

Perception, Engagement and Satisfaction of English Language Learners with Online Learning During Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Schools around the world have always been striving to modernize and digitalize the educational process. This is especially true for English language classes where English teachers tend to incorporate online assignments, activities, and games, depending on the topic of the lesson. However, many would still rely heavily on traditional teaching methods and paper based tests and feedback. Covid-19 pandemic enforced the digitalization process practically overnight, forcing learners and educators to utilize exclusively online learning platforms and tools as studying in person was impossible. Learners around the world had to adjust to new learning conditions and learn in a way that is different from what they were used to. Thus, this paper attempts to provide a general insight into the perception of students in two international schools towards this transition to online learning, their participation and engagement, as well as satisfaction with the learning outcomes in English language.

Keywords: Online learning, Covid-19 pandemic, students, language learning

1. Introduction

The worldwide closure of schools as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic transformed the ways in which students learned and teachers taught so far. This, as stated by Trincherro (2020), forced introduction of distance learning, came unexpectedly and left little or no time for preparation.

According to Biner et al. (1994), virtual online or distance teaching implies that teachers and students are not physically present at the same place, at the same

time in a classroom, but the materials and learning contents are shared and lessons are delivered to the students through digital tools and platforms such as audio files, videos, Internet, and telephonic communication, chats, etc. Therefore, as a result of the largest disruption of education systems in human history (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021), many of the main participants in the educational process found themselves being engaged in online learning fully for the first time in their lives.

The changes that happened so suddenly, in normal conditions, would require resources, training, planned strategy, and adaptation of the participants in the process. As this was impossible to implement, the disruption caused students and teachers to cope with the situation to the best of their abilities. This undeniably implies that students as well as teachers all around the world faced different challenges and obstacles on the way.

Therefore, this study aims to give its own contribution to better understanding of how this sudden shift from in-person to fully online learning was perceived by the students, how much effort and engagement was invested when it comes to participation in online activities, and if the learning outcomes improved or worsened in the first year of in person learning after the disruption. We hope we will be able to identify the challenges and offer solutions for their overcoming in the future.

The inventory for the participants consisted of open-end questions that aimed to gain a broader insight into the challenges students faced as well as segments of online learning they liked. Other items were mainly Likert scale statements aiming to assess the enjoyment, engagement and participation in online classes as well as satisfaction with performance and outcomes.

The research sample consists of students at international middle and high schools in two countries - Bosnia and Herzegovina and Qatar. The aim of this research is to capture students' experiences and opinions they formed about online learning during Covid-19 pandemic which should reveal certain shortcomings in the process that we seek to improve in the future.

2. Research questions

Findings of the previous studies on the topic created the need for further research on the perception of online learning. Thus the objectives of this study are: (a) investigating the perception and attitude towards the online learning; (b) participation and engagement in online lessons; and (c) satisfaction with the learning outcomes and their comparison with the outcomes achieved in the first year of in-person learning after the closures.

Apart from aiming to contribute to better understanding of students' views on the process of online learning in hindsight, this study also aims to generate new ideas and solutions focusing on improvement of online learning for future use.

With this intention the study raises the following three research questions:

What is the perception of students towards online learning during Covid-19 pandemic?

How much were students engaged in the educational process during online learning?

Are students satisfied with online learning outcomes last year and are there any differences between this year and last year's final grades in ELA?

3. Literature review

According to a number of authors (Driessen et al., 2020; Bergdahl & Nouri, 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021), the 2020 pandemic closure led to the creation of an alternative learning environment based mainly on distance learning methods and forms using modern digital technologies. Thus, schools, regardless of using blended or fully online learning, faced certain limitations in terms of pedagogical activities which placed, according to Bhamani, et al. (2020),

the burden of education mostly on students.

This “forced” closure of schools and implementation of online learning has obviously generated inescapable changes both in curriculum content delivery as well as in structure of the lessons.

The teaching and learning strategies for an online classroom are deviant from a traditional classroom as the physical absence of teachers and students, their expressions, gestures, and tones have reduced interaction and communication between teachers and students in a classroom (Ko & Rossen, 2017).

