



TEFL PROFESSORS' E-LEARNING EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

Sumer Salman Abou Shaabanⁱ

Al-Azhar University,

Gaza, Palestine

Abstract:

This study aimed at revealing teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) professors' eLearning experiences during the Covid 19 pandemic in the Gaza Strip higher education institutions. For this end, the researcher designed a (20) open-ended questions questionnaires to be completed by (32) TEFL professors in (8) Palestinian higher education institutions. Results showed that TEFL professors need training to develop their skills in designing, developing and drawing action plan for TEFL e-courses that achieve the objectives of foreign language teaching\ learning. Palestinian TEFL professors spent (4- 7) hours daily preparing, meeting, guiding, helping and facilitating learning by using different eLearning programs and network social media such as Moodle, Google classroom, Zoom, WhatsApp and Facebook. They adopted different teaching methods as well as different types of evaluation and following up in order to measure the objectives achievement; however, they neglected developing thinking and real life skills. The most challenges for both TEFL professors and learners were insufficient knowledge about eLearning and technical problems. TEFL professors action plan was focused on reducing the number of activities and drawing clear procedures with all the needed tools and activities for each objective in the course. Based on the findings, the researcher recommends that higher education institutions should provide training courses in the field of eLearning for both learners and professors, prepare a guide for designing and developing e-courses and provide professional technicians for maintenance of equipment and should regularly fix various technical malfunctions.

Keywords: TEFL, eLearning, experiences, Covid 19 pandemic

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of Covid 19 pandemic spread all over the infected countries very quickly, the idea of social isolation was suggested and then initiated in order to limit and eliminate the spread of Covid 19 and to preserve the human. This, in turn, paralyzed all

ⁱ Correspondence: email sumer762@hotmail.com

aspects of life which is unacceptable in a world. Education is one of the most crucial sectors negatively impacted by social isolation and hence digital technology in general and instructional technologies in particular were the other resort or the alternative for traditional face-to-face education. As a result, higher education institutions sought to provide a new form of education that fits with the current situation, so they adopted eLearning as an alternative in order to ensure the continuation of the educational process.

In the Gaza Strip, all higher education institutions rely on face-to-face learning and sometimes blend with eLearning which not all professors favour. However, during the Covid 19 pandemic the majority of higher education institutions have asked professors to use different eLearning programs besides using social networks. There are some efforts made in Palestine to adopt eLearning in the learning process such as presenting some courses online and adopting eLearning as an enhancement tool in some other courses (Abou Shaaban, 2009, p. 20). In other words, they based on facilitated instructor-led eLearning courses and student-centered learning. This type provides "*different levels of support from tutors and instructors and collaboration among learners*" (Kavitha and Lohani, 2019). Besides this, "*it offers a great flexibility in the educational methodology, in the administration of contents, in the synchronous and/or asynchronous interaction between teachers and learners, in the organization and in the structure of the course, in the educational plans, in the support, the tracking and the evaluation of the student*" (Della, La Mura & Petrino, 2005).

2. Literature Review

2.1 eLearning

eLearning is a concept which morphologically merges from electronic-based learning. A considerable number of terms are also used to describe this mode of teaching and learning. Those include online learning, virtual learning, distributed learning, network and web-based learning (Muthuchamy & Thiyagu, 2011, p. 232). eLearning comes in many variations and is often a combination of them. It can either be computer-based learning (CBL) or web-based learning (WBL) and those can either be synchronous or asynchronous. In the latter type "*learners need high Internet connecting costs, and shift work, which is difficult to schedule*" (Veries, 2005) ; "*other means of communication are utilized that do not require real time responses such as: e-mail, list serves, threaded discussions, blogs, and online forums*" (Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, 2006) and it happens at any time. Nonetheless, synchronous requires that "*learners need high levels of guidance, low learning motivation levels, limited computer experience, and content involving interpersonal skills*" (Veries, 2005). Besides, real time communication such as video conferencing, teleconferencing, and online chat programs is implemented, (Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, 2006). It happens collaboratively and at the same time with a group of online learners and usually a teacher. Both types "*provide opportunities for learners to work more independently, expand their agency, and learn to use tools and strategies that they otherwise might not have. While it is not recommended to experiment in emergency situations, innovation, creativity and resilience are required to make things work*" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2020).

