



# Exploring EFL Learners' Experiences and Attitudes towards Distance Learning Platforms during COVID-19: A Comparative Study of Greek Students in Diverse Educational Settings

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a rapid shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning environments [1]. This unprecedented transition has particularly impacted the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where interactive and communicative approaches are crucial to language learning [2]. This paper aims to present the findings of a study that explored the experiences and attitudes of EFL learners towards distance learning platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on synchronous (Webex) and asynchronous (eClass) learning environments. Based on data collected from 142 students across primary, secondary, and adult education settings in Greece, the research provides a comparative analysis of learner engagement, challenges, and preferences across different educational contexts and basic linguistic skills, mostly speaking and writing. The findings show that EFL learners preferred synchronous learning for its real-time interaction and effective speaking practice, however, many faced connectivity and access issues, especially on mobile devices. Asynchronous platforms were valued for their flexibility in supporting writing and speaking, but challenges like delayed feedback and inconsistent content reduced learner motivation and engagement. The paper concludes with recommendations for optimising both synchronous and asynchronous platforms to better meet the diverse needs of EFL learners across different educational settings, aiming to ensure balanced development in speaking and writing skills.*

**Keywords:** Distance Education, CALL, EFL

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, language teaching and learning has undergone a gradual but continuous transformation, primarily driven by the integration of digital technologies into both daily life and educational practices. This slow shift has enhanced access to language resources and diversified teaching methodologies. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a rapid shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning environments. This change particularly impacted English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, where interaction and communication are essential for language acquisition. This transition highlighted both the limitations of traditional methods and the immense potential of technology to revolutionize language learning in a short period [3], especially through numerous interactive and communicative online platforms. Finding the most suitable online platforms to facilitate language learning was a big challenge. As is well known in online learning, two basic settings are often compared, synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous online learning excels in facilitating real-time communication, offering immediate feedback, and the use of natural language, which makes the learning experience more interactive and engaging. Asynchronous learning, on the other hand, provides flexibility by allowing learners to engage at their own pace, independent of time and place, fostering individual responsibility and less reliance on instructor-led sessions [4]. In EFL settings, platforms that facilitate both oral interaction and writing are crucial for developing language proficiency. Web conferencing tools like *Zoom* and *Webex* offer features that support speaking, such as real-time audio and video, which enable students to practice conversational skills in a virtual classroom. Simultaneously, these platforms' collaborative tools, like screen sharing, breakout rooms, and chat functions, allow for peer review and writing feedback sessions. This combination of oral and written practice helps EFL learners improve both fluency and accuracy, fostering a more holistic language learning experience. The integration of oral and written interaction in such platforms has been shown to enhance students' ability to articulate their thoughts verbally while refining their ideas in written form, which is key to language development [5].



This survey examines the experiences and attitudes of EFL learners in different educational settings in Greece regarding the use of synchronous and asynchronous platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, all participants took part in online education in Greece over two academic years: 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. The study primarily focuses on two specific tools: 1) *Webex* for synchronous learning and 2) *e-CLASS*, a web-based Learning Management System (LMS) built on *Moodle* for asynchronous learning. Both tools were predominantly utilized in school education. By analyzing learner engagement, challenges, and preferences, the research offers insights into the effectiveness of these platforms in supporting the development of both speaking and writing skills, highlighting their respective strengths and limitations.

