A Case Study Of Online Learning Strategies And Influencing Factors For EFL Learners In The Context Of The COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Language learning strategies (LLSs) in EFL classes are influenced by learners' personal differences besides some other environmental and contextual factors. The sudden shift to a totally online learning environment during the Covid-19 lockdown forced students to adapt to a new method of instruction. In order to align with a new educational approaches and methods, they had to compromise their learning strategies. This research intends to explore the learning strategies used by Saudi post-graduate learners, to identify the factors affecting their choice of online learning strategies. The findings show that the degree of learning strategies and factors differed from participant to participant. The responses provided by the participants reveal that their online learning strategies and factors were influenced by the resources at their disposal, their interactions with teachers and peers, and the Department's policies, rules, and regulations for online learning. According to the participants responses, the factors were found to be highly influenced by the pandemic, especially the quality of learning experience, interaction, and flexibility.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, online learning, COVID-19, lockdown, EFL Learners.

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has enforced universities, colleges, and schools to completely terminate face-to-face teaching and learning. Online or remote learning is the only solution to continue the teaching and learning process in such a difficult time. The sudden and unexpected transition from face-to-face to online learning during coronavirus pandemic lockdown had its impact on the educational arena. According to the current and upcoming circumstances, it appears that the online teaching mode will continue to be an important element of education in the post-Covid-19 era. Learning strategies in regular classes may differ from those in online learning. In regular classes, EFL learners may be used to taking notes in a lecture and being engaged in face-to-face discussions with the teacher. However, in online learning, the absence of physical interaction with the teacher and another peer may force learners to follow different strategies to learn.

The unexpected adjustment to a new learning environment has forced students to implement different strategies and styles of learning. Since there has been little known about the learning strategies adopted by Saudi EFL postgraduates it is important to investigate this case and to shed light on the factors influencing the use of these strategies. Learning, according to Lantolf, et al, is a social process during which the development of cognition takes place through learners' interaction with others socially and culturally [10].

Literature Review

The unexpected choice to execute completely remote teaching and learning framework was a big challenge for teachers and educationists who needed to figure out which learning strategies, online media, synchronous and asynchronous tools, and other computerized assets would be utilized to ensure effective guidance for the English language students. Students have been facing several challenges related to the study during this lockdown period, for example, management of time, instruments, information protection, and security, and most importantly poor internet accessibility. The majority of learners have been using android cell for gaining e-learning. They have also been facing different issues related to anxiety, depression, and an ominous study environment at their places. Learners from distant regions and remote areas mostly face great challenges for online learning during this crisis period.

The research has focused on learning strategies in ESL and EFL contexts. Dreyer & Oxford, Green & Oxford, Kyungsim & Leavell have reported a positive relationship between the frequent use of the strategy and successful learning [5, 6, 9]. Wong and Nunan reported that these strategies help learners become more effective in classes and foster more progress in mastering the target language [15]. Beaudoin et al. mentioned several critical factors characterizing successful online learning [1]. These factors include self-motivation, time management, ability to learn with restricted support, ability to tackle unstructured settings and relationships with peers.

Dhawan, S. stated that the sudden outbreak of a deadly disease called Covid-19 caused by a Corona Virus shook the entire world. The present circumstance challenged the education system across the world and forced educators to move to an online mode of teaching overnight. He also describes the importance of online learning and challenges, analysis of e-learning modes in the time of pandemic and includes suggestions for educational institutions on how to cope with challenges faced by online learning [4].

Dawadi, S., et.al. studied the effect of COVID-19 on the Nepal education system, with an attention to school education. They suggest that the challenges it has been experiencing in the advent of Covid-19 are primarily due to its faulty implementation strategies and inability to implement teaching plans [5].

The research on the impact of using learning strategies has proved that learning strategies can be highly effective in EFL contexts (Bidabadi and Yamat; Ghofournia) [2, 7]. Some researchers have suggested that high-achieving learners apply different behavioural strategies that may lead them to achieve good results while others fail to attain any progress in learning. Steinkamp suggested many learners suffer and some might be delayed or give up on their online education due to the lack of organization, arrangement, and self-monitoring skills [14].

