

2022

The impact of virtual tools on EFL learners' performance in Grammar at the times of COVID 19 Pandemic

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Recommended Citation

Elbashir, R. M., & Hamza, S. M. (2022). The impact of virtual tools on EFL learners' performance in Grammar at the times of COVID 19 Pandemic. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 19(3). <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol19/iss3/07>

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to investigate the impact of virtual tools on EFL learners' performance in grammar courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. This experimental study compared a group of students who took a grammar course remotely via the Blackboard platform during the COVID-19 pandemic to a control group who took the same course in person prior to the pandemic. Each group of participants (n = 30) was given the same test. The grades of the two groups were then analysed using the SPSS programme. The results demonstrate that the experimental group test grades were higher than those of the control group grades, suggesting that teaching grammar remotely has a positive influence on EFL learners' performance, as compared to face-to-face instruction, which has been proven to have a lesser impact. As a result, the researchers would promote a hybrid of virtual and face-to-face teaching. As a result, the researchers would promote a hybrid of virtual and face-to-face teaching. More studies on the causes of lower grades in face-to-face classes, as well as suggestions for strategies to improve learners' performance in all aspects of the English language, not just grammar, are requested. Furthermore, each country has its own educational policy, so different results may arise in different contexts. Educators and policymakers may use this study as a reference for the effectiveness of virtual vs. face-to-face instruction, opening the doors for future research on similar topics within the same theme

Practitioner Notes

1. Virtual tools, such as Blackboard, may be effective in teaching and learning English as a foreign language.
2. One of the most important aspects of a successful virtual English class is the use of interactive Blackboard features such as break out rooms, chat boxes, cameras, and microphones.
3. A variety of interaction patterns such as pair work, group work, whole class discussion, and individualization may help students remain motivated until the end of the class.
4. Teaching at home may enable teachers to create stronger rapport with their students by introducing them to his/her private world and family.
5. Teachers and students may benefit from a research that analyses 'a new normal' and a different classroom environment created by the pandemic.

Keywords

Virtual teaching and learning, Performance, COVID 19 pandemic, EFL learners, Grammar.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened a new era in education, particularly in English language teaching, with all classes now taking place online and a shift in engagement from face-to-face to screen-to-screen. As a result, institutions, teachers, and students bear a large share of the responsibility for completing tasks and meeting the educational objectives. Teaching English as a foreign language has become an even more complex, rich field of study due to constant updates, and new technologies and strategies. Grammar has traditionally been taught in face-to-face classrooms, so teaching it virtually is a novel field to investigate. The term "grammar" is probably the most commonly used by parents, students, and teachers when it comes to English language learning. Grammar is commonly thought of in English as a set of universal rules that govern the language (Koay, 2021).

In this paper, researchers examine the impact of virtual teaching on EFL learners' grammar performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many questions have been raised about how effective virtual teaching and learning are, and whether they can take the place of face-to-face classes. Online classes and virtual environments provide a different type of teaching and learning experience than traditional face-to-face situations.

Literature review

Many studies have investigated the efficiency of online versus face-to-face instruction. According to Mahmoudi (2020), who investigated the effectiveness of online learning via smart phone on the improvement of grammatical accuracy in Iranian EFL learners, there were significant differences between the experimental and control groups, with the experimental group using an online classroom performing better. A similar point of view is expressed by Turkmen and Aydin (2016), who found that online instruction increases and improves student performance and can augment traditional classes to significantly improve students' performance levels.

Online classes encourage teachers to be more creative. Some research shows that teachers have a positive attitude toward online classes and that teachers are encouraged to develop skills and to use the best applications (Rahayu & Wirza, 2020). Another study was conducted by Windsor (2021) that examines the effectiveness of short grammar exercises in a virtual learning environment (VLE) for first-year students at a southern Chinese university. The findings of the study indicate an increase in participants' grammar test scores; that these exercises were more beneficial to students with lower English proficiency; and that the VLE has also been beneficial to the university (Windsor, 2021). Participants preferred the e-learning platform to traditional classroom methods, considering it an appropriate and improved means of acquiring vocabulary, developing speaking skills, English language grammar, reading, writing, and listening skills (Zakarneh, 2018).

