

EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTION OF USING ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING WEBSITES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT : *The following paper presents the results of a study aimed at achieving a better understanding of the EFL Learners' Perception of Using Online Language Learning Websites (OLLWs) among EFL learners during COVID-19 Pandemic. The purpose of this study is to elicit Learners' perceptions about improving their language through OLLWs. Data was acquired via a questionnaire administered to 143 female Saudi learners at the College of Sciences and Arts, Unizah, Qassim University. The results provide evidence of learners' positive perceptions towards using OLLWs. Based on the findings, educational implications for this descriptive study and future researches are suggested.*

KEYWORDS: Internet, online learning, EFL, language, learning, websites

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, a new disease was discovered in China. After extensive investigation, it is reported that the disease was caused by a new virus of the coronavirus family and has since been officially named COVID-19. Since its emergence in December 2019, the COVID-19 Pandemic has forever altered education. Although various countries have different levels of COVID-19 infection, several countries have experienced school closures due to the Pandemic. As a result, education has undergone significant transformations with the advent of e-learning, in which teaching is done remotely and through digital platforms (Li and Lalani, 2020). More and more learners of all ages with different backgrounds and purposes end up using OLLWs. In Saudi Arabia, after the breakout of the COVID-19 Pandemic in March 2020, university learners were in a desperate need to look for a new learning style and alternatives to escape the highly contagious Pandemic. Apparently, learners were accustomed to the old and conventional learning styles in group classrooms and one to one context. During this period, learners and teachers were coerced to leave the old and traditional teaching methods. Learners shifted to use online language learning websites (OLLWs) to cope with state-of-the-art technologies in education during the fatal Pandemic period. Therefore, learners have been in continuous exposure to online virtual classes and websites.

Technology is fast becoming a key instrument in people's lives in general and education and learning in particular. Nowadays, technology is thought of as an indispensable tool for learning and teaching.

It is believed that the advent of technology has made significant contributions to education and learners alike. People's knowledge and access to education have changed due to educational technology's growth (Rado, 2014). The internet is considered to be the most valuable technology of learners' day. It assists not just in their personal lives but also in their professional endeavors. It is commonly used for educational purposes to collect information, conduct research, and expand one's knowledge of various subjects. Previously, learners suffer a lot from getting a formal education. They had to attend schools that might be far away from where they live, and the high cost of education was a serious problem for parents and families. The coming of the internet has facilitated the lives of millions of learners worldwide in terms of time and money. Abdallah (2007) mentioned that the internet is used in teaching and learning because it is easy to use, affordable, and open at any time and provides an abundance of tools for a variety of courses and subjects. Furthermore, it has been reported in a study conducted by Rado (2014), who found out that learning via the internet is much cheaper, economical, autonomous, and time-saving. Using the internet enables learners to use a wide range of educational technological devices, applications, websites, and resources to learn a second language. The decision of which tool to be used depends heavily on the learners themselves.

Online courses are taken for several purposes. Some people want a degree that is versatile and accessible. Others use MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) to advance their careers, acquire subject-matter knowledge, or as a forum for continuing education. Others want to learn a new language and feel that online courses are the most efficient way. Online language courses are of two types formal and informal. Schools or universities offer formal courses, and learners are likely to formally assess for credits or qualifications (Hockly, 2015). Informal courses are adapted to the needs of the target group. Participants who take informal courses are from different age groups, with different prior knowledge and different experiences. Learners are expected to be active participants. Learners who take such courses are self-motivated (Trajković, Prokić-Cvetković, and Popović, 2016). Czerkawski (2016) states that:

"Learning networks, especially informal ones, carry opportunities for self-regulated, autonomous, and engaging learning opportunities while offering the most current, authentic, and diverse knowledge and skills. It is important to adapt them in formal settings so learners can integrate their prior and current learning experiences gained outside of formal classrooms with higher education courses. Conversely, it should also be remembered that while informal learning networks are beneficial for learners, they are not designed with formal education in mind. " p.150

OLLWs have helped the learners significantly develop their learning levels and made them independent learners. These OLLWs offer formal and informal courses. They offer materials, flashcards, videos, audio materials, and vocabulary exercises, grammar, etc. Some of these websites require registration, and some do not. Some of them present the materials in a form, and learners have to follow them strictly, and some OLLWs offer materials based on topics, and learners have freedom of choice.

