rural area; we do not have access to the internet and we cannot afford the devices. How are we going to keep up with the education?"(ID, 18: undergraduate).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Although technology had been incorporated to educational arenas for a long time, it had never been used as the only way of education until Corona pandemic spread throughout the world. Unfortunately, participation in on-line classes was not satisfactory enough; 30% of undergraduates and 50% of postgraduates (MA and MS) students at the university took part in the classes. As a result, this study aimed to discover the undergraduate and graduate EFL students' attitudes who participated in on-line classes toward fully on-line courses they took during Corona pandemic in order to discover any preconceptions, misconceptions, and barriers in these classes so that they could be dispelled and eliminated for higher efficiency in future. A focused essay technique was utilized to gather data; two themes and ten subcategories were found as a result of content analysis. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students expressed their satisfaction with comfort, taking advantage of telecommuting, accessibility of the lesson contents asynchronously, and learning in a multimedia environment in on-line classes. However, there were complaints about lack of order and discipline in on-line classes. This might be rooted in the fact that the frequent approach to teaching in Iran is teacher-centered because teachers are reluctant to relinquish power and do not believe in the efficacy of learner-centered approach [7]; therefore, students become accustomed to and prefer this method of presentation and expect a serious learning environment. Another point which caused dissatisfaction among students was glitches. It is hoped that technology designers and manufacturers will find a way to prevent technical and mechanical failures and design more user-friendly systems to facilitate participation in these forums. The next problem which caused frustration was social isolation. This corroborates with previous studies that the feeling of social isolation is one of the factors in withdrawal from online courses [8] [9]. Another obstacle mentioned by the students was lack of

technical and the internet literacy. Today's world requires multiliteracies to thrive; "multiliteracies go beyond dealing with the technical aspect of the electronic medium and include engaging with others through the new technologies and using these creatively as well as critically" (p.35) [10]. Therefore, it is incumbent on educators to equip students with these literacies to prepare them for this fast changing world. The last barrier mentioned by the students was the high cost of technology. Previous studies revealed that there is a relationship between students' socioeconomic goods at home and their score on ICT competence tests [11]. What concerns educators is that in spite of the benefits on-line classes can provide, it will deprive low-income people of education, which will not do justice to this group of people. The results of this study are not generalizable due to the small number of data and its restriction to just one university.

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