Challenges of Online Learning on English Language Teaching in Higher Education in Egypt during Covid- 19 Pandemic.

تحديات التعلم عبر الإنترنت في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في التعليم العالي في مصر خلال جائحة كوفيد-١٩.

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Abstract:

COVID -19 pandemic caused unpreceded crisis in all fields through the world. Education has been transferred to online in most of counties throughout the world. This has impacted the education sector in Egypt as throughout the pandemic crisis, universities have been temporarily closed. As a result, the Ministry of Education has opted for online learning or e-learning with the students through technology or devices to facilitate communication in replacing classroom traditional learning. This study aims at investigating the challenges and problems faced by EFL learners in college of education, October 6 university, Egypt, in the second semester of 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. A5 point scale survey-based questionnaire was used. Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyze the responses of 128 students and their reflections. Results showed that the problems that affected the EFL learning during pandemic are caused by social, technical and academic challenges that impacted the online learning of EFL negatively. The study gives some solutions and suggested strategies that can be implemented to overcome these challenges.

Key words: COVID-19 Pandemic, EFL learners, learning challenges, Online learning

Introduction:

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused an unprecedented crisis in all areas. In the field of education, this emergency has led to the sudden transition of face-to-face teaching to online in more than 190 countries in order to prevent the spread of the virus and decrease its impact. According to data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), by mid-May 2020, more than 1.2 billion students at all levels of education worldwide had stopped having face-to-face classes. This has impacted the education sector in Egypt as throughout the pandemic crisis, schools have been temporarily shut down. As a result, the transition to online and e-

learning was the option to facilitate communication with students in replacing the traditional face to face learning. The rapid move to online modes of delivery in order to keep students engaged in learning has caused the staff overloaded with preparing the content and materials and presented hardship to them to adapt to the "new normal" for quite a period of time (Jeanne et al., 2020).

On one hand, several higher education institutions in Egypt have benefited from internet facilities in delivering the learning content either through the formal educational platforms such as, for example, Moodle platform, universities' websites, or through free communication platforms such as Google classroom and Zoom meetings. On the other hand, various faculty members use many social networking sites such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube for an easily communication with their students (Sobaih et al., 2020). Consequently, considerable efforts are devoted to decrease the technology literacy for both students and instructors. In this regard, these higher education institutions have become more aware of the importance of online learning not only to overcome the hardship but also to face the challenges for the future development of the Egyptian higher education in general. The spread of Covid-19 and the closure of schools, however, has resulted in an adoption of technology in the country's education system, as social distancing measures limited nearly all traditional teaching methods. To fulfil the needs of students and improve and develop the quality of higher education, the ministry of higher education has focused on a digital transformation strategy that has seen them direct their funding towards online learning systems projects since 2004 (MCIT, 2009).

Context of the Problem:

Arab countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and United Arab Emirates, have a growing interest in online learning; however, it remains in its initial stages, especially in comparison with Western countries (Adel, 2017). The pandemic of COVID-19 comes across several obstacles concerning online learning in many Arab countries (Lassoued et al., 2020). When it comes to teaching with technology, there are pros and cons to it. Even though it does improve the students' motivation to learn, teachers must also consider the fact that students may be too distracted with the content that they sometimes would not be able to grasp the main ideas of the actual context. Moreover, even with the advancement of technology, there are still some students that are yet to

own their own high-tech devices (Iskandar&Azar2020). Although in the last two decades Egypt made a great effort to improve its education, the quality of education is low. Schools and universities face many challenges. Some of the challenges are the high costs of establishing infrastructure, maintenance, and training in acquiring digital cognitive skills (Zaki 2020). Despite the government's efforts of digitalization but there is still little progress because of the lack of a clear strategy.

Questions of the Study:

In investigating the challenges, students were requested to respond to the following research questions.