Learning on Blackboard LMS was also effective in developing and improving learners' writing skills (Ta'amneh, 2020, p. 83). In another study, Hamad (2017) found that students' performance on an electronic test is significantly better than on a paper test when using Blackboard in blended learning. Despite their preference for traditional classroom lectures, students in the same study agreed that using Blackboard for blended learning enabled them to obtain lesson materials or watch recorded lectures if they were absent, learn from their classmates' mistakes in discussion blogs, have regular contact with their instructor, and prompt feedback for their questions and confidential test grade results (Hamad, 2017). On the other hand, Kulal and Nayak (2020) argue that online classes are not preferred by teachers. According to them, online classes fail to meet the emotional needs of teachers and students. Similarly, Oraif and Elyas (2021) observe that teachers traditionally enact authority and control over students, when physically present, although this societal expectation is becoming obsolete. As a result, teachers struggle to adapt to online mediums. Students may control when and where they learn remotely. In online classes, teachers cannot monitor students as they once did (Oraif & Elyas, 2021). Furthermore, teachers who are accustomed to traditional teaching methods are no longer required by their students (Halim et al., 2021, p. 215). Outside of the pandemic context, navigating the LMS encourages greater digital literacy, a transferable skill that has become a necessary skill for 21st-century learners (Ahmad & Kashi, 2020).

What is grammar?

According to the Britannica Encyclopedia, grammar is the set of rules that govern the sounds, words, sentences, and other elements of a language, as well as their combination and interpretation. In a strict sense, grammar refers only to the study of sentence and word structure (syntax and morphology), excluding vocabulary and pronunciation (Gaur et al., 2022). Modern grammar may describe grammatical knowledge and systems in terms of how people actually use the language, rather than prescribe how language should be used. Prescriptive grammar is frequently based on written language characteristics, particularly as described several generations ago. Today's language training courses and published materials frequently aim to depict grammar as it is used by English speakers, frequently using data from corpus research and authentic language use. However, because the grammatical resources available in English are frequently different from those available in the learner's native language, many language learners find it difficult to master grammar (Richards, 2022).

Theories of learning with emerging technology

Technology is changing the way we live and behave in the world. Implementing new approaches to education may necessitate the development of new theories, pedagogies, and roles. Three points of view are defined that drive educational technology adoption and development. This includes the presentational, performance-tutoring, and epistemic-engagement perspectives.

The presentational view emphasises theory and practice in order to make discourse and visualisations understandable to students. Theories of multimedia concentrate on the cognitive effects of selecting and transmitting relevant images and words, effectively organising these transmissions, and ensuring that messages delivered via multiple channels do not interfere with one another or with the learners' cognitive processing. Much of this work was aided by studies of brain activity and a better understanding of the complex ways in which people process presentations in order to create the most effective learning expositions.

Social constructivism, identified by Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006), identified the epistemic engagement view of learning as the most recent educational vision driving educational technology. Individuals' construction of knowledge is dependent on individual and collective understandings, backgrounds, and proclivities, according to this theory. Constructivists also emphasise the importance of context in learning, arguing that learning is most effective when the task and context are both authentic and meaningful to the learners. Problem-based learning activities are common in constructivist learning and necessitate active inquiry techniques.

Complexity theory has more recently been called the "science of complexity." Educators and researchers can use complexity theory to look for emergent behaviours that occur when autonomous yet interdependent organisms interact. Educational theorists, in particular, look for and try to predict. Complexity theory, like constructivist theory, supports the acquisition of skills and power by the individual learner, allowing him or her to articulate and achieve personal learning goals (Terry, 2010).

Teaching English language grammar virtually

According to Pelgrum (2001) technology is not only the cornerstone of the Information Age, but also a vital turning point and instrument for inducing educational reforms that transform our students into productive skilled professionals (Liton, 2015, p.14). In an online course, virtual worlds can be used as a learning environment where language teachers and learners who are separated by distance may engage in social activities. Interactions on text chat and audio modalities may be used for communication and feedback (Wigham & Chanier, 2013). Virtual worlds can also help students gain confidence and overcome cultural barriers when learning a new language. When compared to computer-mediated communication (CMC), the combination of text chat and customized avatars may allow students to communicate more effectively. Avatars, for example, can exhibit a wide range of nonverbal communication cues that are difficult to replicate in other types of synchronous CMC. Space simulation (the ability to project a 3D space or spatial element) is another feature of virtual worlds (Hew & Cheung, 2008), as well as an experiential space where students learn by doing and observing the outcomes of their actions (Kruk, 2021). YouTube video lessons, Seesaw, and Google Classroom Interactive Activities are all useful virtual video resources to use when teaching virtual language and grammar. 'ViewPure' can be used by teachers to purify all YouTube videos so that they can send the link to their students without fear of inappropriate ads or