Learning strategies are classified differently. Rubin identified two types of learning strategies:

(A) Cognitive learning strategies: These include: (i) Clarification or verification, (ii) Guessing or inductive inferring, (iii) Deductive reasoning, (iv) Practice, (v), Memorization, and (vi). Monitoring.

(B) Metacognitive learning strategies: These are used to manage, adjust, or self-direct language learning [13].

Oxford identified three direct and three indirect strategy types. Direct strategies that are related to language use include memory, cognitive and compensatory strategies. Indirect strategies comprise metacognitive, affective, and social strategies [12]. However, Beltrán classified learning strategies into four categories: (1) support strategies which include motivation, attitudes, and affect, (2) processing strategies, which include selection,

organization, and processing, and (3) knowledge personalization strategies which include creative and critical thinking recovery and transfer strategies [3].

Recently, Oxford & Griffith modified categories of strategy and developed a model that included four different strategy categories. These are: cognitive, affective, and sociocultural-interactive and a master category [11].

On the other hand, Hilles & Sutton suggested that there are other factors that influence learners' selection of the strategies of learning. These are defined as specific learners' habitual performances. [8].

Althunibat, et. al. (2021) in their study assessed a model called Information System Success (ISS), which advocated the significance of educational environmental factors in boosting the quality of mobile learning systems. On how to enhance the real usage of mobile learning systems, it provides helpful recommendations. The findings of their study further demonstrated that factors affecting quality and the educational environment are essential to the success of mobile learning systems and that factors affecting mobile learning quality alone cannot guarantee mobile learning's positive contribution to the actual use of mobile learning systems.[16]

Alzahrani, L., & Seth, K. P. (2021). Factors influencing students' satisfaction with continuous use of learning management systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. They discovered that, during the pandemic, students' satisfaction was significantly impacted by information quality and self-efficacy but not by service quality.[17]

Since there has been little research investigating learning strategies used by Saudi EFL learners in general and post-graduate students in particular, this study tries to explore the learning strategies used by Saudi master students during coronavirus lockdown. The

study's findings shed light on the factors influenced by learning strategies and show how EFL students can modify their behaviour to fit into new online context.

Research Questions

- What are the new learning strategies used by EFL learners in online learning?
- What are the factors affecting the choice of learning strategies in online learning?

Research Methodology

This research was conducted using a survey amongst a group of post-graduate students enrolled in two master programs: Applied linguistics and TESOL programs at the College of Languages and Translation- Najran University. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods is used to collect information. Quantitative data in the form of a questionnaire was conducted online using Google form to avoid any face-to-face Coronavirus infection. Learners were asked to rate each item according to how strongly they agreed from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Also, interviews utilizing WhatsApp and Bb forums were used to gather information about the factors affecting both modes of learning; namely face to face and online learning.

Data Collection Instrument

Quantitative data in the form of a questionnaire was conducted online using Google form consist of the following:

- The demographic characteristics of students participating in the study,
- Learning strategies in online education,
- Factors influencing learning strategies

Data Analysis

The present study was conducted after completing the online master courses during the covid-19 pandemic. The data contains editing, classifying, and tabulating the statistics which

was collected from the postgraduate students of the Department of English, college of languages and translation, Najran University, Najran, Saudi Arabia. This research explored participants' e-learning learning experience in during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, we recognized the extent of factors that participants experienced, what the Covid-19 pandemic meant for their e-learning experience, and the strategies that they used to face these challenges.