## **2. Research Aims**

This study is guided by the following research questions: primarily, it investigates how EFL learners engaged with synchronous platforms, such as *Webex*, and asynchronous platforms, like *eClass*, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, it explores learners' preferences for these platforms, the challenges they encountered, and how their experiences differed across various educational contexts—namely primary, secondary, and adult education. Furthermore, the study addresses a critical question: What major challenges arise when using synchronous or asynchronous learning platforms for teaching speaking and writing skills? By examining these aspects, the research aims to uncover both the benefits and limitations of each platform in fostering essential language skills.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design-methods**

This study employs a cross-sectional, comparative research design, collecting data from a single point in time during the second academic semester of 2022. The study aimed to assess the experiences of primary, secondary, and adult students regarding the use of synchronous and asynchronous distance learning platforms for teaching speaking and writing skills. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining both quantitative data, collected via questionnaires (structured with multiple-choice and scaled questions), and qualitative data, from open-ended responses. This approach allowed the study to provide a detailed comparison of learners' attitudes, preferences, and challenges when using different online platforms for learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This design effectively captures the multifaceted nature of the learners' experiences and the potential benefits and limitations of the distance learning platforms.

### **3.2 Data Collection: Sample and Tools**

#### **Sampling**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on those who had participated in online education during the pandemic. This included 85 students from the 1st Gymnasium of Mouzaki (Rural town in central mainland Greece), 26 students from the 7th Gymnasium of Karditsa (City in central mainland Greece), and several other smaller groups from various primary schools, private lessons, and adult education centers in other parts of Greece. The sample was nearly balanced in gender (52.1% female, 47.9% male), and students' ages ranged from 10 to 60+ years, with the majority being secondary school students. In fact, there was an age limitation for minor learners, as only learners 9 to 15 years old were allowed to participate but for adults, there was no limitation of age. The questionnaires were designed to be anonymous in order to safeguard the students' personal information. Additionally, the researchers provided a parental informed consent form for any parent who wished to complete it.

#### **Tools**

The primary tool for data collection was an online questionnaire designed to gather comprehensive information on students' experiences with both synchronous and asynchronous EFL learning platforms. It consisted of 22 questions, including multiple-choice, scaled responses, and open-ended questions. The multiple-choice and scaled questions assessed key factors, including technical issues,



the frequency of using interactive materials, and platform preferences. Open-ended questions were included to capture qualitative insights, allowing students to express their thoughts in more detail.

The survey was distributed to students via email, and teachers were present during its completion to assist with any potential issues, ensuring that responses were as accurate and complete as possible. The use of *Google Forms* enabled the collection of immediate results, reducing the margin for error in data analysis and offering a seamless method for tracking response trends.

## Data Analysis

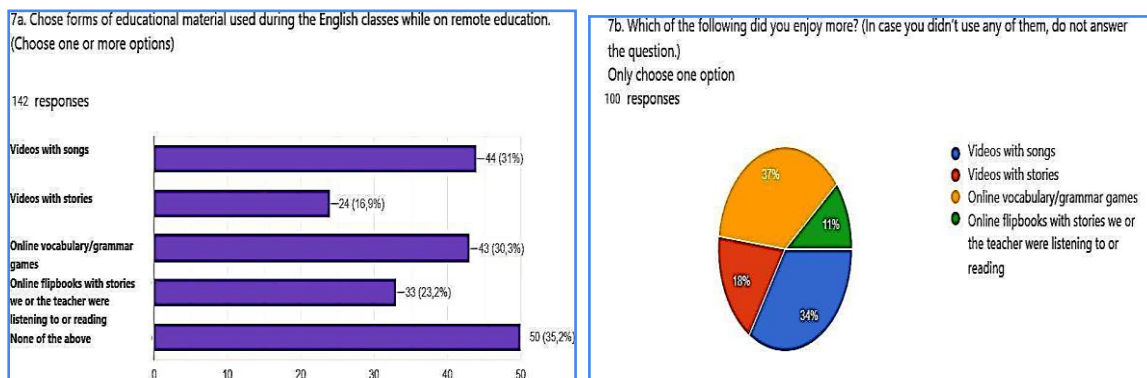
The first part of the questionnaire comprised 16 questions aimed at helping to draw conclusions about synchronous online learning platforms. A definition of synchronous online learning was provided, with examples of educational platforms used for synchronous online learning – e.g., Webex, Zoom, Jitsi – to help learners recall how the synchronous online ELT lessons were conducted. The second part consisted of 6 questions focused on asynchronous platforms, like eClass, focused on self-paced learning, written communication, and challenges related to motivation and independent study. This structure allowed the researchers to gain insights into how learners navigated both platforms and identify key issues related to teaching speaking and writing skills.