suggested videos. Teachers can also use gamifying websites such as IXL learning quizzes for skill practice, grammar and language for virtual learning, Education.com learning games for virtual language activities, and Learninggames.com for skill practice games (Jessica, 2021). Online programmes should be designed in such a way that they are creative, interactive, relevant, student-centered, and group-based (Romero et al., 2020, p. 166). Teachers should not rely on reading long PowerPoint presentations, which may be boring for students.

Grammar course description

The grammar course relates form and meaning at the level of the sentence and above the sentence (in paragraphs and verbal exchanges). It focuses on the word-class members: noun, pronoun, verb, and adjective. It describes their forms, positions, and functions at the level of the English sentence in context. The main objectives are to consolidate students' mastery of the grammatical rules of English covered at previous levels and help them develop more correct and appropriate use of English in context. The course outcomes focus on three dimensions; the first is knowledge, to develop students' explicit and implicit knowledge of English grammar. The second is skills; to improve students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The third is competence: using Blackboard for additional opportunities for practice or research purposes.

Instruction on Blackboard

This term refers to a learner-centered teaching approach that incorporates Blackboard Collaborate into the EFL teaching methods course. According to this approach, the teacher, acting as a guide or facilitator, uses the software Blackboard Collaborate to teach the course and allows students to take advantage of the available resources to complete their tasks successfully (Hussein, 2016, p. 52). Learning Management Systems such as Blackboard may offer advantages in terms of usability, cost, availability, security, stability, interoperability, and scalability (Martin, 2008).

Blackboard Collaborate is organised into three areas: a content presentation area, the session menu, and a collaborative panel. The content presentation area, which is also called media space, or the main stage, is where the session's content is displayed. The tools that appear in the content presentation area are directly related to the session. Audio, video, and hand raises, as well as a collaborative panel and a session menu, are all available. The Session menu tools includes recording, reporting an issue, help, tutorials, and an exit survey. Collaborative tools include chat, attendee's panel, and sharing content such as files and images, Polling, breakout groups, and other options are also provided.

Enhancing interaction via Blackboard sessions

According to Hrastinski (2009), online learning is closely linked to participation. As a result, he has advocated for an online learning theory where learners collaborate and participate. Online learner participation is a complex process of participating in and maintaining

relationships with others, that it is supported by physical and psychological tools, that is not synonymous with talking or writing, and may involve collaboration with peers but, more importantly, may involve all types of relationships (Hrastinski, 2009). A number of critical best practices for improving adult learning have been identified. Fostering a cooperative learning environment and supporting active learning; regular communication between academic staff and students; staff communicating high standards and providing timely feedback to students; respecting students' diverse abilities and learning methods; and prioritizing time on task, are some of these. Many of these ideas can be implemented using Blackboard. Interactivity is defined as "an activity and/or action between individuals and/or machines" (Barretto et al., 2003, p.272). Learner-content, learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-interface interactions are all possible in learning management systems like Blackboard, either asynchronously or synchronously.

Multiple studies have linked passive online learning without participation to lower learning outcomes (Heirdsfield et al., 2011). El-Ghamry (2016) found that using Blackboard Learning System had many benefits, such as enhanced accessibility and usability, synchronous and asynchronous interactions, verbal and nonverbal communication, collaborative and immersive learning environments. The ability to develop a wide range of skills, expand the student corpus of vocabulary, and practise and apply grammar structures prepared students for examinations (Nikitina et al., 2017). Instant feedback, better communication, tracking, and skill development benefits students by providing an interactive learning environment (Bradford et al., 2007). Blackboard can also be used as an interactive, out-of-class access site, with relevant access granted with varying privileges and security levels.

While most teachers were enthusiastic about Blackboard, there were technological barriers that prevented Blackboard from being successfully integrated into the EFL context. Educational institutions often lack the necessary online learning resources and infrastructure, and technical difficulties for students or teachers are demotivating. Teachers and students also lacked technical skills (Hakim, 2020). In order to use Blackboard effectively, students and teachers need training and professional skills. While Blackboard includes features that enable interactive learning for students and teachers alike, its potential as an online learning tool is limited by users' lack of technological skill (Almekhlafy, 2020).