The implementation of online learning was on a scale never seen before (Czerniewicz, 2020). Obviously, this created new challenges for everyone involved in the educational process. Challenges include dealing with technical problems related to technology, designing appropriate activities, relating pedagogies with technology, and gaining learners' support (Son, 2018).

Lederman (2020b) pointed out that lack of reliable Internet, a dedicated workspace, or adequate technology particularly impacted participation in

synchronous meetings, such as those held over web-conferencing software like Zoom.

When discussing students' attitudes towards learning using technology, Al-Mekhlafi (2020) reported that students held a favorable attitude. Additionally, in Moorhouse's (2020) study in Hong Kong, it was found that the participants preferred the blend between synchronous and asynchronous modes of online learning when a face-to-face meeting was not possible due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In spite of that, the temporal and spatial freedom that learners may consider a benefit of online learning can at the same time be a hindrance.

Moreover, according to Plaisance (2018), if online learning is not skilfully executed, it may cause disengagement and learners may be at risk of disconnection. A study by Rajab, Mohammad, Gazal, & Alkattan (2020) concerning online learning challenges reported that the major ones being communications, assessment, online education experience, technology use tools, time management, anxiety, and coronavirus disease stress. Furthermore, Ali (2017) reported that some learners were motivated to work harder in learning English using the Blackboard platform, and some other learners were demotivated to learn using Blackboard. Also, the study of the International Association of Universities conducted in 2020 about the impact of Covid-19 globally on the higher education institutes showed a negative influence on the quality of activities and the inequity of education opportunities.

According to Sahin and Shelley (2008), students who had great satisfaction with their online classes are those who are skilled to utilize online tools and these students considered online learning as an important way of communicating, sharing, and learning. In addition to that, another study revealed that the online interaction between the instructor and the student is a significant element that affects the satisfaction of students in the online learning environments (Paechter, Maier, and Macher, 2010).

The effectiveness of online instruction largely depends on learners' active learning (Fu, 2013). Also, Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen (2010) emphasized the individualized learning support as highly relevant for students' motivation. Additionally, Hattie & Timperley (2007) outlined in their research an importance of individual support in terms of task-related feedback as one of the strongest predictors of students' achievement. Not only that student-teacher communication is important but also as pointed out by Epstein (1987), Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan (2016), supportive teaching is

strongly interrelated and often even depends on the effective cooperation between teachers and parents.

As seen from the above findings, there are numerous and various factors students around the world faced in the online learning phase during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, we aimed to contribute with our own research and examine more specific experiences of students in our environment.

4. Methodology

To maximize insights, the participants in this study are students residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the State of Qatar. As no specific validated questionnaires related to the topic of this study were found, we created the questions ad hoc, based on the feedback given by students either in person, online, or in published journals.

Questionnaire for the participants consisted of 5 point Likert scale statements as well as open-end questions. An online, structured questionnaire was developed by using Google Forms. The participants were to answer the questions related to the grade level and country they live in. The rest of the questions pertain to details related to the topic of the research. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Demographics

114 out of 160 (or 71.3%) of the respondents are students in middle school and 46 (or 28.7%) are attending high school. Both groups are attending international schools where English is a medium of instruction and taught as a second language. 92 participants are from Qatar and the rest (68) are from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The survey took place at two international schools in different countries in order to get a broader perspective. Both schools have similar approaches in teaching English and are well equipped with tools and facilities allowing for more than traditional teaching and learning of a language. Therefore, students were somewhat familiar with online learning before the Covid-19 closure but, as stated earlier in this article, some aspects, such as testing, feedback, and direct instruction were provided in a traditional way - paper based and in person.

5.2 Perception

The prime objective of collecting data in this part was to understand the perception of the students towards online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic based on their experience. Hence, the first set of two questions asked students to give their honest opinion on the best and hardest parts of online learning during Covid-19 pandemic.

When asked about the hardest part of online learning, most answers students listed were the ones related to missing in person communication and lack of confidence to ask clarification questions or communicate in breakout rooms. Other repeating answers are as follows: being easily distracted and having difficulties with focus and motivation, technical issues and too much screen time, difficulty in understanding the assignments, taking tests, getting lower grades and failing to learn the content.