- What are the challenges facing EFL learners in learning English during the covid - 19pandemic?
- What are the attitudes of EFL learners towards using online learning?
- What are the strategies that can be implemented in facing these challenges?

Review of Literature:

Effectiveness of E-learning for Teaching English

Several studies referred to the effectiveness of E-learning mode for teaching the English language in Arab universities as indicated by Zakarneh 's (2018) study which revealed that the participants favored English language e-learning and believed e-learning was the best way to gain English language proficiency. This is supported by Khan (2016) who indicated that e-learning could be highly beneficial due to all of the resources available for online classes. Results of several studies indicated that students' attitudes towards the online learning are positive Schmidt &Topaz ,AL-Mubireek (2019) and Yuyun (2013) who identified students' positive attitudes toward the e-language learning program. Moreover, she found that the respondents preferred e-learning to face-to face classroom learning. Other studies indicated that online learning have many advantages to staff related to communication, preparing content and materials and making assessment Allen& Seaman(2010) , Gilbert (2015) Harrison (2020).

Challenges of EFL Online Learning during COVID -19 Pandemic:

Despite the fact that online learning is not new, but the pandemic has shown problems and challenges faced by students and staff as well. Research carried out by Nashruddin and Tanasy (2020) confirmed that some students live in remote rural areas that are not covered by the internet. In addition, their cellular network is sometimes unstable, due to the geographical location which is quite far from the signal coverage. This is also a problem that is faced by many students.

Wang, et al. (2020) described early impacts of the virus including its effect on anxiety and stress, challenges associated with home confinement, and health worries for family and extended family. Among other results, they found that students experienced more stress, anxiety, and depression than nonstudents. Such findings suggest that vulnerable populations such as students may need additional support when facing traumatic challenges such as those brought on by the pandemic. Efreiana (2021) aimed at analyzing online learning difficulties faced by EFL teachers and students, and students' parents during the Covid-19 pandemic and solutions to solve them. Research data sources are collected through textbooks in print or online form, articles from periodical journal websites, law regulations, and other sources which are relevant to the research problem. The data was analyzed qualitatively with an interactive model, covering data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusions. The implementation of the online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in EFL learning, caused various problems for teachers, students, and parents. Another problem is that some students' parents and students do not have computer or android device, as found in research conducted by Wahab and Iskandar (2020). Such condition makes them difficult in facing the reality. The problem is not only in the lack of learning equipment or facilities, but also in the absence of the internet quota. Providing internet quota requires a high cost. This difficulty is faced by many families. They do not have adequate budget to provide the internet network. Even though the internet is available they face difficulty in accessing it because of the remote areas they live. A study conducted by Ahmad (2016) found a phenomenon that EFL learning which requires a lot of practice for its application also experiences obstacles when the learning system is applied. Bao (2020) advocated that a successful online course needs to possess 'an elaborate lesson plan design, teaching

materials such as audio and video contents, and technical support teams.' Nonetheless, the sudden shift to virtual or online teaching created chaos among the teachers and students for the lack of prior knowledge of online classes. Other challenges may include lack of lecturer's confidence and his inability to monitor student's progress. Developing and integrating quality e- learning contents is another challenge faced by lecturers.

Objectives of the Study:

The study aimed at investigating the challenges through students' reflections at October 6 university. The objectives of the study can be stated as follows:

- Identify the challenges facing EFL learners in learning English during the covid -19 pandemic?
- Suggest some strategies and solutions that can make EFL online learning interesting and motivating to learners.
- Measure the attitudes of EFL learners towards using online learning?

Research Methodology:

Participants:

Participants of the study are English language learners in English major at college of Education, October 6 university, Egypt. The sample comprised 128 students :80 females and 48 males. They did not take any online courses before the pandemic. Most of them do not have any experience with online learning.