A mixed-methods approach was employed to interpret both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the survey. Quantitative data, primarily obtained from multiple-choice and scaled questions, were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequency distributions. These were automatically generated by the *Google Forms* platform, facilitating a straightforward interpretation of learners' preferences, technical issues, and engagement levels. For the qualitative data, derived from open-ended questions, a thematic coding process was applied. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of patterns and recurring themes, providing richer context to the quantitative findings. By combining these two methods, the analysis offered a holistic view of the strengths and limitations of synchronous (*Webex*) and asynchronous (*eClass*) platforms, highlighting both numerical trends and various learner perspectives.

## 4. Main Findings

### 4.1 Synchronous Online Platform (*Webex*)

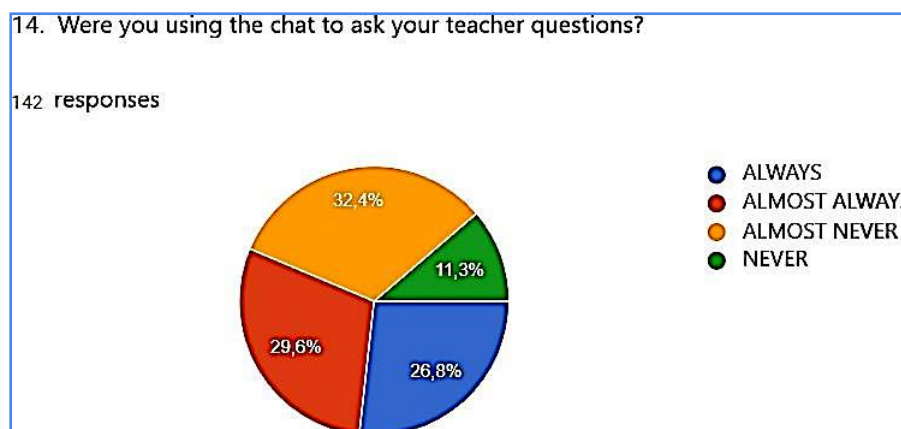
Regarding devices used for distance learning, half of the surveyed students accessed their courses via computer, while 19% used a tablet, and 31% participated using a mobile phone. As for online platforms, the vast majority (99.3%) attended courses through *Webex*, with only 0.7% opting for other platforms. The survey also explored the types of educational materials used in remote English classes and students' preferences for these resources. Students reported that teachers frequently utilized videos with songs and interactive online games focused on vocabulary and grammar to enhance learning. In a follow-up question, those who had used these materials indicated their preferences. The results showed that 37% of learners favored vocabulary and grammar games, while 34% preferred videos featuring English songs. Additionally, a significant number of students valued the ability to "watch videos in English" (36.6%) (Fig. 1, 2). Nearly equal percentages of students (19% and 19.7%) enjoyed using *Photodentro's* interactive e-book (<https://photodentro.edu.gr/lor/>) and viewing exercise answers through teacher screen sharing. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating interactive and multimedia content to engage students during online lessons.



**Fig. 1,2.** Preferred Educational Materials in Online Language Learning

With regards to learners' engagement, synchronous platforms, like *Webex*, were preferred by students for real-time interaction, especially for speaking practice. Learner preferences varied significantly depending on their educational setting. Primary school students generally enjoyed using synchronous platforms for interactive games, while secondary and adult learners valued features like screen sharing and instant feedback. Primary students favored multimedia content, such as songs and stories, while older students appreciated tasks that helped them develop speaking and writing skills.

