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Research Article

E-LEARNING: LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in 2020 to investigate students' attitudes toward e-learning instructions and problems encountered the learners at Nahda College, Sudan. Forty students from second year out of ninety six from English Language Programme were selected. All students had no experience of any type of e-learning before, except this year 2020. A Questionnaire was used to find out answers to research two questions: (a) what are the students' attitudes towards e-learning? and (b) what are the types of problems encountered by the students? Findings revealed that students had positive attitudes towards e-learning, but there were some limitations, such as lack of technology knowledge, inefficient equipment and uncomfortable learning environment at home.

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the recent advent of e-learning to Sudan universities and colleges in 2020. Because of COVID19 pandemic the role of e-learning has become inevitable in learning process. Some colleges in Sudan have taken initiatives to start synchronous learning activities. It was the most right action at the time, instead of waiting for storm to stop; i.e., COVID19 lockdown, those institutes had saved their students' academic year. Although this may be true, it becomes controversial: Is it advisable to continue the education policy that students should study through e-learning? Some students and lecturers are hesitant and they regularly have their complaints against e-learning. But, Hrastinski (2014, p. 52) claims that "Some researchers have expressed concern about the learning outcomes for e-learners, but a review of 355 comparative studies reveals no significant difference in learning outcomes, commonly measured as grades or exam results, between traditional and e-learning modes of delivery."Anyway, some of these institutes continue streaming lectures via synchronous learning/ teaching in Sudan, though the necessary infrastructure to resume face-to-face activities such as halls, projectors, laboratories are available and could be utilized with some health precautions. However, the willingness of the students is important and the developer of synchronous and asynchronous programmes might need the learners' consent to go ahead to apply this system in the academic year 2020/ 2021.

Internationally, many universities and institutes in the world tend to adapt synchronous and asynchronous teaching/ learning method. Meanwhile, the case in Sudan is different. From the COVID2019 experience, some students complained about e-learning and some have even boycotted this method of learning. If universities and colleges in Sudan -where traditional education is deeply engraved- want to continue e-learning, more efforts are needed to convince all stakeholders to accept synchronous and asynchronous learning.

E-learning started as early as at the beginnings of the nineties in Sudan due to the increased number of universities and colleges. Salah *et al* (2015, p. 2) point out that "Some Sudanese universities offer e-learning, such as the Open University of Sudan, which was established in 2002 and the University aims to adopt modern teaching techniques and to provide an outstanding education for those interested in anywhere and anytime."In addition, some external factors, such as conflicts, lack of sufficient number of teachers and distant populated areas have contributed to establishment of e-learning. Therefore, efforts are exerted to support synchronous and asynchronous e-learning in Sudan and some African countries to implement e-learning to close the gap in higher education **(**Alamin and Abed Elgabar2014, p. 1).

The year 2019 imposed an additional experience to all countries because the academic year 2019/2020 was interrupted by COVID19 pandemic lockdown. Though e-learning is completely anew to most of the students in Sudan, some institutes worked hard to avoid time waste. These institutes introduced e-learning as a choice to continue learning/ teaching and so students and lecturers were trained to cope with the new method of education. Both students and lecturers face some problems due to use of e-learning, e.g., technology, bandwidth, and unsociability (distant teachers and colleagues). Park and Bonk (2007, p. 1) found out that "… students felt a need for connecting to others in the course and a sense of social presence." On the other hand Pozgaj *et al* (2014, p., 382) argued that "Traditional face-to-face communication that implicates a strong interaction between a teacher and a student or a group of students and takes place in a classroom at a fixed

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time should be gradually changed."The views of the students where the study was conducted seemed different from Pozgaj's *et al*. It worth mentioning here in June 2020, only 23 (22.7%), out of 101 students attended the free training sessions for synchronous e-learning preparation while others refused. Unfortunately, the proportion remained the same till the end of the courses. This paper bases its argument on the views of students' perspectives.

The Aim of the Study

The study aims at investigating the problems encountered by students in synchronous e-learning and to suggest reasonable solutions to those problems. Also the study aims to find out students' willingness (though infrastructure needed for face-to-face instructions is available in their institutes) to continue e-learning in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the two e-learning methods, synchronous and asynchronous, are new to most of the students in English Programme, some problems have emerged. Redmond *et al* (2014, p. 2) define synchronous e-learning "a real time, instructor-led online learning event where all participants are logged on at the same time and communicate directly with each other."Sufeng (2013, p. 1) defines e-learning as "Virtual classroom refers to courses offered via the internet."Harastinski (2008, p. 51) defines asynchronous as "e-learning, commonly facilitated media such as e-mail ……..supports work relations among learners and with teachers, even when participant cannot be online at the same time". Another definition is quoted from Wagner *et al* (2008, p. 2) that e-learning is "instructional content or learning experience delivered or enabled by electronic technologies". Brandon (2007, p. 9) states that "Synchronous e-Learning goes by a variety of names: virtual classrooms, Web conferences, Webinars, and online presentations, to list just a few of them."