Participants

The data for the analysis was collected from the two post-graduate clusters of students registered in MA Applied Linguistics and MA in TESOL at the Department of English,

College of Languages and Translation, Najran University, Najran, Saudi Arabia. These students had already completed their masters' program during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Results

The questionnaire was distributed to 80 participants, out of them only 63 i.e., 52.38% female and 47.62% male students offered to respond to the questionnaire specially prepared for collecting data for this research. Consequently, the researchers took only 63 students as the participants of the study. Very few students already have previous experience of online learning. The details of the participants are given in table no. 1 below:

Table 1 Participants' Demographic Characteristics (Item 1-10)

Participants	Gender		College	Age			Urban/Rural	
	Male	Female	College of Languages	18-20	21-25	above 25	Urban	Rural
63 Students	**47.62%**	**52.38%**	**100%**	**0%**	**40.60%**	**59.40%**	**66.80%**	**33.20%**

Graph No. 1
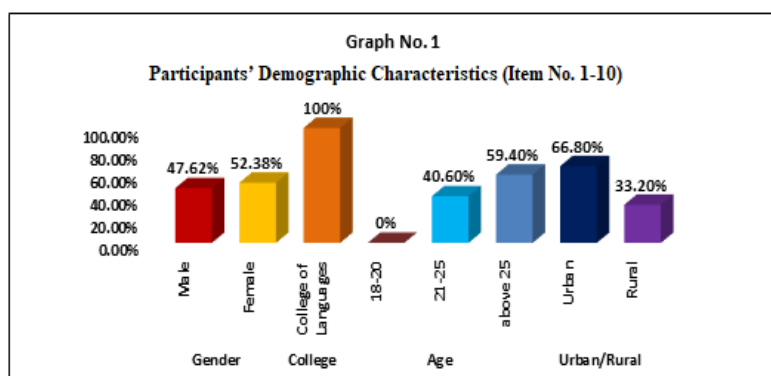Participants' Demographic Characteristics (Item No. 1-10)

Table and graph 1: Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Table and graph 1 display participants' responses to the questionnaire items related to the Demographic Characteristics of Students Participating in the Study from item no.1-4. Item (1) "Gender" shows that there are 52.38% female and 47.62% male. Item (2) "college" shows that all the participants who have been

included in this study are from the College of Languages and Translation. Item (3) "age" describes the age of the participants. There is not a single student in the age group of 18-20, 40.60% are in the age of 21-25 while 59.40% of them are above 25 years of age. The next item of this table "Unban/Rural" tells us that the majority of the students i.e. 66.80% belong to urban areas whereas 33.22% belong to rural areas.

Table 2 Learning Strategies in Online Education (Item 11-20)

Sl. No.	Questions	Never		Rarely		Occasionally		Sometimes		Always	
		No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent%
1	Q.11	2	3.17	0	0.00	12	19.05	22	34.92	27	42.86
2	Q.12	1	1.59	9	14.29	14	22.22	19	30.16	20	31.75
3	Q.13	0	0.00	1	1.59	11	17.46	26	41.27	25	39.68
4	Q.14	0	0.00	4	6.35	10	15.87	26	41.27	23	36.51
5	Q.15	0	0.00	4	6.35	12	19.05	23	36.51	24	38.10
6	Q.16	1	1.59	3	4.76	15	23.81	24	38.10	20	31.75
7	Q.17	1	1.59	6	9.52	14	22.22	23	36.51	19	30.16
8	Q.18	0	0.00	7	11.11	19	30.16	22	34.92	15	23.81
9	Q.19	1	1.59	4	6.35	15	23.81	20	31.75	23	36.51
10	Q.20	0	0.00	2	3.17	11	17.46	23	36.51	27	42.86
Average		**0.60**	**0.95**	**4.00**	**6.35**	**13.30**	**21.11**	**22.80**	**36.19**	**22.30**	**35.40**
Standard Deviation		**0.70**	**1.11**	**2.75**	**4.36**	**2.67**	**4.24**	**2.25**	**3.57**	**3.80**	**6.03**
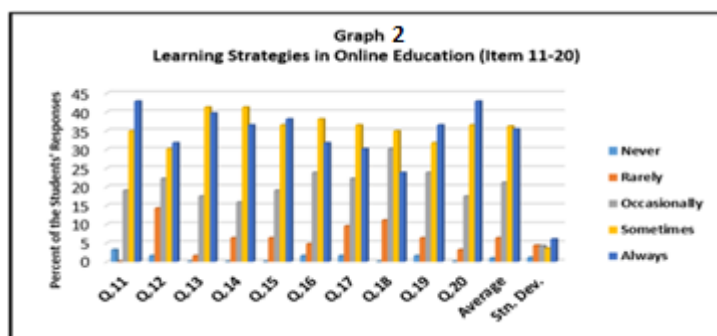
Graph 2: Learning strategies in online education