Some of the most common answers related to communication were that students were unable to get the answers on the spot due to not being confident to speak up or they had difficulties in getting the right information due to technology issues. Participants pointed out that technology created frustration when communicating as they were not able to get feedback promptly and in real time or couldn't hear the information properly.

Participant 5: *“When you want to talk, some people don't respond in the breakout rooms.”*

Participant 10: *“I wasn't able to understand what the teacher said and every time there was a problem with the Internet and also I was a little shy to ask the teacher for something.”*

Participant 15: *“Getting the teacher's attention, sometimes it was lagging.”*

Another common answer was lack of focus due to either spending too much time on devices or having too many distractions. What we can infer from the answers is that students found it difficult to stay motivated and attend lessons. This obviously affected the understanding of the content and assignment completion.

Participant 14: *“Being able to be fully focused and committed to my online work.”*

Participant 76: *“The hardest part of online learning was staying focused and understanding the assignments because I could not communicate with the teacher properly and the lessons were hard to understand.”*

Participant 56: *“Being focused on what the teacher is explaining.”*

Participant 86: *“Focusing online was hard throughout the day because we spent a lot of time in front of the screen and our eyes would hurt.”*

Participant 13: *“I didn't have any motivation towards online learning and really couldn't focus at all.”*

Participant 37: *“I was easily distracted.”*

Furthermore, other emerging issues that affected students' perception were problems with technology or not being prepared to use the online tools. Due to the changes and closure that happened suddenly, some students did not have readily available Internet connection at home, let alone their personal device and other tools.

Participant 12: *“Technical issues, (mic lag), and opening the camera.”*

Participant 29 *“Learning how to adapt to change so quickly.”*

Participant 31: *“Listening in the glitching voices.”*

Participant 40: *“The Internet doesn't work most of the time and I don't understand as much.”*

Participant 66: *“Internet connection, can't understand well, all of the bad things on the iPad.”*

On the other hand, along with challenges, we wanted to examine the aspects of online learning that students enjoyed. Most of the answers listed for this question were the ones pertaining to being safe and enjoying the comfort of one's own home.

Participant 21: *“We were in the comfort of our home.”*

Participant 26: *“Studying in my own environment in a comfortable way.”*

Participant 89: *“I can be more safe and after I can sleep and have free time.”*

The rest of the survey was used to determine students' perception on the enjoyment in online classes, satisfaction with performance and how well they coped with online assignments. This part included Likert scale statements that arose from the feedback given by the students earlier either in person or online and it aimed to further examine their experiences with online learning.

When it comes to the enjoyment in online learning (Table 1), the majority of students (63) answered *Neutral* for the statement *I enjoyed learning online during the Covid-19 pandemic*, meaning they have neither a positive nor a

negative opinion. 17 participants (10.6 %) answered positively to this statement with Strongly Agree and 36 (22.4 %) answered with Agree. 19 participants (11.8 %) disagreed with the statement and 26 of them (16.1 %) answered with *Strongly Disagree*.

Table 1: Overall enjoyment in online learning

I enjoyed learning online during the Covid-19 pandemic	N	%
Strongly agree	17	10.6
Agree	36	22.4
Neutral	63	39.1
Disagree	19	11.8
Strongly disagree	26	16.1

From the above results, it is not hard to conclude that students did not have quite the best experience with online learning. This is further supported with the responses to the statement about enjoying online activities where 102 students out of 161 expressed that they didn't enjoy them. 39 were neutral and only 20 responded that they did enjoy (Table 2).

Table 2: Enjoyment in online activities

I enjoyed online activities better than the ones done at school.	N	%
Strongly agree	8	5
Agree	12	7.5
Neutral	39	24.2
Disagree	61	37.9
Strongly disagree	41	25.5

Since the responses to the statement about overall enjoyment in online learning during Covid-19 pandemic (Table 1) turned out to be a little bit more positive, this can be explained through the students' answers analyzed earlier where they claimed that online learning was enjoyable in a way that it allowed them to follow lessons from the comfort of their own home and remain safe. However, when it comes to lesson activities, they were affected by poor communication, distractions, and technical issues.