2.2 eLearning and TEFL

In the current era, the Covid 19 Pandemic era, it is essential to provide English as a foreign language (EFL) learners with self-learning and life-long learning skills. eLearning is one of recent foreign language (FL) teaching/ learning trends which seeks to enhance such skills. Trokelshvili and Jost (1997) and Alias and Hussin (2002) have invited FL teachers to integrate recent technology and eLearning in teaching foreign language (TFL) to provide FL learners with authentic and natural environment through different tasks and activities. In eLearning environment and tools, FL learners experience real-life communication throughout expressing their ideas, opinions and building up relationship with different members by using FL (Carmen et al, 2003, pp. 12-15). In addition, Samuels and Zaitun (2008) and Al-Masri (2003) elaborated that communication tools, whether audio like chat or written like chat, discussion and e-mail are useful in developing EFL because learners feel free in expressing their ideas and these tools encourage shy learners to participate and develop their knowledge and their use of language. Abou Shaaban (2009, p. 32) pointed out the benefits of other eLearning in TEFL, she mentioned that the activities types and teaching strategies adopted in eLearning meet learners' needs and individual differences and e-resources allow learners to develop their knowledge of and about English language by accessing a lot of free online FL resources. Besides, learners can contact with native speakers who help them in acquiring FL. Moreover, it saves learners' time in knowing their writing, structure and vocabulary errors and correcting them electronically because online programs help learners in browsing reading and digesting information from the web. Furthermore, eLearning environment enables professors to adapt effective teaching methods, pair and group activities and self-study Kavitha & Lohani (2019).

2.3 Obstacles of eLearning in Palestinian Higher Educational Institutions

Despite the fact that eLearning cannot replace traditional classroom learning, it is mostly a socio-cognitive activity. *"Not every student will find eLearning suitable ... in many cases; eLearning can significantly complement classroom learning"* (Goyal, 2012, pp. 40-41). *"While online programs have significant strengths and offer unprecedented accessibility to quality education, there are weaknesses inherent in the use of this medium that can pose potential threats to the success of any online program"* (Illinois Online Network and the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 2007). Some of these obstacles can be the instructor's low level of skills to design courses by using technology. There is a lack of basic necessary computer skills, a need for instructional technology experts, a need for specialists to design learning contents electronically, a need for well-trained experts to prepare learning material and use the e-program, and a lack of experiences exchange between the teachers (Abou Shaaban and Hammad, 2006). Instructor faces difficulties in tracking a huge number of learners in many courses, needs complicated steps to perform a specific task, needs effort and time to design effective WebCT course. There is also lack of copyrights availability for contents in e-programs, and a lack of suitability in sufficient degree for all subjects. Learners may ignore the role of eLearning and lack basic necessary computer skills (Al-Riffi and Abou Shaaban, 2008).

2.4 Previous Studies

eLearning in higher educational institutions simulated the interest of researchers. Some studies focused on eLearning and TEFL such as: Alshehab (2013) who found out that Internet and eLearning methods improved learners' ability in translation from English into Arabic. Bijeikienė, Rašinskienė & Zutkienė (2011) pointed out and highlighted teachers' experience with and attitudes towards the blended learning courses created at their university and the application of ICT and the use of blended teaching and learning within the curriculum of general English language. While, Al-Jarf (2006) revealed the effect of using online learning in EFL vocabulary instruction from home as a supplement tool to classroom instruction. Al-Masri (2005) also indicated how various WebCT tools develop an effective TEFL course for fourth-level learners specialized in English at IUG. Within the same context, Rajaretnam (2004) study was based on using online grammar quizzes as a tool in teaching grammar and EFL learners' skills to use of the computer to access information and as a tool to facilitate English language practice activities.

From another angle, there are different studies talked about the instructional design and difficulties of using eLearning in higher institutions, for instance: Goyal (2012) concluded that eLearning is cost effective as course content once developed, easily used and modified for teaching and training. E-learning also provides learners with freedom from carrying heavy school bags and stop cutting of trees for the sake of paper, pencil and rubber. E-learning is the future of education as it is interactive, interesting and entertaining way of learning, and will soon replace the paper books in the form of touch screen tablets. AlAwaawdaa (2012) investigated the difficulties of eLearning at Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip from professors and learners' perspectives. Al-Riffi and Abou Shaaban (2008) highlighted the most frequent obstacles that faced Palestinian university professors and learners during eLearning such as: using oral communication tools and negative attitudes and weak motivation among learners. Al-Jaser (2009) presented the common difficulties that face higher educational institutions in using eLearning. Al- Ghazawi et al (2008) explored the importance of integrated eLearning in higher education curricula in terms of instructional improvement. The results of the study showed that instructional design is an important factor in an integrated e-learning that will help learners interact and cooperate with each other effectively in different ways to enhance their learning. Abou Shaaban and Hammad (2006) revealed that using WebCT in teaching provides professors with a lot of advantages, such as motivating them to use recent technology and develop their computer skills but it needs effort and time to design effective WebCT course and track huge number of learners in many courses. On the other hand, it decreases the opportunity for practicing book-based learning and developing learners' computer skills.