Instrument:

To answer the research questions, an online survey-based questionnaire was developed and formatted for students (see survey in Appendix 1.) The survey was completed by 128 students. Five-point Likert scales were used. The Likert-scale data was examined using analysis of variance and linear regression by SPSS. The survey-based questionnaire contains 17 multiple questions (yes/no and multiple choice) which covered the study's objectives. It was designed via Google Forms and a Qualtrics link sent to students using their e -mails and WhatsApp groups at the end of the 2nd semester 2021. The questionnaire consists of four different parts; The first part includes questions about demographic information as gender, place of residence and level of language. The second

part includes social challenges. The third part includes technical challenges, and the fourth part includes academic challenges. The questionnaire was prepared in the light of review of literature and was judged by a jury to be validated. Some modifications were done according to the suggestions provided by the jury and the questionnaire was used by its final form.

Results and Discussion:

Quantitative Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1.

 Data Analysis of Students' Responses

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Descriptive Statistics					
My gender	127	1.00	12.00	1.6063	1.05528
My age	127	1.00	3.00	1.8583	.76350
My level in English is	127	1.00	3.00	2.1969	.72418
I live in a	127	1.00	2.00	1.5827	.49507
My university gave me orientation in using platforms before applying e-learning.	127	1.00	5.00	4.0630	.95741
I have difficulty in having adequate budget to have a network.	127	1.00	5.00	2.5669	1.63586
I have difficulty in accessing the network.	127	1.00	22.00	2.3937	2.10124
I live in rural areas that are not covered by internet.	127	1.00	5.00	2.5748	1.50933
The cellular network is sometimes unstable.	127	1.00	5.00	2.1024	1.19413

I join online classes just for filling attendance.	126	1.00	4.00	2.5079	1.15062
I leave the online class to do other activities without being controlled by the teacher.	127	1.00	5.00	2.2047	1.26829
I think e- learning is effective in listening sessions.	127	1.00	12.00	3.3701	1.64173
I think e- learning is ineffective in speaking sessions.	127	1.00	5.00	2.0787	1.20585
I face difficulty in online writing classes.	127	1.00	5.00	2.0236	1.01156
I find difficulty in asking the teacher and getting immediate feedback.	127	1.00	5.00	2.3780	1.43056
I am fully active from the beginning to the end of the online class.	127	1.00	5.00	3.5827	1.43892
Valid N (listwise)	126				

The first question of the study was about the challenges that students face in their learning.

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistical analysis of the study. It is noticed that the highest scores of all the statistical measures (Mean, Standard Deviation, Sample Variance, Kurtosis, Skewness, and Confidence Level (95.0%)) are listed in the challenges and related online issues in online English language learning during the pandemic. The mean score is 3.38 in the challenge's variable whereas other challenges the mean score is less than one. That means the challenges negatively influenced EFL online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 1 shows the distribution of students' place of residence. As shown, most of students live in towns and rural areas that suffer from sever technical problems. This

affects negatively on students' learning process and maximizes the loads for the university.

Figure 1 .

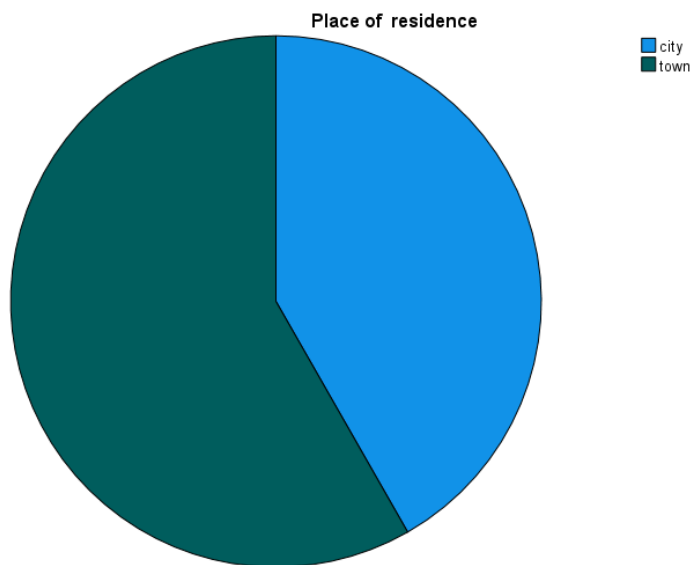Sample place of residence distribution

Place of residence

Table 2.