When expressing their satisfaction with learning outcomes (Table 3), 31 participants (19.3 %) answered that they are very satisfied and 44 participants (27.3 %) answered that they are satisfied. 43 participants (26.7 %) were

neutral. Those dissatisfied with learning outcomes make up 13.7 % or 22 participants and 21 participants or 13% were very dissatisfied.

Table 3: Satisfaction with performance

I am satisfied with my performance while learning online last year.	N	%
Very satisfied	31	19.3
Satisfied	44	27.3
Neutral	43	26.7
Dissatisfied	22	13.7
Very dissatisfied	21	13

Despite the issues mentioned previously, the majority of students are satisfied with their ability to cope and perform during online learning. These results were expected considering the students' answers stated earlier that they did their best considering the unprecedented situation.

5.3. Engagement

In order to find out the level to which students were engaged in their lessons we inquired about the level of difficulty of assignments, not just content wise but also in terms of utilizing different tools and platforms for those assignments.

Majority of the students reported that it was easy for them to work on online assignments (Table 4) as 32 participants (19.9%) responded with Strongly agree and 49 participants (30.4 %) responded with Agree. 40 participants responded with neutral (24.8%), 25 participants (15.5 %) disagreed with the statement, whereas 15 of them (9.3 %) strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 4: Difficulty of online assignments

It was easy for me to work on my online assignments.	N	%
Strongly agree	32	19.9
Agree	49	30.4
Neutral	40	24.8
Disagree	25	15.5
Strongly disagree	15	9.3

As stated earlier, these students did occasionally participate in online activities before the pandemic closure and they had experience with online learning tools. Therefore, it is understandable that the majority of them stated that the work on the assignments was easy. As for the rest of the answers, it can be justified by the fact that they were not ready for the sudden shift to online learning and they needed more support with the transition in order to engage in the work.

As keeping focus in the lesson greatly affects the engagement, we also examined the ability to remain focused and follow lessons (Table 5). The majority of participants reported that it was not easy. Namely, 41 participants (25.5 %) strongly disagreed and 46 of them (28.6 %) disagreed with the statement. Only 5 students (3.1%) agreed strongly with the statement, and 29 (18%) responded that they agree with the statement. 40 students (24.8%) were neutral to the statement.

Table 5: The ability to remain focused

It was easy for me to remain focused on activities during online learning.	N	%
Strongly agree	5	3.1
Agree	29	18
Neutral	40	24.8
Disagree	46	28.6
Strongly disagree	41	25.5

As seen above, remaining focused seems to be the most challenging part for the majority of the respondents. It is not hard to understand that if students are distracted or busy doing something else while attending online lessons, their engagement and participation will drop. This eventually leads to not understanding the content, not being able to do the assignments, and bad grades.

Since technology and Internet access are an essential part of online learning and their malfunction can affect focus, statements related to it are included in this section as well (Table 6). 80 participants reported that they had necessary technology and solid Internet connection while learning online (30 or 18.6 % responded with *Strongly agree* and 50 or 31.1 % responded with *Agree*), whereas that wasn't the case with 33 participants (25 students or 15.5 %

responded with *Disagree* and 8 or 5% responded with *Strongly disagree*). 48 participants or 29.8 % responded with *Neutral*.

Table 6: Having necessary technology and Internet connection

I had all necessary technology and solid Internet connection while learning online.	N	%
Strongly agree	30	18.6
Agree	50	31.1
Neutral	48	29.8
Disagree	25	15.5
Strongly disagree	8	5

Furthermore, when it comes to familiarity and being able to use the main tools utilized in online learning, 117 students stated that it was easy for them to use online learning tools such as Zoom and Google Classroom (Table 7). 56 of them (34.8 %) responded with *Strongly agree* and 61 (37.9 %) responded with *Agree*. Only 21 students disagreed with the statement - 8 (5%) responded with *Strongly disagree* and 13 (8.1%) responded with *Disagree*. 23 students (14.3%) responded with *Neutral*.

Table 7: Using online learning tools

It was easy for me to use online learning tools (Zoom, Google Classroom, etc.)	N	%
Strongly agree	56	34.8
Agree	61	37.9
Neutral	23	14.3
Disagree	13	8.1
Strongly disagree	8	5

Majority of the students responded that they had their needs met in terms of technology; however, there is still a number of students who were unprepared to participate in online classes due to not having their personal device and Internet connection or not knowing how to make use of devices and online

learning tools, which can be explained with the fact of not expecting the unprecedented circumstances and the sudden change in education.