2.5 Commentary

It is obvious that eLearning in higher education has been the concern of researchers around the world. Some studies mentioned the benefits of e-courses on TEFL. This means that using eLearning in teaching and learning FL is beneficial and highly needed for enrich FL learners with self-learning style and relevant e-resources for continual learning.

On the other hand, some studies focused on highlighting the common obstacles and difficulties of using eLearning this helps professors, learners and administrative staff in the high educational institutions to reach high level of quality in eLearning courses by meeting such difficulties with suitable solutions. The current study designed the open questionnaire based on reviewing previous studies. Up to the best knowledge of the researcher, there are no studies in Palestine which investigated TEFL professors' eLearning experiences during the Covid 19 pandemic. Hence, the researcher noticed that there is a need for revealing TEFL professors' eLearning experiences during the Covid 19 pandemic as the first experience for higher educational institutions, to present all courses in electronically, to show the strengths and weakness aspects of such experiences.

3. Statement of the Problem

During the Covid 19 pandemic in the second semester 2019/ 2020, the higher educational institutions asked all professors to continue the teaching/ learning materials by presenting e-course suddenly without careful instructions, which resulted in a confusing teaching and learning atmosphere. TEFL is one of the most important specializations which professors and learners have fought such unique experience. So, were TEFL professors and learners having sufficient skills to run eLearning? were the eLearning standards and strategies considered in the presented courses? Were the educational objectives of the courses achieved? Were there obstacles face TEFL professors and learners?

4. Material and Methods

To achieve the aim of the research, the descriptive research design was followed. A sample of (32) TEFL professors from (8) higher education institutions in the Gaza Strip completed an open-ended question questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first one includes three questions about professors' general information while the second one presents seventeen questions which enable TEFL professors reflect on their eLearning experience. (95) professors were asked to complete the questionnaire but only (32) responded. All professors who completed the questionnaire have had experience with eLearning in TEFL courses in the second semester of the academic year 2019/ 2020 are full -time TEFL professors in their institutions. The responses were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. To check the relevance and clarity of the questionnaire, a panel of (5) professors reviewed it. The researcher considered their recommendations to modify the questionnaire.

5. Results and Discussion

A: General Information about TEFL Professors

The first part of the open questionnaire which consisted of three questions were asked about general information. The results were summarized as follows:

- The TEFL professors are divided into (3) females and (29) males from (8) higher educational institutions. All of them had several years of experience ranging from (15 - 40) years.
- The average number of e-courses professors taught ranges between (2- 6).
- The total number of learners in each course ranged between (18 – 250).

B: eLearning Experience

The second part of the questionnaire requires that TEFL professors reflect on their eLearning experiences by completing seventeen questions. The following is the summary of their reflection.

- **Using eLearning programs before the Covid 19 pandemic**

The results showed that 83%, i.e. (26) professors had never used eLearning before and it is the first time for them. However, only 17%, i.e., (6) professors had previous experience for different purpose such as sending assignments, presenting support lectures and doing virtual classes.

- **Receiving training from institution on eLearning**

The participants stated that 60%, i.e. (19) amongst them did not have previous training, only 12%, i.e. (4) watched videos to know how to use Google classroom and Zoom and the rest, i.e. 27% had joined eLearning training courses at their institutions. This revealed that most of TEFL professors had not received training. The result here is confirmed by Samarawickrema & Benson (2004) who mentioned that academic staff in the developing countries have not sufficient experience in preparing e-courses and use eLearning tools. So, they need hard efforts to develop their eLearning skills. The researcher believes that this is pertaining to the fact that academic institutions in Gaza only approve the face-to-face traditional teaching method where the professor just tells, and students are passive recipients. Only few teaching aids particularly the technologies are used due to the faulty belief that technologies are expensive and time consuming. In addition, the researcher figures out that TEFL professors at Gaza would not prefer change. Moreover, eLearning is widely based on already-designed e-courses and hence the institutions do not give chance for professors to try designing e-courses by themselves as it is costly to pay extra wages for professors.