Based on the data given in table and graph 2, it has been observed that the average (36.51%) of the participants always used learning strategies mentioned in the said graph. Further, it was reported that (38.37%) participants sometimes used strategies in online education which was the highest percentage in the graph and was considered as a positive response. On the other hand, (19.3%) of them reported that they occasionally used these strategies while (2.3%) and (0.70%) of them further observed that they rarely or never used the strategies given in the questionnaire respectively which was considered as negative. We noticed that the majority of the participants used strategies in online education but there was no uniformity in their answers as shown in graph 2.

Table 3 Learning Strategies in Online Education (Item 21-32)

Sl. No.	Questions	Never		Rarely		Occasionally		Sometimes		Always	
		No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent%
1	Q.21	1	1.59	6	9.52	17	26.98	18	28.57	21	33.33
2	Q.22	1	1.59	3	4.76	14	22.22	23	36.51	22	34.92
3	Q.23	0	0.00	0	0.00	14	22.22	25	39.68	24	38.10
4	Q.24	0	0.00	0	0.00	17	26.98	24	38.10	22	34.92
5	Q.25	1	1.59	3	4.76	15	23.81	18	20.00	26	41.27
6	Q.26	0	0.00	1	2.00	16	25.40	17	26.98	29	46.03
7	Q.27	0	0.00	1	1.59	10	15.87	24	38.10	28	44.44
8	Q.28	0	0.00	1	1.59	10	15.87	27	42.86	25	39.68
9	Q.29	0	0.00	2	3.17	19	30.16	20	31.75	22	34.92
10	Q.30	1	1.59	1	1.59	19	30.16	22	34.92	20	31.75
11	Q.31	0	0.00	1	1.59	14	22.22	24	38.10	24	38.10
12	Q.32	0	0.00	1	1.59	14	22.22	19	30.16	29	46.03
Average		**0.40**	**0.63**	**1.80**	**2.90**	**15.10**	**23.97**	**21.80**	**33.75**	**23.90**	**37.94**
Standard Deviation		**0.52**	**0.82**	**1.81**	**2.86**	**3.21**	**5.10**	**3.39**	**6.92**	**3.03**	**4.82**

Graph 3
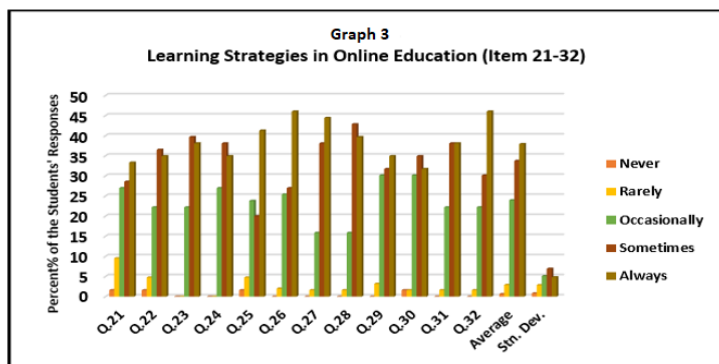Learning Strategies in Online Education (Item 21-32)

Table and graph 3: Learning strategies in online

Table and Graph 3 also display the "learning strategies in online Education from (item 21-32). The elucidation based on the table and graph No. 3 is as follows: It was noticed that the majority of the participants (40.80%) always used learning strategies mentioned in the above graph. Further, it was also observed that (35.94%) of participants used sometimes, (20.08%) of them reported that they occasionally used these strategies. On the other hand (2.54%) and (0.63%) of them rarely and never used the strategies given in section "C" respectively. However, we discerned that there was no uniformity in their answers to the questions asked. In line with the exposure of the findings, we noticed that most of the participants used strategies in online education e.g. "ask yourself questions", metacognitive strategies like "arranging and planning learning", problem-solving strategy", "graded assignments" and makeup plan strategies.