Method

This study aims to investigate the impact of virtual tools on EFL learners' performance in grammar during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students of English as a foreign language make a determined effort to use the correct language. As a result, teachers spend a lot of time teaching tenses and improving sentence structure. In contrast to face-to-face lessons, teachers and students in virtual sessions communicate with one another via chat boxes, white boards, and microphones. However, the context in Saudi Arabia is slightly different, particularly when teaching girls, as cameras are not permitted, and there is limited visibility. Teachers and

students question the effectiveness of virtual learning and the impact of virtual tools on teaching language and grammar. Hence this study explores these two research questions:

Research question 1. What is the impact of virtual tools (Blackboard) on EFL learners' performance in grammar at the time of COVID 19?

Research question 2. Which method of teaching is more efficient: virtual or face-to-face?

Hypothesis 1. The virtual tool (Blackboard) has a positive impact on EFL learners' performance in grammar.

Hypothesis 2. Teaching virtually is more efficient than face-to-face teaching.

An experimental study was conducted by administering a test to first-year students before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The control group studied the course face-to-face before the pandemic and the experimental group studied virtually since the beginning of the academic year in September 2020, during the pandemic and the lockdown procedures.

Population

The sample is 30 Saudi EFL students at the College of Sciences and Art (Dhahran Al Janoub)-King Khalid University—Faculty of Arts and Science—English language department-Second year 2019-2020 and 2020/2021. It consists of two groups: a control group that studied the grammar course face-to-face pre-pandemic in the academic year 2019/2020 and an experimental group that studied the grammar course virtually via the Blackboard platform during the COVID-19 pandemic in the academic year 2020/2021.

Data analysis

Reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha equation as shown below:

$$\text{Reliability coefficient} = \frac{n}{n-1} * \frac{1 - \text{Total variations questions}}{\text{variation total grades}}$$

$$\text{Validity} = \sqrt{\frac{n}{n-1} * \frac{1 - \text{Total variations questions}}{\text{variation total grades}}}$$

Cronbach's alpha coefficient = (0.91), a reliability coefficient is high and it indicates the stability of the scale and the validity of the study.

Validity coefficient is the square root of the reliability coefficient is (0.95), and this shows that there is a high sincerity of the scale and the benefit of the study.

Table 1:*Cronbach's alpha*

No.	Statement	Reliability	Validity
Row 1	Before COVID-19	0.87	0.93
Row 2	After COVID-19	0.89	0.94
Row 3	Total	0.91	0.95

Table 1 illustrates the Cronbach's alpha method for the test, showing the reliability and validity for both groups. The group before COVID-19 reliability was 87% and validity was 0.93, compared to 0.89 and 0.94 for the group after.

Table 2:*Frequency and percentage before COVID-19*

No	Valid	Frequency	Percent
Row 1	Pass	26	86.7%
Row 2	Failure	4	13.3%
Row3	Total	30	100.0%

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage for the group before COVID 19; (26) learners pass that is (86%) and (4) of them fail which are (13.3).