- **Developing eLearning skills to complete the courses virtually with learners**

The calculated percentages and aligned with the results in the section above indicated that 27% of TEFL professors felt confident because they relied on their previous experience or background knowledge and practices in eLearning. Only four of them, i.e., 12% to some extent felt confident because they depended on their self-learning by navigating the Internet and watching YouTube, colleagues guide and computer staff department in the institution to gain the needed skills. Nevertheless, the majority of participants, namely nineteen 60% suffered and felt frustrated a lot in completing their teaching. This result matches TEFL professors' answers in the previous question which points out those professors were eager to complete the courses virtually by using different techniques.

- **Time spent daily with eLearning**

The professors revealed that they were mostly spending (4 – 7) hours daily in preparing and presenting eLearning materials. Besides, they reply on learners' questions through different eLearning programs used or evaluated learners' responses on the activities and assignments. In fact, most of learners did not use eLearning before so professors have to keep in touch with learners most of the time to meet their needs and answer their questions. Moreover, learners need psychological support, which also needs further time because they were learning in pandemic time. It is worth mentioning that Palestinian TEFL professors are usually working under pressure since they are overloaded since they have a lot of teaching duties and some managerial and official duties to do. All this prolongs the period they deliver an e-course.

- **The eLearning programs and the social network media used during this course**

Participants mentioned that during the Covid 19 Pandemic they used a wide range of eLearning media; the most common amongst which are Google classroom, Zoom, Google meet, Hangout, WhatsApp, Facebook, email, Moodle and Facebook, BBB virtual classes, Skype, and Camtasia. The different eLearning programs used by professors was an indicator for the need of focusing on developing different language skills. Within the same contexts, Heafner & Plaisance (2012, p. 464) mentioned that using different synchronous and asynchronous tools are "*designed to facilitate communication and knowledge-sharing among learners.*" So, different tools motivate learners to practice the different language skills. Professors maintained that students this way got rid of the face-to-face learning distractors such as shyness and being under focus. Students through the eLearning classes felt much more relaxed and hence got actively involved in the virtual classes and did their assignments in percentages higher than in the traditional learning.

- **Performing virtual meetings/ classes**

TEFL professors' responses revealed that (12) professors, i.e. (36%) performed (3) virtual meetings weekly as assigned by university academic affairs. They maintained that (15) out of the total , i.e. (45%) held (3 – 5) virtual meetings during the whole course using Zoom. Five professors, i.e. (15%) used Facebook messenger, WhatsApp and Zoom three times weekly. One professor only mentioned that: "*I held three meetings through Zoom application every three weeks. And on the messenger of either Facebook or WhatsApp nearly every day*" and another one said that "*Weekly I have around 3 live meetings and 5 recorded ones.*" That is because TEFL professors recognized the importance of virtual meeting in clarifying difficult topics, create satisfaction atmosphere in learning and facilitate learning.

- **Drawing an action plan for using eLearning to complete courses virtually**

Five professors, i.e. 15% set the schedule of presenting the material and meetings and provided learners with the schedule without talking about teaching methods and evaluation types, however the rest did not draw their plan. Here are two responses from professors about their plans: "*Yes, by setting a schedule to meet on weekly basis to make my work easy and clear to finish the courses on time and providing learners with detailed explanation on how to work.*" "*Yes, by recording videos, meetings by zoom and class work.*" and "*Sure I did.*"

Some of the technologies I used had some drawbacks. Since then I quitted using those technologies such as Facebook classroom since the recording is online and open to all."

Abou Shaaban (2009, p. 37) mentioned that e-course action plan refers to "the process and procedures followed to present the learning material in a suitable way enhancing learners' needs and interest, and meeting individual differences in an online learning environment in order to achieve the learning/ teaching objectives." In this respect, there are tips suggested by educators to be considered in planning e-courses. The action plan of e-courses should include course description, the aims and outcomes of the course, the pre-requisites, the course requirements and assignments, the distribution of the syllabus over weeks of the semester, the distribution of marks over the course requirements, the teaching strategies, glossaries, communication tools, rules and policies and recommended readings and links to online resources, as well as additional information on specific topics (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2020 and Kavitha & Lohani, 2019). In addition, FAO (2011pp. 13- 14) asked e-courses designers adopt learner-centered content, create flexible scheduling, engage learners and motivate learning by presenting different types of assignments and different tools of communication and interaction and promote learning personalization based on learners' interests and needs. In brief, the course action plan is the path of achieving course objectives by drawing the procedures with elements, tools and participators' roles.