Learners' responses against orientation

		My university gave me orientation in using platforms before applying e-learning.			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	2	1.6	1.6	1.6
	Agree	11	8.6	8.7	10.2
	Unsure	9	7.0	7.1	17.3
	Disagree	60	46.9	47.2	64.6
	strongly disagree	45	35.2	35.4	100.0
	Total	127	99.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.8		
Total		128	100.0		

As shown in table 2, the number of respondents is 128. In item *My university gave me orientation in using platforms before applying e-learning*. 2 choose strongly agree (1.6%) 11 agree (8.6) ,9 unsure (7.0%) ,60 disagree (46.9%), 45 strongly disagree (35.2%). The transition to the e- learning was sudden and covid-19 was not preceded by proper preparation or training for students to use the platforms. The untrained students are one main problem as they found themselves suddenly facing the situation that obliged them to learn online. This refers to the technical challenges. The transition from traditional learning system to on -line system happened suddenly as the pandemic was sudden and unexpected. Many students did not have the IT skills and were not ready for online, so it was difficult for them to cope with the situation. They were not familiar with platforms as Edmodo, zoom and teams that were used to keep the learning process running. Other challenges include slow internet and difficulties in accessing it

Figure 2.

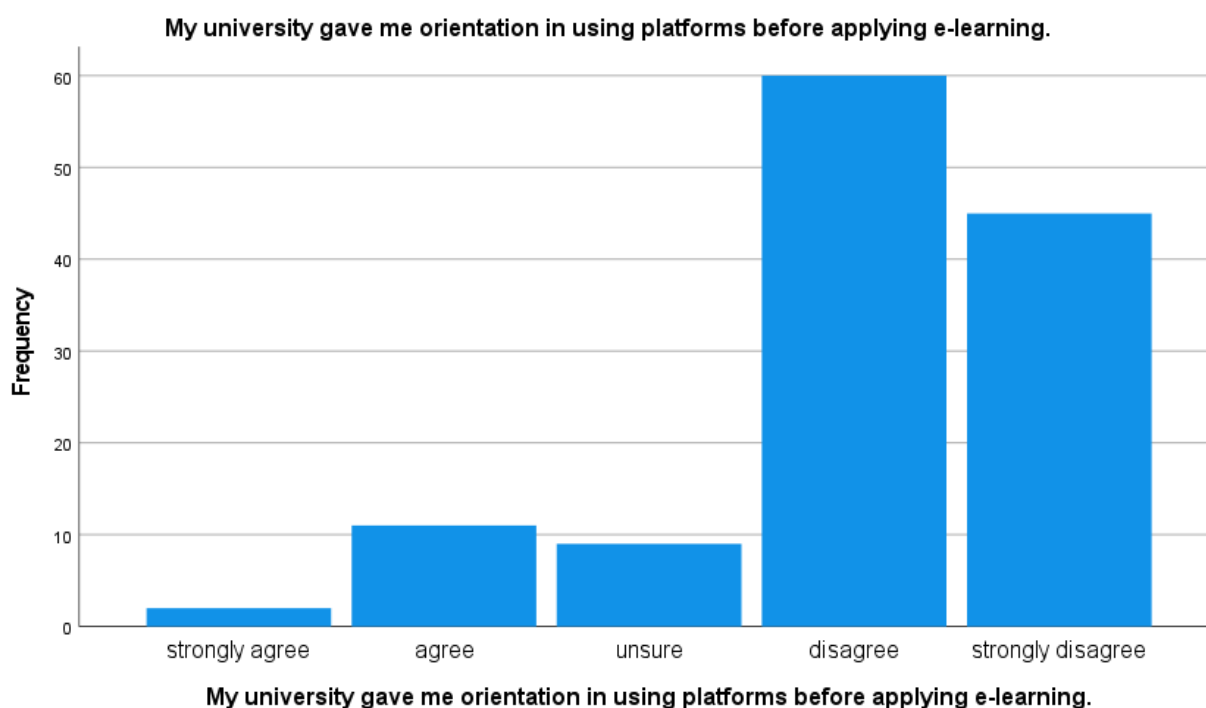Frequency of learners' responses against their orientation