Furthermore, regarding interaction during online lessons, data on chat box usage showed that 56.4% of learners frequently used it to ask questions, while the rest rarely or never engaged with it (Fig.3). Notably, 51.4% expressed a desire to use the chat box more often for communication with their teacher, and a significant 80.3% wished to use it to interact with their classmates.

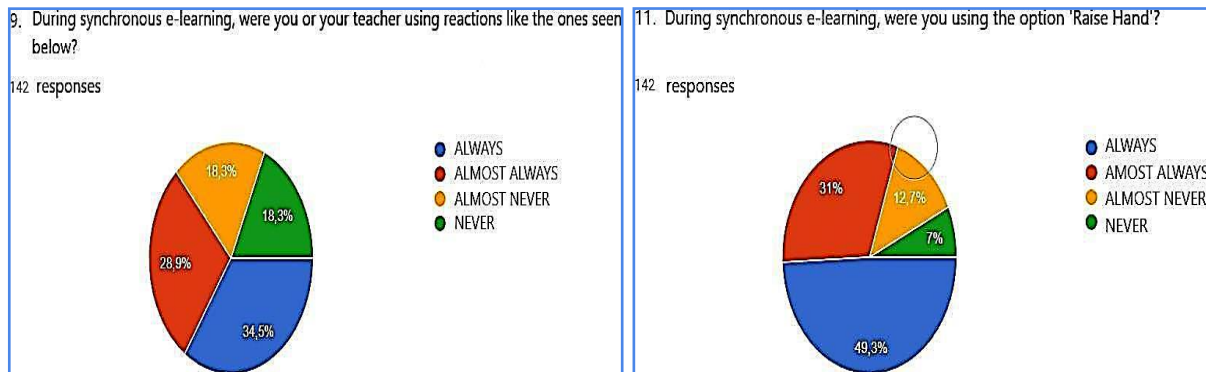


**Fig. 3.** "Chat": learners' frequency of use

Additionally, *Webex* reaction icons helped students recall emotions playfully, serving as effective ice-breakers during awkward moments or when cameras were off. With cameras turned off during synchronous online classes, the absence of non-linguistic and paralinguistic cues—such as facial expressions and gestures—was inevitable.

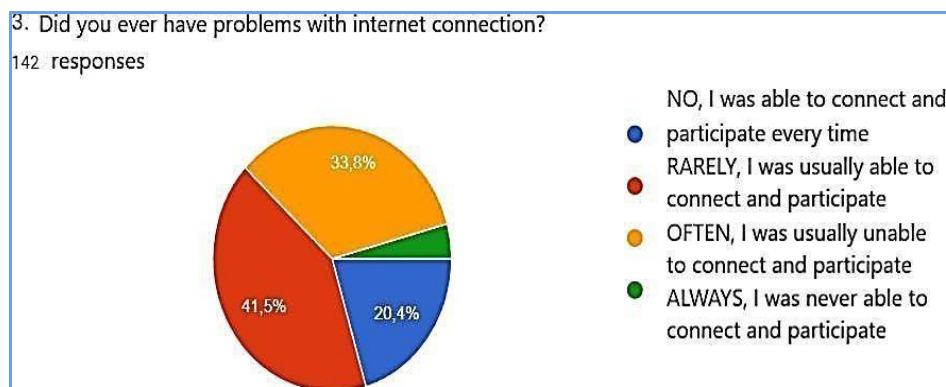
Results showed that reactions were utilized in every or nearly every lesson for 63.4% of online courses (Fig.4). In an optional open-ended question, 67.5% of students expressed a positive view of using these reactions. Furthermore, half of the students (49.3%) reported using the raise hand option in every lesson, while a small minority (7%) indicated that they had never used it (Fig. 5).