In this research synchronous refers to the live lectures attended by both, lecturers and students. In asynchronous e-learning students learn alone at their pace; i.e., their contact is with materials only while studying. So, since e-learning advent is problem solutions are needed. Universities are found to find solutions related to society occurring from time to time. Paradoxically, now universities have their own problems because of COVID19 lockdown, for example, students are unable to attend lectures and other activities because of COVID19.Thus; now institutes are looking for the alternative and the synchronous e-learning is one of the available solutions.

E-learning Complexity and Motivation

Though synchronous technicians may think interface and accessories seem easy to use, but it is not so for the people who use them for the first time. For students this is a problem. From the researcher's own experience, it needs hours, days and patience to get trained. The instructions of how To utilize the mechanism of software is not easy for students to get start. Some students as well as some professors find difficulty to use simple PowerPoint l*et al*one complicated ones. Students and Lecturers must be skilled in IT, spend more expenses for fast Internet, modern computers or mobile phones. Bigné *et al* (2018, pp. 87 - 105), claims that "… teachers need to have a series of skills related to the command of digital technologies"
Motivation is the core of language learning. Any technology used to enhance learners' education; positive attitudes of those learners should be reviewed. Substitution of traditional education by e-learning or going side by side of both systems (blended learning) depends on the learners' background. Venkatesh *et al* (2016), state that the students are satisfied with lectures where technologies are used. From the researcher's experience motivated students are those who are competent to attend virtual classroom, who know how to log in, who are able to use chat box, who know when to switch on and off mike or web cam. Otherwise, the learners will be demotivated.

Interaction between Students and Lecturers

While teaching the course the researcher noticed that there were many complaints from the students attending lectures; they complained from distracters at home, such as family members, children, telephone calls etc…Some students said that they could not ask questions or contact their tutors so they got bored; especially during the long hours lectures.

Who Is To Decide E-learning?

In colleges and universities many parts are involved in education policy decision making. That is to say stakeholders. Stakeholders include students, lecturers, colleges and universities, technology providers, Ministry of Higher Education, and owners/ employers.

The students are the centre of any educational implementation, instructions, and strategies of teaching or change of syllabi. Lecturers' role is not of less importance than students'. Teachers and students, complement each other to achieve the goal of the course. Without their consent and satisfaction there will hardly be any fruitful learning.

E-Learning Environment

E-learning began as early as in the twentieth century in Sudan; to name a few Omdurman Islamic University and Cairo University (Neelein University today). It was called distance learning and because of lack of technology at that time, learners used books and worksheets. It suited those who had positions who already joined workforce and adults learners. Availability of technology today makes the situation better for distant learners since learners could contact lecturers and other learners in real live time; in synchronous lectures. For those who are accustomed to face-to-face education, e-learning may be unacceptable beside its benefits.

Benefits and Constraints of Technology-based Education

Concerning the benefits of e-learning, it could be mentioned that e-learning has closed the gap in COVID19 lockdown. Stakeholders of the college, where study took place, were quiet satisfied because the college has an alternative plan to avoid the loss of learners' time. Sufeng (2013, p. 1) states that e-learning enhances students' self-studying and encourages introvert learners to use the language.

On the other hand, one of e-learning disadvantages experienced were that: when students attended classes via e-learning, it was noticeable that the students were always anxious before the lectures because they feared failure of power, internet, computer or mobile phones at any time before or during the lecture.

Related Studies

Ramadiani et al (2016) conducted a study to find out about the users' need using e-learning interface, e.g., log in and the following steps to get involved in the process to access a

lecture. The study took three months to gather data from forty seven learners at Mulawarman University. The outcome of the study reveals that the operation and getting involved into the system (log in, communicating with the interface, choosing the correct topics) was the most problematic issue to learners.