- **Teaching strategies used to present the learning/ teaching material via eLearning environment**

All TEFL professors relied on learner-centered approaches in presenting learning materials via eLearning. They mentioned different teaching strategies as shown in the following quotations: "*Provide information, repeating some of the tasks and cooperation, between learners to achieve given task, lecturing, video- recorded lectures, group discussion, self-learning, projects and assignments.*" "*After uploading three videos I make an online discussion groups with learners. Work sheets*", "*Lecturing, discussion, video- recorded lectures ... etc.*" and "*I intended to use the flipped classes in a way that I used to post the recorded class then have a live session for discussion and feedback.*"

As mentioned before, TEFL professors recognize the role of activating different teaching strategies and programs on developing English language different skills. This notion is confirmed by Hall and McCune (2005) and Kavitha & Lohani (2019) who believed that online learning should promote productive and satisfying learning interactions, and develop problem-solving and increase critical thinking abilities and foster learners' engagement to meet different learning styles and differences. In other words, TEFL have to consider three types of teaching strategies in designing e-courses learning materials as mentioned by FAO (2011, p. 47):

- a) Expositive methods which emphasize "absorption" of new information through using presentations, case studies, worked examples, demonstrations.
- b) Application methods which emphasize the active processes learners use to perform procedural and principle based tasks and build new knowledge through demonstration-practice method, job aids, case-based or scenario-based exercises, role play, simulations and serious games, guided research, project work.

- c) Collaborative methods which emphasize the social dimension of learning and engage learners sharing knowledge and performing tasks in a collaborative way through online guided discussions, collaborative work and peer tutoring.

Some of the most popular eLearning teaching strategies are: learning contracts, lecture, discussion, self-directed learning, mentorship, small-group work, project, collaborative learning, case study and forum which focuses on reinforce learner-centered approach through motivating communication tools, assignments and evaluation tools, encourage self and lifelong learning and develop life skills by combining learners to work in groups or pairs and asking learners to express their opinions and respect each other's opinions, help each other, develop each other's work, and solve situated problem (Abou Shaaban, 2009, p. 40).

- **Types of activities used to activate learners' participation and learning**

In their response to the question regarding the most frequently used activities to activate their students' participation, TEFL professors named different types of activities such as: quizzes and virtual presentations, giving assignments, open-ended questions, and commentaries. These different types are suitable with the different TEFL course objectives which vary among listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Within the same context, some previous studies such as Rajaretnam (2004) and Al-Masri (2005) tested the role of different eLearning tools in helping TEFL learners in achieving course objectives.

- **The following up and evaluation strategies used with learners**

Evaluation is one of the required components in the pedagogical process. It is the final stage where educators check whether the objectives are met or not. This can be tackled formally or either informally in so many ways. As for the study participants, thirty professors, namely (94%) mentioned that they based on two types of following up and evaluation strategies which are question/answer and discussion. Learners had to read a material or watch a video or attend professor presentation then answer specific questions. All learning difficulties and misunderstanding points were discussed and feedback in discussion sessions was provided electronically. Two professors mentioned that they only adopted question and answer evaluation tasks without providing learners with feedback because they had more than (100) learners in each course. Some of professors' responses were: "*Questions and answers; I delivered questions for learners and invited them to read a chapter and answer these questions. After that I handed model answers for learners to compare them with the answers they wrote.*" "*Giving assignments, correct them and give feedback. And discuss the point they did not understand in the videos.*" "*I have discussed with and explained everything to them to convince them of the ease of e-learning, overcoming difficulties in front of them. I am on their side to overcome all obstacles together.*"

Here professors in addition to their academic roles such as delivering electronic lectures, providing students with activities and selecting supplementary materials for them to enhance their learning, provide affectional and psychological support for their students to enable them get absorbed in the new style of learning.

The results indicate that TEFL professors are in constant need to know more about e-assignments specially that develop EFL learning. Compatible with this, International

Baccalaureate Organization (2020) advice e-course designers to present assignments which include multimedia assignments that require learners to remix pictures, videos, online resources and text into their own creations and enable learners to work together collaboratively. Besides, assignments should embed learners' personal experiences and context into any assessed content. Moreover, the learners have to be provided with very clear instructions on how to submit work online. In addition, Abou Shaaban (2009, p. 38) asked e-course designers to provide learners with timely feedback, establish flexible and responsive student's roles and responsibilities, present exercises that might develop thinking skills, provide opportunities for learners to assess their own learning, include quizzes with varied questions in terms of types and levels, indicate questions depending on real life situations and issues, and motivate learners to search through web sites or surrounding environment in order to answer some questions.