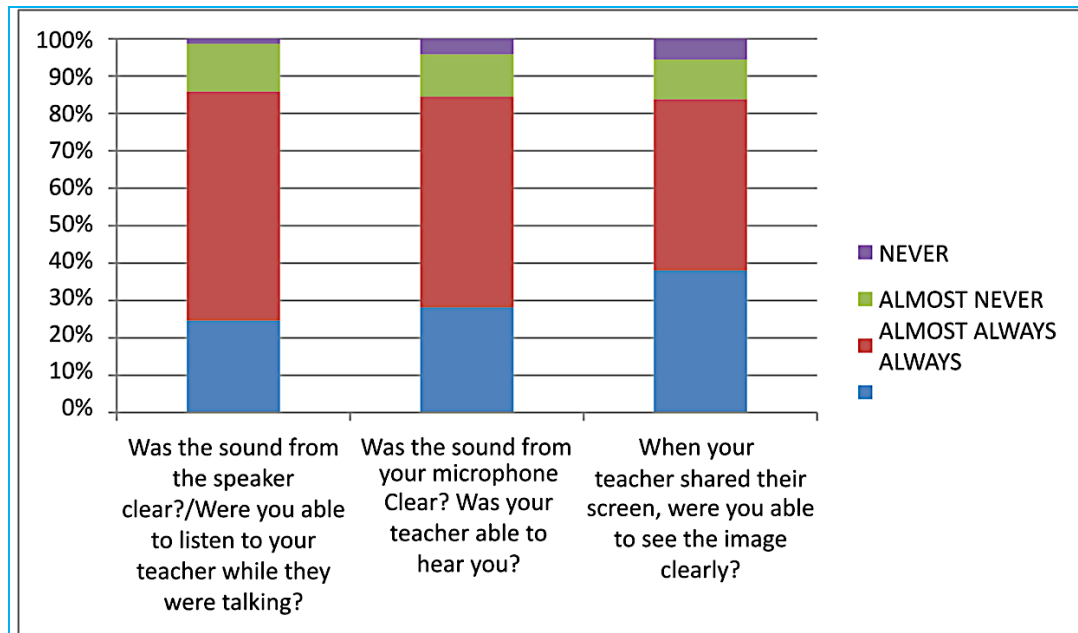
**Fig. 4, 5.** "Frequency of use of reactions" and the "raise hand" reaction

Furthermore, the majority of learners (54.2%) expressed that they appreciated "being able to attend and participate in the course from the comfort of their homes and hear their teacher clearly, without classroom noise (29.6%) despite the connectivity issues. Most students (61.9%) stated that they rarely experienced difficulty or had no difficulty connecting to the synchronous online learning platforms (Fig. 6). However, a significant percentage of students (33.8%), those connected via mobile phones, said that they frequently encountered problems resulting in usually being unable to participate in class meetings. In comparison, there was also a small percentage (4.2%) who reported that were never able to log in.



**Fig. 6.** Connectivity issues

The survey revealed significant technical issues (Fig. 7) related to hardware during online EFL lessons. About 24.6% of students reported consistently clear sound from their speakers, allowing them to hear the teacher without problems, while 14.1% struggled to hear clearly or rarely heard the teacher well and this affected their participation. Similarly, only 28.2% of students indicated that their microphones consistently worked well, with teachers hearing them clearly, whereas 15.5% reported that they could rarely, if ever, be heard by the teacher. Regarding screen-sharing issues, 45.8% of students stated they rarely encountered problems, and 38% experienced no issues at all when viewing shared content. These findings highlight both successful and problematic areas in the technical performance of online learning tools.



**Fig. 7.** Technical issues

Overall, several challenges were identified by students regarding synchronous online learning. A notable 60.8% reported that slow internet connections disrupted their ability to hear other participants, often forcing them to log in repeatedly. Additionally, 29.6% expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of pair or group work activities, while 21.8% were frustrated by the inability to see other participants due to restrictions on camera usage and limited screen-sharing options during lessons.