Table 4 Factors Influence Learning Strategies (Item 33-41)

Sl. No.	Questions	Never		Rarely		Occasionally		Sometimes		Always	
		No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent%	No. of Responses	Percent %	No. of Responses	Percent %	No. of Responses	Percent %
1	Q.33	0	0.00	0	0.00	18	28.57	27	42.86	18	28.57
2	Q.34	0	0.00	2	3.17	14	22.22	25	39.68	22	34.92
3	Q.35	0	0.00	1	1.59	17	26.98	25	39.68	20	31.75
4	Q.36	1	1.59	9	14.29	14	22.22	24	38.10	15	23.81
5	Q.37	1	1.59	9	14.29	12	18.00	28	20.00	13	20.63
6	Q.38	2	3.17	3	4.76	20	31.75	22	29.00	16	25.40
7	Q.39	1	1.59	7	11.11	12	19.05	27	42.86	16	25.40
8	Q.40	1	1.59	0	0.00	27	42.86	19	30.16	16	25.40

9	Q.41	1	1.59	6	9.52	13	20.63	23	36.51	20	31.75
Average		**0.78**	**1.23**	**4.11**	**6.53**	**16.33**	**25.81**	**24.44**	**35.43**	**17.33**	**27.51**
Standard Deviation		**0.67**	**1.06**	**3.69**	**5.86**	**4.87**	**7.86**	**2.83**	**7.60**	**2.87**	**4.56**

Graph 4
Factors Influence Learning Strategies (Item 33-41)
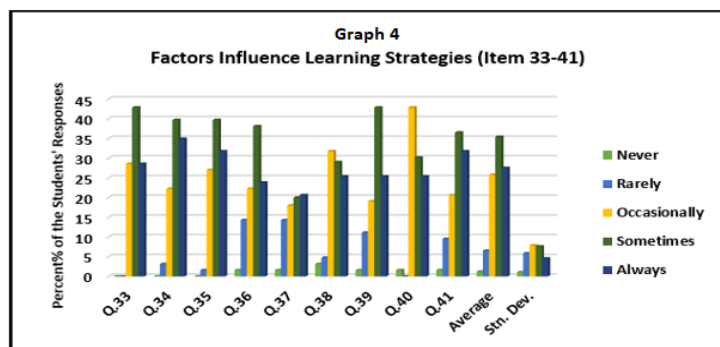
Table and graph 4: Factors influencing learning Strategies item

In Table and Graph 4, the findings discovered that (43.15%) participants agreed that many factors influenced learning strategies. (24.03%) strongly agreed and (25.58%) neither agreed nor disagreed with item no. 33-41. The remaining (5.94%) and (1.29%) participants disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. These findings confirmed that most of the participants agreed and strongly agreed that many factors influence the learning strategies such as syllabus designing, technical support, styles, lack of organization, course designing, learning styles, self-monitoring skills, incongruous administrative support, and time management.

Table 5 Showing the experience of attending online lectures during the lockdown period

Sl. No.	Likert Scale	No. of Responses	Percentage%
42.	Very Poor	2	3.17
	Poor	4	6.35
	Good	10	15.87
	Very Good	17	26.98
	Excellent	30	47.62
Average		**12.6**	**20**
Standard Deviation		**11.35**	**18.01**

Graph 5
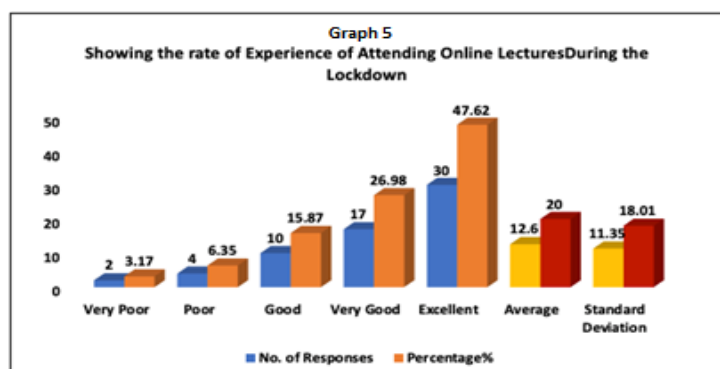Showing the rate of Experience of Attending Online LecturesDuring the Lockdown