'E-learning,' 'blended learning OLLWs,' 'hybrid' or 'mixed' learning, 'web-enhanced learning,' and 'distance learning' are all components that make up the phenomenon of learning online, and they are often used interchangeably (Hockly, 2015). Throughout this paper, the term 'online learning' will be

used to refer to language learning that takes place entirely online via the internet, with no face-to-face interaction, in learning scenarios.

The paper attempts to throw some light on some common perceptions of using online learning websites OLLWs experienced by EFL learners at Qassim University during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This study aims to contribute to this growing research area by exploring EFL learners' perceptions of using OLLWs. This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What general perception do learners have towards improving their English through OLLWs?
 - a. Do learners think that OLLWs are useful in improving their English Language?
 - b. Do learners think that OLLWs motivate them to improve their English language?
2. What problems and difficulties do learners encounter when they use OLLWs to improve their English Language?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The internet gives learners much-unlimited access to authentic language. However, this accessibility may be a disadvantage. Learners may come across a site that uses vocabulary beyond their current linguistic competence level or websites that use language or culture inappropriate for the learners. It is, therefore, necessary for learners to learn the skills for and practice evaluating websites (Murray and McPherson, 2002). OLLWs are designed to serve different learners' needs and provide a safe and rich learning environment. With the rise of social apps and web-based technology, online learning networks have become invaluable for formal and informal learning (Czerkawski, 2016). The use of OLLWS in education is quite old. Hockly (2015) traces the development of online websites' history. She found out that online education websites were available since the early 1990s in coincidence with the World Wide Web invention in 1989. Since then, the OLLWs are in gradual and continuous development.

For the advantages and disadvantages of OLLWs, Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) conclude that the use of OLLWs in higher education institutions has several advantages and benefits, which are: flexibility of time and place; efficacy of knowledge and qualifications via ease of access to a massive amount of information; elimination of fear barriers that have the potential of hindering participation; it is cost-effective, learners do not need to travel, and it does not require many buildings to accommodate them. This view of Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) is further supported by Elkaseh, Wong, and Fung (2016), who examined the usefulness of e-learning in Libyan higher education; they found out that Libyan teachers and students widely accept e-learning for its educational effectiveness. This finding agrees with Vijayavalsalan's (2018) findings, who carried out a study to evaluate the effectiveness of online discussion forums among the students of Abu Dhabi University, UAE. His research showed a strong association between the positive learning experience and the frequency of student participation in online discussion forums. On the other hand, Robert (2016) disagrees with Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015), Elkaseh, Wong, and Fung (2016), and Vijayavalsalan(2018). According to him, the serious disadvantages of using OLLWs are distraction and cheating. However, despite the drawbacks of OLLWs, there is a consensus among linguists that OLLWs have advantages and disadvantages, but the benefits of OLLWs are much higher. Rado (2014) points out that learning a language online is possible; learners need to have smartphones and internet connections.

Furthermore, Rambe and Bere (2013) question the use of mobile instant messaging to create alternative contexts for learners' collaboration and engagement in informal spaces in response to the minimal lecture contact time and the little learners' participation. They selected 163 third-year Information Technology students at Central University of Technology (CUT). They interviewed the teachers and used a questionnaire to compile data using WhatsApp as a learning and teaching tool in different contexts to achieve educational benefits. The researchers conclude that WhatsApp has a positive impact on learners' ability to participate and engage with their colleagues online at any time, more flexible in comparison with face-to-face teaching. Many ESL websites offer teaching materials, lesson plans, games, and other instructional resources available to students and teachers. Aly (2008) carried out a study to evaluate some online websites for learning and teaching English as a foreign language. He reported that although many websites are designed and published on the internet for learning and teaching English, little use of them is done by both Egyptian EFL teachers and students. The textbook is usually their primary concern and focus. Czerkowski (2016) states that learning networks, especially informal ones, carry self-regulated, autonomous, and engaging learning opportunities while offering the most current, authentic, and diverse knowledge and skills. It is important to adapt them to formal settings to integrate their prior and present learning experiences outside of traditional classrooms with higher education courses. He studies students' use of informal and formal learning networks in online classes to understand the interaction between the two and how they affect each other. The study results revealed that students and professors use both environments often to optimize learning. Nonetheless, most online course designs do not take into account students' informal interactions. Using OLLWs can effectively increase learner motivation and reduce learner anxiety (LeLoup and Ponterio, 2003). Kung and Chuo (2002) investigated the possibility of using ESL/EFL websites to complement in-class instruction. The data collected demonstrated that students found learning English via ESL/EFL websites was enjoyable and that their teaching methods were both successful and appropriate. A study conducted by Zamari, Adnan, Idris, and Yusof (2012) investigated learners' perceptions of using online language learning materials. The results showed that students were motivated to attempt web-based online learning materials. North (2014) researched to measure the effect of motivation on successful online learning. She identifies autonomy, self-regulation, and peer communities as significant factors to promote motivation for online learning. Sun (2014) surveyed forty-six students to learn about their challenges and how they adapted to complete online learning. Six significant issues were reported as a result of the findings: 1. sticking to the schedule and training daily, 2. contacting classmates and arranging a time to work together, 3. pairing/teaming up and collaborating, 4. maintaining constant interaction with the class, 5. being self-motivated and becoming a self-directed learner, and 6. social interaction. Similarly, Atmojo, Priyo, and Nugroho (2020) asked 13 teachers in Indonesia to complete a questionnaire about their students' challenges of using online EFL learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia. Some serious challenges were reported: a. unstable internet connection, b. the poor financial condition of the family to provide smartphones to students, c. low awareness of online learning.