Figure 1:*The COVID-19 sample distribution*

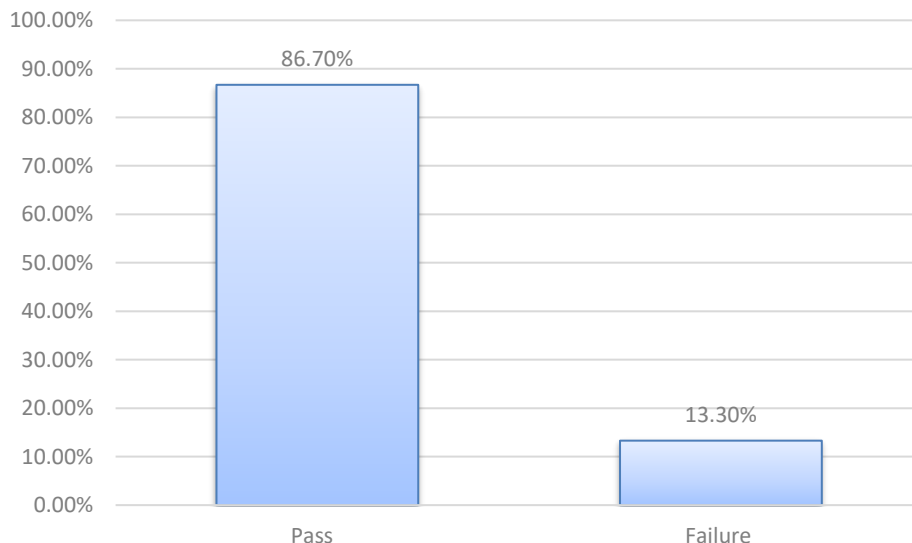


Figure 1 illustrates the views of the distribution of the COVID-19 sample by the statement as follows: before passing by 86.7% (and failure by 13.1%)

Table 3:

t-Test result before COVID 19

N	Mean	SD	T – test	Df	Sig.	Scale
30	59.80	8.46	6.340	29	0.00	Pass

The value of the t-test in Table 3 was calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals in the study for the hypothesis was 6.340, which is less than the level of significant value (0.05). These refer to the statistical existence of differences for the Pass.

Table 4:

The frequency and percentage after COVID-19

	Valid	Frequency	Percent
Row 1	Pass	27	90.0%
Row2	Failure	3	10.0%
Row3	Total	30	100.0%

Figure 2:

Distribution of the before COVID 19 sample

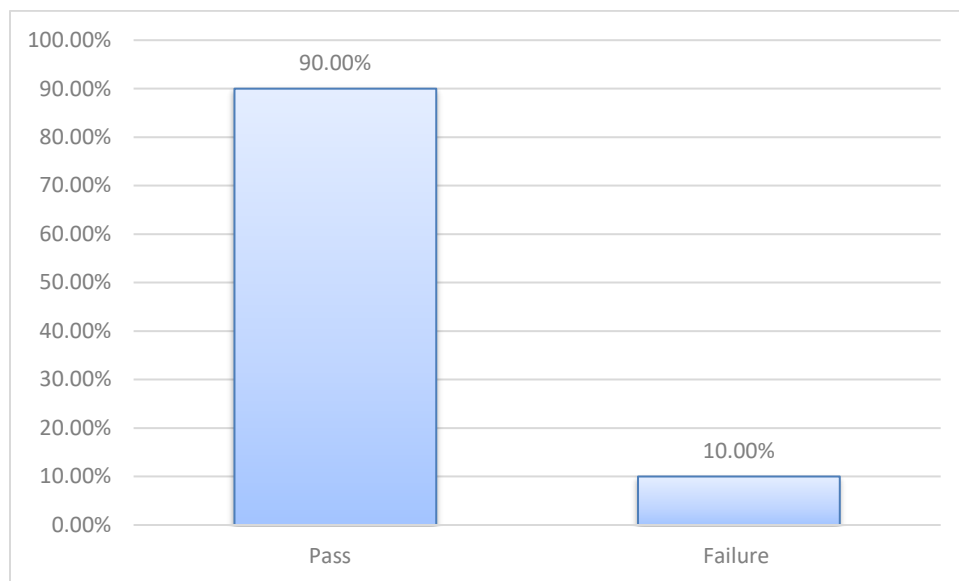


Figure 2 illustrates the views of the distribution of the BEFORE COVID 19 sample by the statement as follows: before passing by 90.0% (and failure by 10.0%).

Table 5:

t-Test result of group means before COVID-19

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	T – test	Df	Sig.	Scale
ROW1	30	70.67	13.21	8.569	29	0.00	Pass

The value of the t-test in Table 5 was calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals in the study for the hypothesis was (8.569) with a significant value (0.000), which is less than the level of significant value (0.05). These refer to the existence of statistically significant differences for the test.

Table 6:
The frequency and percentage for the content

	Valid	Before COVID 19		After COVID 19	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Row1	Pass	26	86.7%	27	90.0%
Row2	Failure	4	13.3%	3	10.0%
Row3	Total	30	100.0%	30	100.0%