#### **4.2 Asynchronous Platforms**

On the other hand, asynchronous platforms like eClass provided flexible access to learning materials but were less favored due to delayed feedback and inconsistent content updates. Approximately one-third of learners (35.2%) reported never using the eClass provided by their public school. Consequently, this platform, established in 2006, has never been fully utilized, even during the pandemic. Students noted that the lack of immediate feedback diminished their motivation to complete tasks. While these platforms were better suited for self-paced writing practice, the delay in receiving feedback hindered their effectiveness in improving writing skills.

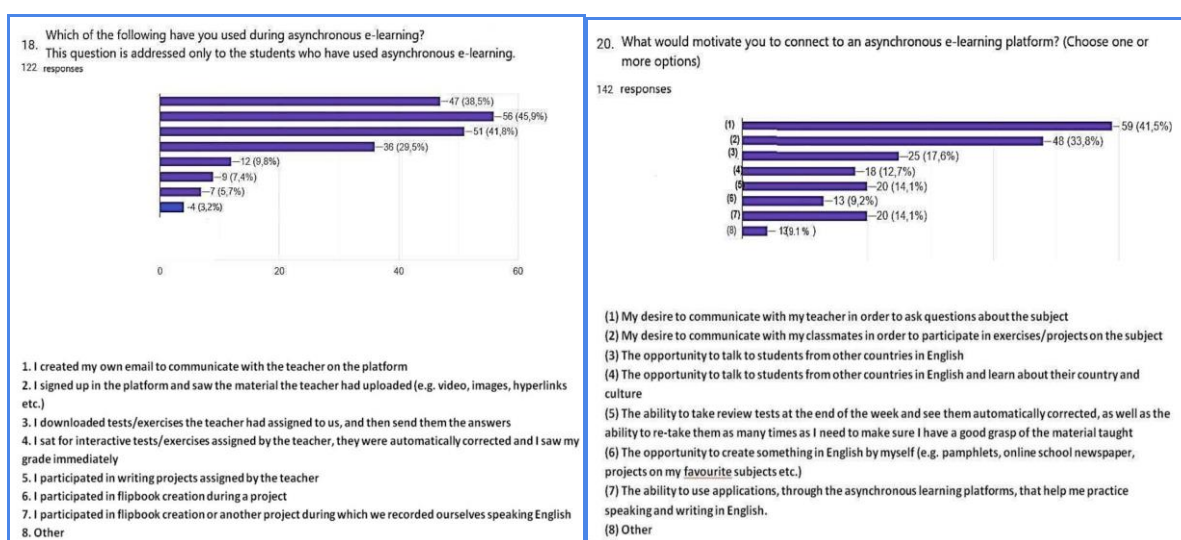
The findings revealed varied usage patterns: 45.9% of students indicated they signed up primarily to access materials uploaded by the teacher, such as videos, images, and hyperlinks. Additionally, 41.8% reported downloading tests and exercises assigned by the teacher, completing them, and later submitting their answers. A significant portion of students (38.5%) created their own email accounts to facilitate communication with the teacher through the platform (Fig. 8).

Furthermore, 29.5% engaged with interactive tests and exercises that were automatically graded, allowing them to see their results immediately. However, participation in writing projects and collaborative activities was less common, with 9.8% involved in writing projects, 7.4% participating in flipbook creation, and 5.7% recording themselves speaking English as part of a project. Only 3.2% selected "Other" activities, indicating limited engagement in alternative tasks. Moreover, 14.1% of students valued the ability to take review tests at the end of the week and receive automatic corrections, expressing a desire for the option to retake tests to reinforce their understanding. They found that automatically corrected tests and exercises, particularly those focused on writing at the word level, provided instant feedback and allowed for repeated practice until they grasped what was expected of them. This level of engagement and reinforcement can only be achieved through innovative digital tools supported by online platforms, which traditional textbooks cannot offer.



But what else motivated the students' participation? Opportunities to create projects in English, such as pamphlets or contributions to an online school newspaper, motivated 9.2% of students. Lastly, 14.1% were drawn to using applications through the platforms to practice speaking and writing, while 9.1% cited other reasons for their engagement.