Table 3 .

Learners' responses against social challenges

I have difficulty in having adequate budget to have a network.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	45	35.2	35.4	35.4
	Agree	38	29.7	29.9	65.4
	Unsure	6	4.7	4.7	70.1
	Disagree	3	2.3	2.4	72.4
	strongly disagree	35	27.3	27.6	100.0
	Total	127	99.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.8		
Total		128	100.0		

As shown in table 3, Item *I have difficulty in having adequate budget to have a network.* 45 choose strongly agree (35.2%) 38 choose agree(29.7%) , 6 choose unsure(4.7%) , 3 choose disagree (2.3%), 35 choose strongly agree (27.3%).

Figure 3.

Frequency of learners' responses against social challenges

I have difficulty in having adequate budget to have a network.
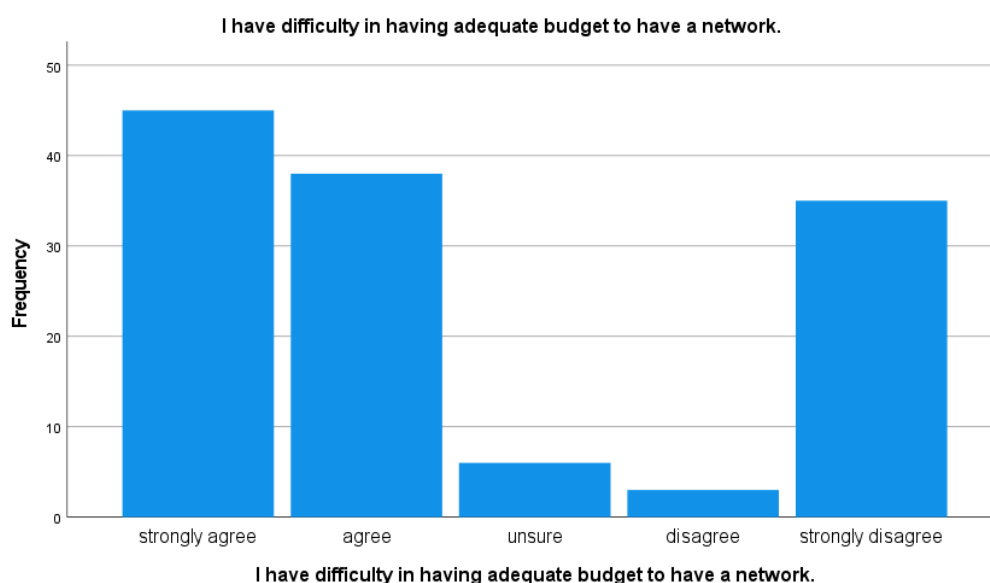
One of the social challenges and problems faced by students in learning online is that some students live in rural areas that are not covered by the internet. The instability of cellular network and the areas where they live sometimes are far from the internet coverage. The pandemic caused challenges for families by overloading them with internet costs especially those of middle and low class. They were also overloaded with extra funds of extra laptops or smart phones for each student. The IT illiteracy of many parents made the situation more difficult as they could not help them in solving the problems.

Table 4.