Table and graph 5: Part F: Experience of attending online lectures

Table and Graph 5 display item No. 42 of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to rate their experience of attending online lectures during the lockdown period. The order of ranking to those 5 listed scales was (55.8%) of the participants considered the option (e) "excellent" as the 1st rank of all. (25.6%) of them considered option (b) "very good" as the 2nd rank, 11.6% of the participants gave the 3rd rank to the option (d) "good", another 4.7% and 2.3% of them felt that the option (d) "poor" and (e) "very poor" as the 4th and 5th rank respectively. Based on the above table and graph no. 8, the majority of the participants recounted their experience of attending online lectures during lockdown period were "excellent" and "Very Good", whereas a very small number of participants have chosen options (d) and (e) as a negative response.

In the light of the last essay type question No. 42, most of the students like online learning rather than F2F learning because digital learning gives students benefits of more comfort, saving time, giving more assets, available from anyplace and cost bearing.

Around 38 out of 43 students expressed their views with regards to the difficulties/challenges they faced in e-learning during the pandemic lockdown. There were different types of challenges, issues, and difficulties that students had mentioned against the answer of this question such as ten students mentioned that "Technical issues, internet, wi-fi, and computer literacy were the main challenges as the whole online teaching and learning process is based on these digital items. The students' comments include:

- a. "technical issues."
- b. "time management,
- c. self-motivation."
- d. Internet connection difficulty
- e. Management of internet traffic is very well managed.

- f. "It is big task to be connected to the internet without any hindrance."
- g. "E-Connection"
- h. "The Internet"
- i. "Slow Internet Connection"

Two students reported that "time constraints" and "personal speaking difficulties" were other difficulties they faced. The following are the pupils' responses: writing issue."

- a. Exams time is not enough
- b. Two students identified "problem of time management" and "self-motivation problem"

7 students mentioned that the "blackboard problem in writing exams and midterms is a major issue in online learning.

- a. Dealing with the Blackboard while writing midterm or final exam is a major challenge.
- b. "Lack of organization & Blackboard"
- c. "Technical difficulties with learning platforms. Unlike other platforms, Blackboard."
- d. "The use of BB"

One student complained that the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown makes it difficult to type slowly while writing tests. Student's comment includes…
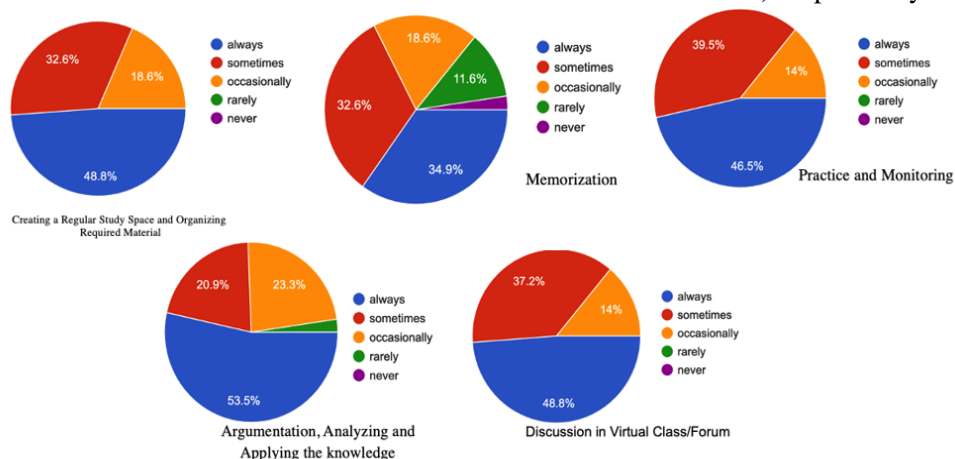
- a. "Typing speed is slow to answers."