Figure 3:
The distribution of the COVID-19 samples

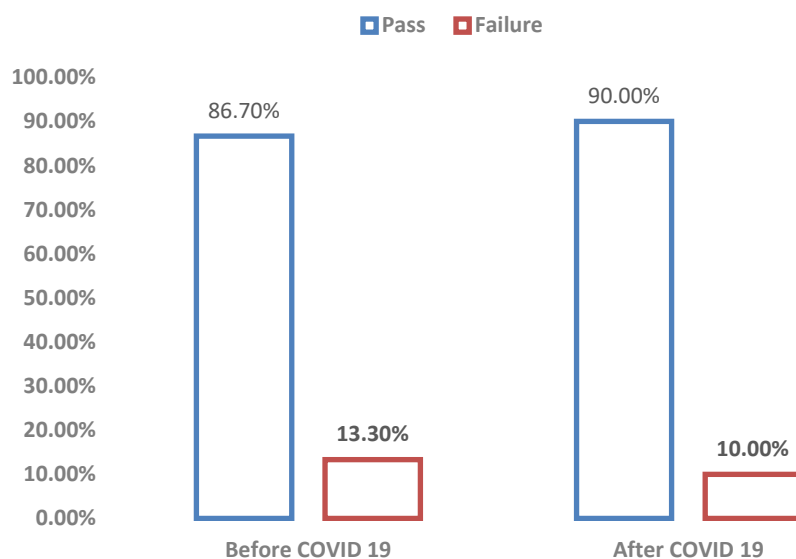


Figure 3 illustrates the views of the distribution of the COVID-19 sample by the following After COVID 19 pass by 90.0% (and failure by 10.0%) and after passing by 86.7% (and failure by 13.3%).

Table 7:*t-test result of Blackboard*

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	T – test	Df	Sig.	Significan t
Row1	Before	59.8	8.5				
Row2	After	70.7	13.2	-3.712	29	.00	Significan t

The t-test result showing group means of the virtual tool (Blackboard) has a positive impact on EFL learners' performance in grammar. The value of the T test calculated to signify the differences between the numbers of individuals in the study for the hypothesis was (-8.559) with a significant value (0.000), which is less than the level of significant value (0.05).

Discussion

The result of this study has shown that the students in the experimental group have their grades arise, with EFL learners' grammar performance being greater in the virtual group. The result of the T-test, which is for the test after COVID 19, clearly supports the first hypothesis, stating that the virtual tool (Blackboard) has a positive impact on EFL learners' grammatical performance. also approves and supports the second hypothesis that virtual teaching is more efficient than face-to-face learning, which is similarly accepted and supported. The exam result after COVID 19, with a score of 90.0 percent and a failure rate of 10.0 percent, is shown. Table 7 shows the T-test results. The same result was documented in a number of studies. It is clear that the majority of the studies support the use of blackboards and have found them to be effective in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. According to Alhawiti, M. (2017), in the majority of educational establishments in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the state and unified educational systems provided equal opportunities for learning English. Windsor's (2021) stated that so far, the Virtual Learning Environment has been extremely beneficial to both the university and the students. (Windsor, 2021). The e-learning platform has the potential to make learners feel more at ease and create a less stressful environment. (Mathew et al., 2019). Students highly value and prioritise the innovative learning resources in BB (El-Hmoudova, 2015). Virtual instruction, as previously stated, has been found to be an effective method of teaching and learning English.

According to the results above, the researchers reach the following findings: the first hypothesis stating that the virtual tool (Blackboard) has a positive impact on EFL learners' performance in grammar is clearly approved by the result of the T-test, which is for the test after COVID 19. The second hypothesis stating that teaching virtually is more efficient than face-to-face is also approved and supported by Table (6) that illustrates the views of the

distribution of the test sample before COVID 19 as follows: After COVID 19, I passed by 90.0% (and failed by 10.0%) and after I passed by 86.7% (and failed by 13.3%). In addition to the results of the T-test, which are illustrated in Table 7, showing that Blackboard has a positive impact on learners' performance.

The researchers in this study address two significant problems: the first is the impact of virtual tools on EFL learners' performance in grammar; the second is to determine if virtual or face-to-face teaching is more successful. Previous researchers have found that virtual tools (Blackboard) improve EFL learners' grammatical skills and that teaching virtually is more efficient than teaching in person. According to the findings, virtual instruction is a massive success, as evidenced by experimental grammar scores that were higher than the controls. Other studies in different circumstances, on the other hand, may raise concerns about the teachers' readiness to teach remotely and whether they were well prepared. As a result, the researchers recommend that more research be done on the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on English learners' performance, not just in grammar only, but also in the other elements of English as a Foreign Language learning and teaching as well. Participants agreed that they learned better via e-learning and that all English language courses should be taught through the e-learning mode. They consider the e-learning platform an appropriate and better means of acquiring vocabulary, developing speaking skills, English language grammar, reading skills, writing skills, listening skills, and as a better mode of enhancing performance in English than the traditional classroom mode. They see e-learning as a better tool for testing and evaluation and prefer it to other traditional methods. E-learning can be more effective in learning English than the face-to-face classroom system (Zakarneh, 2018).