METHOD

The methodology of this study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Participants

The participants in the study were 143 students majoring in the English language. They were drawn from second and third-year students, the English Department, College of Sciences and Arts, Unizah, Qassim University. The criteria to enroll the participants for this study was basically to have previous experience in using online language learning websites. All students who reported that they had not tried such a learning way were excluded from the study.

Instrument

A structured three-part questionnaire was administered to the students to investigate the Learners' perception of using online language learning websites OLLWs.

Validity of the Questionnaire:

After forming suitable and sufficient statements of the questionnaire covering the study's intricate parts, it was necessary to validate it. To achieve the validity of the structured questionnaire, some university English language teachers checked it. The experts excluded some statements and paraphrased others to avoid ambiguity or negation. In the end, they confirmed all the items of the questionnaire to be clear, specific, and understandable.

Reliability of the Questionnaire:

To check the questionnaire's reliability, the researchers randomly selected a small group out of the sample, 20 students who were excluded from the study later. They were asked to read each statement of the prepared questionnaire and respond to it by checking in the right column of their choice from the old version.

After collecting the questionnaire's answers, the data were fed and analyzed in the SPSS program. SPSS version (17) for windows was used to compute descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation) and perform reliability. The reliability of the questionnaire was found to be .87.

Table (1) Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.871	.854	11

Procedure

The following procedures were followed to investigate the EFL Learners Perception about EFL Learners' Perception of Using OLLWs during COVID-19 Pandemic :

1. Reviewing relevant literature.
2. Designing and validating a questionnaire.
3. Administering the previous tool to sample second and third-year university students.
4. Treating the data statistically by using SPSS software.
5. Interpreting the findings of the study.
6. Introducing the suggestions and recommendations of the study.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the study question, 143 learners responded to a three-part- questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire, which included four statements, investigates usefulness (Do learners think that online language learning websites are useful in improving their English language?) The second part, which included four statements, explores motivation (Do students think that online language learning websites motivate them to improve their English language?). The third part, which included three statements, investigates problems and difficulties (What problems and difficulties do learners encounter when learners use online language learning websites to improve their English Language?)

For statistical purpose, the researchers assigned numerical values to the responses in the following manner:

Strongly agree = 5

Agree = 4

Neutral = 3

Disagree = 2

Strongly disagree = 1

To illustrate the respondents' reactions to each statements, the sum and mean scores were compute. Then, statements of the same arithmetic groups were discussed together. The mean score for item number 1 in the questionnaire, for example, becomes

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Mean} &= (31 \times 5) + (79 \times 4) + (25 \times 3) + (6 \times 2) + (2 \times 1) \\ &= 155 + 316 + 75 + 12 + 2 \\ &= 560 \\ &= 560/143 \\ &= 3.9\end{aligned}$$

The mean score, 3.9, indicates the average number of students' responses to the given statements. The mean scores of the items are above 3.0, which is the neutral point in the scale. It shows that the learners have positive perceptions of using online language learning websites to help them get used to authentic English materials. The same method was applied for the rest of the statements.

Students' response to whether online language learning websites are useful in improving their English Language?

The statements, which have been used to answer this question, were as follows:

1. Online language learning websites help me to get used to authentic English materials.
2. Online language learning websites help me to expand my English skills in comfortable ways because I can access them anytime and anywhere.
3. The online language learning websites help me to improve my achievement in my courses.
4. Online language learning websites are useful to learn a variety of English expressions and vocabulary.