- **Guide/ help learners to use e-course**

As mentioned earlier in the previous section, professor's roles vary according to the current state. In addition to being knowledge providers, they are facilitators, mentors, selectors ...etc. In this regard, all the (32) TEFL professors talked about the programs they used to guide learners on how to use e-course but they did not mention the general guidelines presented for learners such as: guiding students how to send homework, deal with communication tools, or whatever. Some of them said that this was also possible through the tutorials: "*Through an explanatory video, in the zoom meeting and WhatsApp group.*" And this had an ultimate outcome "*Encouraging students to participate in the activities through Google classroom and WhatsApp.*"

Since it was a unique and surprising experience for learners, they did not have sufficient skills that enable them to deal with eLearning material and tools as well as technical problems. Therefore, TEFL professors took into consideration provision of adequate support continuously by employing various social networking and eLearning programs to facilitate learning and help learners to achieve courses objectives.

- **Achieving eLearning course objectives**

All (32) TEFL Professors based on learners' positive results in quizzes, exams, synchronous discussions and interaction to measure the achievement level of course objectives. This response demonstrates the extent of which TEFL professors are keen to measure the level of objectives achievement in the various stages of e-course implementation. And this is what they pointed out when they mentioned the various types of activities used to follow up learners and increase participation during learning process. On the other hand, there is no indication that they were focusing on developing learners' thinking skills and team work, suiting real life situations, and giving immediate feedback.

- **Learners' reactions and attitudes towards the courses**

TEFL professors commented on learners' reaction and attitudes towards eLearning from their own perspectives. All (32) TEFL professors mentioned that technical problems constitute an essential problem for EFL learners. For instance, (18) TEFL professors, i.e. 56% reported that most the learners participated and reacted effectively, and found it was a great opportunity to use technology in learning/ teaching process. Also, they added a

lot of learners participated actively in the virtual classes and almost all of them did the electronic activities. On the other hand, (14) TEFL professors, namely 44% revealed that learners' reaction and participation were very weak as learners lack the required skills needed for participating in e-courses, which affects their attitudes which were negative.

It is worth mentioning here that Palestinian national academic institutions differ in their dealing with the pedagogical process during the Covid 19 pandemic. Some took it seriously and directly started finding alternatives for face-to-face learning. Those institutions do have infrastructure which suits eLearning. Meanwhile other universities completely adopted the traditional learning system, so they found it difficult to cope with the current situation and hence they are not equipped with the technologies required for the eLearning.

To put it in a nutshell, TEFL learners' reactions varied between enthusiastic because of ease of the learning process since they study in their own free time and pessimistic due to the lack of any prior training for them and the weakness of the auxiliary capabilities such as the Internet. This result concurs with Paulus and Robert's (2006) which indicated that learners' satisfaction with online courses is influenced by three constructs: instructor variables, technical issues, and interactivity.

- **Role of TEFL professor in eLearning courses during the Covid 19 pandemic**

The following are the different roles in eLearning courses during the Covid 19 pandemic as mentioned by (32) TEFL professors: tutoring and guiding, support, encouraging, and clarifying different issues related to the material that they teach or related to the use of the different technological facilities, directing learners and guiding them, a moderator, a facilitator, activity designer, an evaluator and feedback provider. Distinctive and modern roles commensurate with the e-learning environment mentioned by TEFL professors which reflect their awareness of the difference between face-to-face courses and e-courses. TEFL professors believe that the student lives under great psychological pressure from the unknown, so they need to distinguish their roles to meet the latter's worries and fears. Moreover, the different teaching methods used to present e-courses and different assignment types required different roles played by professors.

- **Challenges faced TEFL professors during eLearning experience**

As a matter of fact, eLearning was not part of the instructional plans or policies in many Palestinian national higher education institutions as they mainly adopt the face-to-face learning system. Therefore, eLearning was not an option but an alternative during the Covid 19 pandemic. Many universities did not even have the infrastructure for eLearning but were obliged to adopt it. This resulted in many challenges for both professors and students alike.

The results revealed that (26) TEFL professors, i.e. 80% stated that they did not have enough knowledge about designing and developing e-courses and using eLearning tools in TEFL courses. By the same token, (30), i.e. 92% stated that some technical problems appeared due to electricity frequent cuts or internet bad service and (32), 100% clarified that FL needs synchronous practice and imitate feedback for most of language skills which were impossible to achieve with huge number of learners and too much/tough duties. Another challenge mentioned by all professors was the difficulty to

create, follow up and provide feedback for more than one e-course at such a short time. The challenges faced TEFL professors confirmed with what has been mentioned in ALAwaawdaa's (2012), Al-Riffi and Abou Shaabans' (2008) and Abou Shaaban and Hammads' (2006) studies. Those points harmony with what has been mentioned earlier when they talked about their previous experience with eLearning and training. This reflects the urgent need for conducting training courses for TEFL professors about eLearning and provide them with facilities to overcome such challenges and the planning from higher education institutions.