Online learning would have a positive impact if proper training and orientation programmes for teachers and students were implemented and online language learning platforms and tools were kept up to date (Rahman, 2020; Oraif & Elyas, 2021). ELearning also has the advantages of less commuting, has no physical infrastructure restrictions, a global audience and instructors, and is environmentally friendly. More profitable, faster content retrieval and creation, automated scoring systems, reduced. Studying online allows you to learn at your own pace rather than fixed books and class timetables learning schedules (Khasawneh, 2021). Many values have emerged as a result of the pandemic situation, such as solidarity, self-directed learning, self-care, care for others, social-emotional skills, health, and resilience.

In addition to the unanticipated positive outcomes of the digital transformation, such as the advantages of flexibility in terms of location and time, and the promotion of specific language skills (Al-Samiri, 2021). When compared to traditional learning, digital learning improves not only students' learning outcomes but also faculty members' capabilities and technical system implementation, as well as staff productivity and work environment (Abdulrahim & Mabrouk, 2020).

Students in Saudi Arabia had positive attitudes toward English and recognised the advantages of online learning, but they believed it could not replace face-to-face instruction (Alzamil,

2021). Saudi students also agreed that distance learning saves time and that increased time use has improved their performance (Khasawneh, 2021). The closure of university facilities necessitates the immediate testing, verification, and support of modern technologies, as well as the compatibility and user-friendliness of their software. The current technological teaching methods have not only influenced how educators deliver learning outcomes and how students learn, but they have also influenced the quality of education that is now available to millions of students through the introduction of online courses and online resources (Ahmad & Kashi, 2020, p. 5392).

At the very least, during lockdown and the reopening of schools, teachers in this scenario require priority support in the following areas: Training, advice, and resources for working on various distance education formats, such as skills and methodologies for using ICT and other distance teaching and learning platforms in education, as well as criteria for contextualised and flexible curriculum decisions, assessment, and feedback for learning. Support for methodological innovation and the implementation of alternative forms of teaching, such as incorporating opportunities for learning through play into the curriculum, Prioritize health protection, legal support, and capacity building in teaching socio-emotional skills to students and their families, as well as job security and decent working and contractual conditions. Developing collaborative proposals to address curricular, teaching, and socio-emotional support work by strengthening local teacher networks through spaces for support, learning, and the development of collaborative proposals contextualising the experienced situation, as well as educational strategies to accelerate and resume learning for students who were more severely affected during the pandemic. Supported by all the mentioned studies, researchers would conclude that virtual teaching using the Blackboard Collaborate platform has enhanced EFL learners' use of English grammar and impacted positively on their performance. Thus, Blackboard has been approved to be very effective, and thus researchers would advocate a hybrid of virtual and face-to-face teaching.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that the students who responded to the survey were Humanities majors, other majors were not studied. This study might also raise concerns regarding the teachers' readiness to teach digitally and whether they were adequately trained. As a result, researchers urge further research on teachers' readiness to teach virtually. On the other hand, more research into the impact of the pandemic on English learners' performance in terms of teaching grammar virtually, as well as other elements of English as a Foreign Language learning and teaching, is needed. The study only examined a limited sample of Saudi EFL students at King Khalid University's Faculty of Arts; a larger sample may in future be taken from other Saudi universities. According to these results, the authors suggest that further empirical studies be conducted on the challenges and obstacles that confront digital learning and how to maximise its benefits. More studies can also investigate the impact of online teaching during the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the participants for their valuable contributions to the study. They also thank the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science and the head of the English language department at King Khalid University- Dhahran Aljnoub in Saudi Arabia for their help and support in conducting this study. The authors would also like to extend their thanks to Professor Hamad Fadelamoula for his valuable thoughts and support.

Ethical approval

A permission to conduct the study and use the students' grades was issued by the head of English language department at the Faculty of Arts and Science in King Khalid University (Dhahran Al Janoub).

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