Gadera (2014, pp. 93 - 101), investigated students' experience with e-learning in a virtual classroom in a university in New Zealand. The researcher used individual interviews and online observation as tools of the study to find out the effect of synchronous e-learning on the students' participation. The researcher found out that there was no sociability problem because the students could see and hear each other when they presented their topics. The researcher also found out that learners could have discussion live. But sometimes if there was any power or internet deficiency on the specific and allocated lecture time, everything would fail.

Begne (2019, pp. 87 - 105) in a study reviewed virtual classrooms to observe teachers' abilities to use computer, affective and communicative capabilities to achieve students' needs and enhance their engagement. The study was conducted at University of Valencia, Spain. The researcher tries to tackle the following questions after development of virtual classroom in five years' time to find: what skills teachers need to master virtual classrooms, how to apply different learning theories using virtual classrooms, the students' engagement and its prerequisites? The researcher used a comparative methodology by reading sixty seven articles (either abstract or full paper); written on topic of virtual classes between 2013 and 2018. The findings are: it is necessary to continue e-learning in higher education for educators and teachers. Secondly, three factors are crucial in virtual classroom: computer and technology literacy, understanding students' emotions, and regarding verbal and non-verbal communicative from the beginning to end of the lectures. Thirdly, lecturers should follow different teaching theories and methodology in virtual classrooms.

Perveen (2016, pp. 21 - 39) from Virtual University of Pakistan conducted a study to measure e-language learning through Constructivist Theory (learning is constructed not transmitted) approach. Three English courses were selected: English comprehension, Business Communication and Business and Technical English. The data was collected by employing three tools: observation, interview, and questionnaire. About 1025 out of 9919 of the population were involved in the study. The findings indicate that learning language via synchronous is beneficial for the learners. There were some limitations which could be solved by adapting synchronous and asynchronous blended study.

King et al (2017, pp. 4 - 5) interviewed 114 professors from Anglophone and Francophone colleges in Canada. The professors were considered by their students to be excellent in using technology-based teaching. Those professors were self-learning technology users. They used variety of technologies, such as e-mail, assignments, PowerPoint, practice exercises, web links, presentation, and videos. They were all had technical problems in common. The researchers surveyed 337 students, including some immigrant students, to express their likes and dislikes. Data collected by using descriptive statistics, coding and category creation. The findings indicate that 93% of the students were satisfied with their professors who used ITC based-teaching.

METHODOLOGY

Because of COVID19 lock down universities and colleges in Sudan have introduced e-learning (synchronous and asynchronous). This study was conducted in 2020,in a Sudanese College, to answer these questions: (a) what are the students' attitudes towards e-learning? and (b) what are the types of problems encounter the students? The fifteen statements, in the questionnaire, were set to meet needed answers for the questions of the research. The sample of the study was second year, English programme, from the total population. The participants willingly agreed to be involved in the study. The respondents had no previous e-learning experience before the academic year 2019/ 2020.The study is both qualitative and quantitative. A questionnaire was designed and sent to students via internet. The questionnaire comprises two phases: phase one is to evaluate students' attitudes towards synchronous learning. Phase two of the study is about e-learning difficulties encountered students during the three months e-learning courses; from June to August 2020. Likert modified scale (agree/ neutral/ disagree) is used. Data was collected and analysed.

RESULTS, DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

In the present study the researcher used rating scale to examine students' attitudes towards e-learning and the problems encountered them. The first six questions aimed to measure students' attitudes towards e-learning. Questions 6 to 10 were used to assess and find out major obstacles and problems faced students during e-learning instructions.

Table 1 Students' Attitudes Towards E-learning.

No.	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1.	I prefer to attend face-to-face lectures only.	46.4%	18.6%	35%
2.	There is no communication between me and the lecturer during e-learning lecture.	20.3%	13.6%	66.1%
3.	I dislike e-learning because there is no interaction between me and other students during e-learning.	31.4%	15.7%	52.9%
4.	I cannot get my colleagues' help during e-learning lectures.	32%	48%	20%

The table above represents an overview of the students' attitudes towards e-learning in this study. By examining the statement (1), 46.4% of the respondents agreed with *"I prefer to attend face-to-face lectures only."* Meanwhile 35% disagreed. The difference is not too big since this is the first time for this group to attend lectures via synchronous mode. If amendments are made in the future more students who disagreed may be convinced to join e-learning. In addition to that, the 18.6% who were neutral could also be persuaded. Though in face-to-face students have opportunities to interact with both lecturers and their colleagues, statement3 indicates that the lecturers had considerably involved their students to interact. Another important finding was that about 66.1% disagreed with *"There is no communication between me and the lecturer during e-learning lecture."*While 52.9% of the participants disagreed with *"I dislike e-learning because there is no interaction between me and other students during e-learning."*Testing sociability of e-learning among this group of students shows that students did not feel lacking being part of community. A possible explanation for this result is related to the way lectures delivered. Responding to statement 3the informants said that they did not feel loneliness when attending synchronous e-learning activities. However, there are

differences between e-learning and face-to-face lectures, but both have same facilities, such as communication between students, their instructors and colleagues.