Learners' responses against academic challenges

I think e- learning is effective in listening sessions.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	19	14.8	15.0	15.0
	Agree	31	24.2	24.4	39.4
	Disagree	45	35.2	35.4	74.8
	strongly disagree	31	24.2	24.4	99.2
	12.00	1	.8	.8	100.0
	Total	127	99.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.8		
Total		128	100.0		

The second question was about students' attitudes towards using online learning.

As shown in table 4, item no *I think e- learning is effective in listening sessions* The received responses are,19 choose strongly agree (19%) , 31 agree(24.2) ,45 disagree (35.2),31 strongly disagree (24.2).This refers to the academic challenges .In listening session, for instance, the ICT equipment used by teachers to train students who are in separate and distant places is often ineffective. Teachers also cannot maximally supervise students when giving listening exams. Integrating technology can be effective and make

listening classes interesting if employed and applied properly as e--learning gave teachers chances to use audio and authentic materials that are difficult to be applied in traditional classes. In speaking course with the distance or online learning, students also find problems in imitating the way of speaking exemplified by their teacher. The teacher also cannot optimally train students to speak. The difficulty of control and virtual class management makes the situation harder. Some students joined the class then left thinking that teacher cannot notice. Results related to language skills show that content of materials was not comprehensible to many students. All materials were e- books and power point slides. Students face difficulties in understanding, and many used to contact their teacher for explanation. Lack of enthusiasm of students is another problem. They are motivated and enthusiastic only when the lesson is accompanied by quizzes or assignments. They cannot receive lesson materials and assignments delivered by teachers via the internet network. In addition, the duration of online learning that has been going on for months has caused students bored and lazy. They were inactive because of the lack of activities and discussion. This is caused by the absence of a discussion forum menu in the application used. Even if the menu exists, many students do not use it well. Results showed that, despite the multiplicity of strategies to reform the educational system, achievements and outcomes of educational processes are modest, and the developmental status of Egypt is lower than that of other countries. Studying educational outcomes indicated that school-education suffered from the predominance of quantity over quality and a serious inability to meet requirements of new knowledge era.

But although earlier technological infrastructure may help October 6 university adapt to blended learning, the role of teachers, in using those resources is even more important. The pandemic has once again confirmed that the teacher is at the core.

Solutions and Suggested Strategies:

The third question was about the solutions and strategies that can be implemented. Some effective strategies can be implemented to overcome the online learning problems during Covid-19 Pandemic

1. Regarding academic challenges, materials should be prepared in more interesting ways that attract students' interest and attention. Authentic audio or video materials

can be added to the lectures. Varied activities should be used though the online lectures to make students active and attentive all the class time.

2. Concerning the technical challenges and IT problems, more opportunities should be offered to students to train them through training sessions inside and outside their universities. Motivating them to improve their IT mastery by self-learning also is required.

3. Guidance should be offered by the staff members for students and their families who cannot afford the internet budget or the costs of laptops. They can identify those students and give counselling to them. Departments of social solidarity at universities should be funded by the university or by accepting donations to help those students.

4. Blended learning strategy that combines face to face teaching with remote learning from home should be adopted

5. Preparing different learning materials that can be available to students all the time even without connectivity.

6. Increasing funding for infrastructure.

7. A new, computer-based course focused on the 21 st century skills is conditioned for student's graduation.

Conclusion:

The study aims at investigating the challenges faced by EFL learners during the Covid-19 pandemic. The online system solved some of the education problems during the quarantine, but it was not effective in learning EFL. The study found that students suffered from social challenges in their families' inability to offer the budgets for internet and laptops and from technical problems in the absence of IT mastery and their unpreparedness. The instability of internet inside and outside the university made the situation worst. The online system was not effective in listening and speaking classes and affects negatively in the students' performance.

Using technology in teaching and learning English facilitate the role of teachers and cannot replace his position or be a substitute for him. Education reform in Egypt needs employing a comprehensive technology strategy as concluded by (Zaki 2020). Appendix 1

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