In addition to usage, the survey also explored what motivated students to connect to asynchronous e-learning platforms, receiving 142 responses (Fig. 9). The most significant motivation was the desire to communicate with teachers, cited by 41.5% of students, who wanted to ask questions about the subject matter. Meanwhile, 33.8% expressed a preference for collaborating with classmates on exercises and projects. Interaction with peers from different countries was valued by 17.6%, while 12.7% appreciated the opportunity to learn about other cultures through these platforms. The chance to communicate with EFL learners from abroad—through written text or audio recordings—could motivate users to engage with asynchronous learning platforms. However, this potential was never realized, leaving intercultural communication among learners unexplored and underutilized.



**Fig. 8, 9.** Activities and motivation during asynchronous e-learning platform

These findings indicate that while both synchronous and asynchronous platforms have unique benefits, the synchronous environment is more conducive to developing speaking skills due to its interactive nature, despite occasional technical issues. In contrast, asynchronous platforms remain underutilized, largely because of the lack of immediate feedback and motivational tools. The majority of learners appreciate the interactive writing opportunities provided by online platforms, such as instant messaging in chat boxes during synchronous sessions and email in asynchronous settings. However, the research revealed that speaking interactions and role-playing activities are most effective when teachers fully leverage the features of these online platforms. Additionally, the teaching of skills like speaking and writing significantly influences the use of online tools, techniques, strategies, and the roles of both teachers and learners, highlighting the importance of tailoring online learning experiences to meet specific learner needs and contexts.

#### 4. Conclusions

The study reveals that synchronous learning platforms are generally preferred for teaching speaking skills, as they offer real-time interaction, despite technical challenges like connectivity issues and microphone malfunctions. Learners appreciate the clarity of communication and the ability to participate from home. In contrast, asynchronous learning platforms are favored for writing tasks, as they allow flexibility in accessing material and give time for thoughtful responses. However, asynchronous platforms are less engaging, with many learners citing difficulties in usage or lack of



motivation due to limited interaction and feedback. Both approaches are seen as complementary but face technical and motivational barriers.

#### **4.1 Implications**

The findings underscore the importance of selecting appropriate online platforms for different aspects of EFL learning. Synchronous platforms foster real-time interaction critical for developing speaking skills, but they require stable internet connections and better integration of non-verbal cues. Asynchronous platforms support writing development by providing flexibility, yet they lack the immediacy and interaction needed to maintain engagement. For future EFL teaching in online and hybrid environments, there must be a balance between these two methods, leveraging the strengths of each while addressing their limitations, particularly regarding technical reliability and learner engagement.

#### **4.2 Recommendations**

To enhance the effectiveness of online learning, several recommendations should be considered. First, educational institutions should invest in improving internet infrastructure and providing students with access to high-quality devices to minimize disruptions, particularly during synchronous sessions. Second, for asynchronous platforms, implementing automated systems for timely feedback—such as instant grading on tasks—can significantly boost student motivation and support their learning progress. Third, both synchronous and asynchronous platforms should feature intuitive interfaces and ensure consistency in the materials uploaded, with regular updates from teachers. Incorporating interactive elements, like quizzes or multimedia content, can also make asynchronous learning more engaging. Finally, comprehensive training for teachers is essential; equipping them with the skills to effectively use both types of platforms will enable them to troubleshoot technical issues and fully leverage platform features to engage students.

#### **4.3 Future Research**

Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of online and hybrid learning on EFL students' language acquisition. Studies could also examine how different linguistic and cultural contexts influence the effectiveness of these learning modes. Additionally, investigating the integration of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence in language learning platforms could provide insights into further optimizing the online learning experience. To ensure that learners benefit from online education and avoid wasting time, the development of regulatory frameworks that include models for choosing and assessing online platforms is urgently needed.

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