- **Challenges faced learners**

From the professors' perspective, the common challenges faced learners in eLearning were:

- lack of internet access and frequent electricity cuts,
- Lack of knowledge about and in eLearning,
- Nonawareness regarding their roles in the eLearning process
- Complaints of the many assignments they have,
- difficulty to use the mic in the virtual classes,
- learners lack required skills and motivation and participation in eLearning activities.

ALAwaawdaa's (2012), Al-Riffi and Abou Shaabans' (2008) and Abou Shaaban and Hammads' (2006) studies pointed out and agree with the challenges that face university learners in using eLearning.

- **Action plan for next eLearning courses**

Based on what has been mentioned in the above section, namely, challenges that TEFL professors experienced in eLearning, they suggested the following points as action plan to be considered in their next eLearning experience:

- using only one platform,
- reducing the number of tasks,
- limiting the number of hours online,
- arousing learners' awareness,
- learning more on how to improve learning skills,
- starting by preparing learners first and training them how to use and respond and to make sure not to move to further step till they fully grasp the one they are in,
- identifying strategies and methods to be adopted, and
- preparing the course action plan which includes clear objectives with clear achievement procedures for each objective and specifying the need for communication tools, assignments, roles, and timeline for each procedure.

6. Recommendations

In the light of those findings, a set of recommendations are presented for more successful eLearning courses and practices in TEFL. It is necessary to provide training courses in the field of e-learning for learners. Besides, holding training courses about creating more appealing and effective atmosphere by integrating appropriate pedagogical methods in

TEFL courses. It is important to prepare a guide for designing and developing e-courses needs to be prepared and spread for TEFL professors. Moreover, different oral and written assignments and evaluation types have to be used in TEFL to enhance all language skills and teach integrated skills. In addition, higher education initiations need to provide professional technicians for maintenance of equipment's and to fix various technical malfunctions.

7. Suggestions for Further Research

Researchers are invited to conduct further research on best practices for designing and developing TEFL e-courses and evaluating TEFL e-courses which must suit the Covid 19 pandemic and TEFL learners' eLearning experiences during the pandemic. Moreover, researchers can study the effect of TEFL e-courses on enhancing learners' English language skills, creative and critical thinking skills as some of the urgently needed twenty first century skills.

About the Author

Sumer Salman Abou Shaaban earned a PhD in curriculum and teaching methods in 2009 from Ain Shams University, Egypt, and is now an associate professor in the Curriculum and Teaching Methods Department of the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University-Gaza, and since 2014 has served as the Deputy Dean of Planning and Quality Assurance Affairs. Sumer supervises and acts as an internal examiner for students completing their M.Ed. theses at AUG. She has published a number of papers in local and international journals and conference proceedings, and often serves as a reviewer for papers submitted to local journals and conferences. She is a certified PCELT master trainer.

References

- AlAwaawdaa (2012). The Difficulties of Utilization of eLearning at Palestinian Universities in the Gaza Strip in Viewpoint of Professors and Students. *Unpublished Thesis*, Faculty of Education: Al-Azhar University- Gaza.
- About Shaaban, S. (2009). The Effect of a suggested Online Program on Developing English Majors' Awareness Essay Writing Skills at the Islamic University-Gaza, *Unpublished Thesis*, Ain Shams University.
- About Shaaban, S. & Hammad, R. (2006). Evaluating the Use of WebCT in Teaching at the Islamic University of Gaza, *4th Conference on E-Learning Applications*, January 3– 4, The American University: Cairo.
- Alias, N. & Hussin, S. (2002). E-Learning in a Writing Course at Tenaga National University, *TEFL Web Journal*, http://www.teflweb-j.org/v1n3/Alias_Hussin.htm
- Al-Jarf, R. (2006). Teaching to EFL College Student Online, *First International Conference and Exhibition on E-learning: E-learning a New Era of Learning and Culture*, Bahrain University.