Table 2 E-learning Problems

No.	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
6.	It is easy to access e-learning recorded materials.	4.1%	21.9%	74%
7.	Expensive high-speed Internet makes e-learning unaffordable.	45%	40%	15%
8.	Staying for long time working with computer makes e-learning tiresome.	50%	35%	15%
9.	Sometimes home environment is inconvenient to study.	59%	30.8%	10.2%
10.	When I am in the college, the college provides sufficient Wi-Fi to use.	4.1%	18.9%	77%
11.	My lecturers use technology effectively when we need help.	39.5%	46.5%	14%
12.	I can use my mobile or computer well during lectures.	11.5%	29.5%	59%
13.	I always find it difficult to join lectures because of technical problems.	37.8%	35.6%	26.6%
14.	I always face unclear sound and volume during speaking.	7.8%	40.6%	51.6%
15.	My computer and other accessories are adequate to use during e-learning lectures.	34%	12%	54%

The second set of the questions examine the impact of e-learning co-existing problems on learners. Table 2 illustrates ten problems that faced students while they were attending synchronous e-learning lectures from June to September 2020. These problems were the main barriers that inhibit students from attending e-learning fully. Combatting these problems could arouse students' attitudes towards synchronous e-learning.74% of the students disagreed with statement 6 *"It is easy to access e-learning recorded materials."*Asynchronous e-learning is an important part of e-learning; unable to reach those recorded material decreases its function. With regards to Wi-Fi availability in their college, 77% disagreed that *"10. When I am in the college, the college provides sufficient Wi-Fi to use."*The results of the statement obtained about computers and mobile phones, showed that 59% of the students disagreed with *"12. I can use my mobile or computer well during lectures."*Regarding statements 12 with 14 and 15 *"14. I always face unclear sound and volume during speaking."* and *"15. My computer and other accessories are adequate to use during e-learning lectures."* There are some obstacles due to technical literacy, which was one of e-learning problems the researcher experienced during the four months synchronous e-learning courses in the period between June and September 2020. Within the limited knowledge of technology among students, they were asking many questions which needed technicians to answer rather than teachers during the course.

Referring back to the research aims, the researcher has analyzed the results of the study and has come up with the following findings: with respect to the first question: *"To what extent are the students willing to continue e-learning"*, the results indicate that students have positive attitudes towards e-learning. Though 46.4% agreed with the statement *"I prefer to attend face-to-face lectures only."*. Comparing the two results, it can be seen that the difference of the figures between the two statements (46.4% and 35%) is not too big compared.

In order to examine types of difficulties inherent with synchronous e-learning, the findings show many types of problems that encountered the students in statements 6 to 15 (Table 2.). The respondents' answers indicate that there is lack of knowledge as well as technical problems.

In summary, these results of the study contribute to understanding of e-learning problems as well as students' attitudes towards synchronous and asynchronous education.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was undertaken to find out students' attitudes towards e-learning and problems they encountered during e-learning instructions. As stated in **1.1** above, e-learning was recently introduced to Sudan universities and colleges. In 2020 the spread of COVID19 pandemic hastened some college stakeholders to look for alternatives. They introduced the synchronous e-learning as another solution to continue education despite the refusal of some learners who had not experienced this type (online lectures) before. At the end of the course, the researcher designed a questionnaire to find answers to the two questions of the study: (a) what are the students' attitudes towards e-learning? and (b) what are the types of problems encountered by students? Findings revealed that there was no absolute rejection of synchronous e-learning from the learners' point of view. Evidence shows that there are truly, significant problems need immediate intervention. The problems immerged were: ability to access e-learning recorded materials, insufficient technology knowledge, inefficient computers and cell phones, and costive internet.

However, findings imply that the objection of those learners to e-learning could be lessened and they would accept online instructions if the problems are solved. Hence findings suggest that more careful steps to attend the problems by involved *all* stakeholders (see Table 2 above) are needed to improve synchronous e-learning in the future.

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