5.4 Satisfaction with online learning outcomes

Since the focus of our research was on English language learners, we only inquired about the satisfaction with online learning in English language classes and their learning outcomes. 92 students reported that they were satisfied with their English language grades while learning online (41 or 25.5% responded with *Strongly agree* and 51 or 31.7 % responded with *Agree*. 32 students or 19.9 % responded with *Neutral*. Total of 37 students disagreed with the statement - 24 or 14.9% responded with *Disagree* and 13 or 8.1% responded with *Strongly disagree* (Table 8).

Table 8: Satisfaction with grades while learning online

I am satisfied with the grades I earned while learning online last year.	N	%
Strongly agree	41	25.5
Agree	51	31.7
Neutral	32	19.9
Disagree	24	14.9
Strongly disagree	13	8.1

79 students (49.4 %) reported that their final mark in English during online learning was 5. 50 students (31.3%) had final mark 4. 26 students (16.3 %) reported that their final mark was 3, 4 students (2.5%) had final mark 2, and 1 (0.6%) student reported failing English during online learning (Table 9).

Table 9: Final grade (online learning)

Final grade in ELA (online learning)	N	%
5	79	49.4
4	50	31.3
3	26	16.3
2	4	2.5
1	1	0.6

Situation with grades in the first year of in-person learning after Covid-19 closure is somewhat different. 90 students (56.3 %) reported that their final mark in English was 5. 55 students (34.4%) had final mark 4. 15 students (9.4 %) reported that their final mark was 3. No students reported final final marks 1 and 2 (Table 10).

Table 10: Final grade (in-person learning)

Final grade in ELA (in-person learning)	N	%
5	90	56.3
4	55	34.4
3	15	9.4
2	-	-
1	-	-

After comparing the above results, we determined that students received better grades during the in-person learning as more students had final marks 5 (excellent) and 4 (very good) and nobody reported final marks 1 (failing) and 2 (satisfactory).

6. Conclusion

The study raised the question “What is the perception of students towards online learning during Covid-19 pandemic?” and the results presented above indicate that students do not hold a completely favorable attitude as they did struggle with aspects of online learning that deviate from traditional classroom. As discussed above, students listed many challenges they faced in the process and the only positive sides mentioned were the ones being home and safe from the virus. This sudden transition significantly changed the perception about online learning they had earlier when only occasionally participating in online activities.

Second question “How much were students engaged in the educational process during online learning?” only confirmed the assumption that students being out of the classroom are easily distracted and find it hard to commit to their work if there is no teacher to directly supervise them. Some found working on the assignments easy, others found it difficult to navigate them. Therefore, it is essential to revise the difficulty of assignments given and adjust them to suit students’ proficiency level. Also, as visible from the results,

students need to be provided with training on how to make use of the technology and tools in order to maximize their engagement and participation in the lesson.

Lastly, answering the question “Are students satisfied with online learning outcomes last year and are there any differences between this year and last year's final grades in ELA?” , it was found that students, despite difficulties, still value their efforts and mostly are satisfied with the outcomes. This is despite the fact that the final grades were worse during the online learning than in the year after.

The study aimed to evaluate online learning experiences in order to improve its implementation as utilizing new technologies in language learning is especially important. Hence, it is utterly important to start changing students' perception by changing the way online learning is conducted, working on improving activities that will increase students' engagement and participation and keep them focused on the lesson.

While online learning has its own advantages, it can be inferred from this study that the traditional way of learning and being present in the classroom still holds value as students feel more comfortable to communicate, it is easier to receive feedback and ask for clarification, which altogether improve their performance. Furthermore, it is easier for teachers to navigate the lesson having students in the classroom, motivate them and help them keep focus on the topic.

Acknowledging the significance of online learning in the 21st century and the shortcomings in its application during Covid-19 pandemic, it may be noted that a variety of strategies need to be developed in order to change students' perception, maximize their engagement and participation, and improve the outcomes.

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