Table (2) Students responses to the first question (a)

The statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Mean	Std. D
1	31	79	25	6	2	143	3.92	.826
2	64	54	14	7	4	143	4.17	.986
3	32	73	30	6	2	143	3.89	.848
4	60	59	19	3	2	143	4.20	.852

As can be seen from table (2), the mean scores of the students to the items are above 3.0, which is the neutral point in the scale. This shows that many EFL students think that OLLWs help improves their English Language.

Students' response to whether online language learning websites motivate them to improve their English language?

The statements, which have been used to answer this question, were as follows:

5. It is fun to use online language learning websites for my English skills.
6. Online language learning websites motivate me to practice English frequently.
7. Online language learning websites motivate me to self-study to improve my English skills.
8. Improving the English language through online language learning websites motivates me to meet my needs.

Table (3) Students responses to the first question (b)

The statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Mean	Std. D
5	41	67	25	7	3	143	3.95	.922
6	42	58	34	8	1	143	3.92	.904
7	44	64	29	3	3	143	4.00	.888
8	25	71	41	4	2	143	3.79	.812

Table (3) shows that the mean scores of the items are above 3.0, which means that students think that online language learning websites motivate them to improve their English language.

As can be seen from the results, it can be concluded that generally, there is evidence of students' positive perceptions towards using OLLWs in improving their language learning.

Students' responses to what problems and difficulties they encounter when using online language learning websites to improve their English Language?

The statements, which have been used to answer this question, were as follows:

9. It isn't easy to download the materials I am interested in.
10. The language used in OLLWs is complicated.

11. Not all websites are free. Many are paid, and the subscription fees are pretty high.

Table (4) Students responses to the second question

The statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Mean	Std. D
9	14	34	39	49	7	143	2.99	1.084
10	7	19	65	13	13	143	2.59	.995
11	57	41	34	10	1	143	4.00	.993

The data presented in table (4) illustrate that the mean scores of two of the statements are less than 3.0, which is the neutral point in the scale. This clearly shows the students do not think these are problems they encounter when using OLLWs to improve their English Language. On the other hand, the mean score of statement 11 is above 3.0, which means that students think that one of the problems they encounter when using OLLWs is that many are paid, and the subscription fees are pretty high. When participants were asked to mention other difficulties in use OLLWs, many mention Internet access. The participants listed other problems. The most frequent ones are:

- It is not easy to decide which online language learning websites suit me
- Difficulty to ask for help if needed-
- Self-commitment

CONCLUSION

This study, which is also a work in progress, has shown that learners have positive perceptions towards using OLLWs in improving their language learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Learners think that these websites are helpful (Arkorf and Abaidoo, 2015; Elkaseh et al., 2016; Vijayavalsalan, 2018). Learners have an internal motivation to use OLLWs to facilitate their learning. These support Kung and Chuo's (2002) finding that learners found learning English via ESL/EFL websites was enjoyable. Learners do not think that the language used in OLLWs is complex, and they do not believe that it is difficult to download the materials they need from these websites. When they were asked to mention other difficulties they encounter when using OLLWs, participants mention choosing the appropriate OLLWs that suit their needs. They also have self-commitment problems. Some of these difficulties, which the participants in this study have mentioned, were reported in Sun (2014) when she attempted to investigate the issues that confronted EFL learners and how they adapted to fully online learning. Sun's results identified six significant difficulties: 1. following the schedule and studying regularly, 2. getting hold of classmates and finding a suitable time to work together, 3. pairing/teaming up and working collaboratively, 4. ensuring constant engagement with the class, 5. keeping self-motivated and being a self-directed learner, and 6. socializing. Learners should ask for help and guidance in choosing the websites that could give them good language learning exercises to maximize their use to improve their command of the language (Aly, 2008 and Zamari et al., 2012).

This research paper investigated students' perceptions of 143 undergraduate students about using OLLWs. The authors have analyzed the qualitative data in the study to understand how students perceive the use of OLLWs for improving their English language skills during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The analysis of students' perception towards OLLWs indicated that it is widely accepted among students. Regarding learning performance, further investigation of the relationship between perceived learning improvement (perception) and motivation (attitude) is required. The researchers recommend that the use of OLLWs can be adopted to enhance students' interaction and learning experiences inside and outside the classroom and during emergencies such as COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Some recommendations are made based on the above findings.

1. Students at the university level should be exposed to different OLLWs under the supervision of their teachers; this will give them opportunities to have the ability to find OLLWs that suits their needs .
2. There is a need for further research (action research) to investigate using OLLWs to improve the English language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

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