- Al-Jaser, Gh. (2009). Difficulties Facing Higher Educational Institutions in eLearning and Strategies to Meet them as Perspective from Academic Staff at Tiba University, *Unpublished Thesis*, Om Al-Qura University.
- Al-Masri, N. (2003). Using Technology (WebCT) for Teaching Advanced Writing, *APETAU 2nd International Conference (Association of Professors of English & Translation at Arab Universities (APETAU))*, University of Jordan: Amman, Aug. 26 -28, 2003.
- Al-Masri, N. (2005). Developing Effective TEFL Course with WebCT, *CALL-EJ Online*, Vol. 7, No.1, June 2005. <http://www.tell.is.ritsumeij.ac.jp/callejonline>
- Alshehab, M. (2013). *The Impact of E-Learning in Students' Ability in Translation from English into Arabic at Irbid National University in Jordan*. Vol.4, No.14, Available: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340540175>.
- Al-Riffi, M. & Abou Shaaban, S. (2008). Obstacles of Using eLearning in Palestinian Universities, *Second international conference*, Zain eLearning Center.
- Bijeikienė, V., Rašinskienė, S., & Zutkienė, L. D. (2011). Teachers' Attitudes towards the Use of Blended Learning in the General English Classroom. *Kalbu Studijos*, (18), 122-127. DOI: 10.5755/j01.sal.0.18.420.
- Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania (2006). *E-Learning Concepts and Techniques*, Department of Instructional Technology. http://iit.bloomu.edu/spring2006_eBook_files/index.htm.
- Della, F., La Mura, F. & Petrino, R. (2005). E-learning as Educational Tool in Emergency and Disaster Medicine Teaching, *Minerva anesthesiologica* 71(5):181-95. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15834347/>. PMID: 15834347.
- FAO (2011). *E-Learning Methodologies A Guide for Designing and Developing e-Learning Courses*, Rome: Italy.
- Goyal, S. (2012). *E-Learning: Future of Education*, *Journal of Education and Learning*. Vol.6 (2) pp. 239-242. DOI: 10.11591/edulearn.v6i4.168.
- Hall, V. & McCune, A. (2005). Engaging the Online Learner in Academic Writing. The APA Format Interactive Tutorial, In G. Richards (Ed.), *Proceedings of World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, and Higher Education 2005* (pp. 64-69). Chesapeake, VA: AACE.
- Heafner, T. & Plaisance, M. (2012). *Exploring the Effectiveness of Online Education in K-12 Environments*, Information Science Reference: USA.
- Kavitha, V. & Lohani, L. (2019). A Critical Study on the Use of Artificial Intelligence, e-Learning Technology and Tools to Enhance the Learners' Experience, *Cluster Computing* 22(3), DOI: 10.1007/s10586-018-2017-2
- Kulkarni, K. & Goyal S. (2012). E-Learning: Future of Education, *Journal of Education and Learning*. Vol.6 (2) pp. 239-242. DOI: 10.11591/edulearn.v6i4.168
- Illinois Online Network and the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois (2007). *Instructional Strategies for Online Courses*, Retrieved June 13, 2008 from <http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/index.asp>.
- International Baccalaureate Organization (2020). *Online learning, teaching and education continuity planning for schools*, Le Grand-Saconnex: UK.

- Muthuchamy, I. & Thiyagu, K. (2011). *Technology and Teaching: Learning Skills*, Kalpaz Publications: India.
- Prasad, R.K. (2016). *Implementing E-Learning? What Standards Should You Consider?* <https://trainingindustry.com/articles/e-learning/implementing-e-learning-what-standards-should-you-consider/>.
- Rajaretnam, T. (2004). Using Online Grammar Quizzes for Language Learning, *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. X, No. 8, August. <http://iteslj.org/Article/Rajaretnam-OnlineQuizzes.html>.
- Samarawickrema, G. & Benson, R. (2004). Helping academic staff to design electronic learning and teaching approaches, *British Journal of Education Technology*, Vol. 35, No. 5, 659- 662. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0007-1013.2004.00422.x>.
- Samuels R. J. and Zaitun A. B. (2008). VELT: An e-learning Tool to Improve the Teaching and Learning of the English Language, *2nd International Conference and Exhibition on E-Learning*, Bahrain University, 28 – 30 April.
- Trokeloshvili, D. & Jost, N. (1997). The Internet and Foreign Language Instruction: Practice and Discussion, *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. III, No. 8. <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Trokeloshvili-Internet.html>.
- Veries, J. (2005). E-Learning Strategy: A Framework for Success, *Learning Circuits*, SATD Website <http://www.learningcircuits.org/2005/aug2005/devries.htm>.

Creative Commons licensing terms

Author(s) will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Foreign Language Teaching shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflicts of interest, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated into the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).