A few participants stated only "nothing," while others simply mentioned, " there are no issues or problems." regarding the COVID-19 epidemic. The remarks include "... "

- a. Besides this, I believe that online learning for Female master's students is the only viable option since actual classes on campus are also conducted via the network and not face-to-face."
- b. I could contact all my teachers and receive effective feedback at any time
- c. "There is no.", "Nothing", No Problem"

All of the above difficulties and issues have answers listed below under the section "Discission and Conclusion."

Discussion and Conclusions:

This study's aim was to identify the strategies that students used to overcome the various online learning issues they experienced. Table No. 2 affirms that the most commonly used strategies used by participants were 48.8%

"creating a regular study space and organizing required material", 34.9% "memorization" 46.5% "practice and monitoring." Surprisingly the highest two strategies were also the most constantly used concerning different challenges. However, looking closely at each of the twenty-two strategies, the most frequently used strategy was "critical thinking in writing" and discussion in virtual class/forum" (53.5% and 46.5%) respectively.

Creating a Regular Study Space and Organizing Required Material

Memorization

Practice and Monitoring

Argumentation, Analyzing and Applying the knowledge

Discussion in Virtual Class/Forum

In addition, the current study identified the factors that influenced learning strategies. The findings indicate that majority of the participants agreed that many factors influenced learning strategies for instance syllabus designing, technical support, lack of organization, course designing, self-monitoring skills, incongruous administrative support, and time management. Very few participants disagreed and strongly disagreed that no factors influenced the learning strategies during the lockdown period.

Also, the present study was to bring out the factors that influenced participants in an online-based learning situation and what the pandemic meant for their e-learning experience. The outcomes discovered were that the online learning challenges of participants varied in terms of type and extent. Depending on the responses given by the participants, their challenges were also found to be intensified by the pandemic, especially in terms of quality of learning experience, mental health, interaction, and flexibility. The present research has accomplished their findings on the pedagogical,

technological, and psychosocial online learning challenges that students experienced within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall outcomes indicate that the extent of factors and strategies varied from one participant to another. Participants' responses show that their online learning challenges and strategies were refereed by the resources available to them, their interaction with their teachers and peers, and the Department's existing policies, rules, and regulations for online learning. During the period of the pandemic, the enforced lockdown intensified the challenges that the learners experienced.

Suggestions and Recommendations

In order to learn effectively, students should ensure to have a high-speed internet connection at home and receive technical assistance from the IT Department.

IT training should be provided to all the students and teachers who are not familiar with e-tools that can be helpful for them to solve technical issues.

In e-learning, time management is a crucial issue. Students should recognize the factors, such as distractions and multitasking, that have an impact on their timing when participating in online learning. The most effective way for EFL students to control their time is to manage it according to a daily timetable that has previously been set up.

One of the difficulties of taking online classes is maintaining one's own motivation. Keeping in touch with teachers and fellow students will help students stay motivated. They ought to exchange knowledge and talk about the subjects they have already studied. Students must sign in each day, attend all lectures, and maintain interest.

The problem of setting up a good space is particularly difficult in large families. In order to avoid disruptions that would impair learning during the pandemic, every student's house should have a suitable location for participating in online lectures and conversations. To prevent damage, students should establish a good study space in their houses.

Course and curriculum design is one of the most crucial considerations during Covid-19 pandemic. For students to better understand the course materials, the course designer should alter the activities and assessments. The curriculum should be condensed for the lockdown period compared to the regular period.

Privacy is a topic that comes up whenever we discuss the internet or social media. The privacy issue has always been a very difficult one to deal with. When using programs and e-tools with others, our security is always at risk. However, students can lower the risk by avoiding dubious apps, questionable connections, etc. Unknown texts, emails, and unfamiliar links shouldn't be opened. EFL learners are encouraged to regularly update their e-tools.

The tasks and assignments that students receive from their individual teachers should be their main attention, and they should be finished on time. They should constantly use self-management techniques to stay on top of what they are doing.

A sudden change from F2F learning to completely online learning is one of the challenges as students found the lack of F2F interaction and lack of immediate feedback. The interaction between the students and the instructors in online courses should be the same as it would be in face-to-face classes. Instead of completing lectures and other course material at their own pace, students should follow the instructors' schedules.

Acknowledgement

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