

Online Teaching: EFL Instructors' Strategies and Challenges

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إستراتيجيات وتحديات أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية خلال التدريس عبر الإنترنت

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Abstract:

This qualitative study investigated the strategies adopted and challenges faced by Libyan university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors when teaching online. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine purposively selected EFL instructors whose responses were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that instructors employed a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online instruction, facilitated student discussions, adopted continuous assessment, and provided feedback. The study also found that instructors encountered challenges related to insufficient infrastructure (unstable electricity and internet connections) and pedagogical difficulties (material design, assessment, and time management). Moreover, the findings contribute to the local literature on online teaching and guide university decision-makers and EFL instructors in adopting online teaching. The study stresses the need for institutional support for instructors through providing professional development programmes to overcome challenges and ensure effective online teaching. Instructor procedures of overcoming the challenges were not investigated, indicating an area for further research.

Keywords: Online Teaching, EFL Instructors, Strategies, Challenges.

المخلص

تناولت هذه الدراسة النوعية الاستراتيجيات والتحديات التي يواجهها أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات الليبية عند التدريس عبر الإنترنت. وقد أجريت مقابلات شخصية مع تسعة من أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية قد تم اختيارهم بشكل هادف، وتم تحليل أجوبتهم باستخدام التحليل الموضوعي. وكشفت النتائج أن الأساتذة استخدموا مزيجاً من التدريس المتزامن وغير المتزامن عبر الإنترنت، وسهّلوا مناقشات الطلاب، واعتمدوا التقييم المستمر، وقدموا التعقيبات والملاحظات. كما أظهرت الدراسة أن الأساتذة واجهوا تحديات تتعلق بالبنية التحتية (مثل عدم استقرار الكهرباء واتصالات الإنترنت) والتحديات التربوية (مثل تصميم الدروس، والتقييم، وإدارة الوقت). تساهم النتائج في الأدبيات المحلية المتعلقة بالتدريس عبر الإنترنت وترشد صنّاع القرار في الجامعات وأساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في تبني التدريس عبر الإنترنت. وتؤكد الدراسة على الحاجة الماسة إلى الدعم المؤسسي للمعلمين من خلال توفير برامج التنمية المهنية للتغلب على التحديات وضمان فعالية التدريس عبر الإنترنت. لم تتناول الدراسة طرق التغلب على التحديات من منظور الأساتذة، مما يبيح المجال لإجراء المزيد من البحوث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التدريس عبر الإنترنت، أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، إستراتيجيات، تحديات.

Introduction

Advancements in online technologies have brought significant changes to education, especially with the introduction of internet-based platforms that facilitate online teaching. Online teaching involves the use of computers connected to the internet, offering instructors the flexibility and convenience to teach from anywhere, anytime, and at any rhythm (Meisani, 2023). Moreover, online teaching offers increased learning opportunities and access to students (Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008). Jung (2005) claims that instructors benefit from teaching online by learning technological skills. Online teaching settings encourages learner participation, resulting in improved learning outcomes (Palloff and Pratt, 2007). Such an environment also provides learners with unlimited access to resources, improving their creative thinking and autonomous learning (Singay, 2020). While research on online teaching exists in the Libyan context, this study extends the literature by focusing on previously unexplored dimensions. Thus, this study aims to:

- 1- Investigate the strategies adopted by Libyan university EFL instructors when teaching online.
- 2- Explore the challenges Libyan university EFL instructors face when they teach online.

Literature Review

Modes of Online Teaching

The most common modes of online teaching are synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous online teaching refers to simultaneous, real-time interaction and collaboration between instructors and students via video conferencing and video streaming platforms (Perveen, 2016). Video-conferencing applications such as Zoom are characterised by facilitating group discussions and individual virtual meetings with learners (Torres, 2023). A synchronous session fosters a sense of community (Asoodar et al., 2014), and with the presence of the online instructor, it enables high motivation among learners to stay engaged in online activities when conducted (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). On the other hand, asynchronous online teaching requires no simultaneous real-time presence from either instructors or learners; instead, they can interact at different times from different locations (Yusop et al., 2020), offering more flexibility. In this mode, learners are supplied with “readily available material in the form of audio/video lectures, handouts, articles and [PowerPoint] presentations” (Perveen, 2016, p. 22). Such material can be accessed anywhere and at any time on platforms. This non-synchronous online setting eliminates shyness and offers learners the opportunity to provide creative responses to activities, given that instructors and learners meet in a non-live format. Moreover, asynchronous online teaching facilitates high-level learning skills, such as autonomous learning and critical thinking (Perveen, 2016).

Instructor Roles in Online Classes

In an online class, instructors communicate with learners through audio and/or written messages within a given mode of instruction (Varvel, 2007), in addition to text messaging and using email (Albrahim, 2020). Communication also involves instructors providing learners with information about course ground rules, such as regulations, due dates, netiquette, accessibility, the code of conduct, privacy, and copyrights (Darabi et al., 2006; Varvel, 2007). In addition, instructors play the facilitator role; they guide learners to online educational resources and materials, ensuring that they are ready for online learning. They also inform learners about which online platforms to use. Online facilitators explain the expectations, deadlines, and weekly time commitments that students must abide by during the online course (Abdous, 2011). They moderate discussions to stimulate learners' participation (Darabi et al., 2006) and observe learners as they complete their assignments (Abdous, 2011). Instructors also play the role of steering interactions among learners. Instructors formulate participation guidelines for learners and build a sense of belonging, which is essential for effective interaction (Abdous, 2011). They establish open and focused discussions. To achieve this, instructors build an enthusiastic atmosphere and answer questions during interactions while being aware of learners' needs, inviting them to engage in discussions. Online instructors are also tasked with providing timely, constructive feedback for learners, who themselves expect to receive such feedback about questions and assignments (Brindley et al., 2009). As a result, such feedback fosters learners' motivation and participation, especially when feedback is well-worded and provided kindly (Abdous, 2011). Moreover, instructors regularly collect feedback from learners to deal with any concerns immediately; consequently, such collected feedback provides practical indications of how effective the content and activities are in the online course (Abdous, 2011). In terms of assessing online learners, Moallem (2005) recommends that online assessment be continuous and conducted to assess students collectively rather than individually (as cited in Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 10). This type of assessment is advantageous as it eliminates cheating and deception in any form. Online assessment takes several forms, including assignments, quizzes, and regular learner participation in discussions (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Such assessment tools strengthen learners' self-learning (i.e., autonomy), expand learning opportunities, and increase the flexibility of the assessment process, ultimately contributing to the achievement of learning goals (Al-Maqbali and Al-Shamsi, 2023). Combined with timely feedback, continuous assessment keeps students informed about their performance throughout the course, establishing motivation, enthusiasm, and effective learning (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).

Challenges in Online Teaching

A review of previous research revealed that instructors face multiple challenges when teaching online. Unreliable internet connection and device shortages were trends in the literature. Such technical issues reduce interaction, cause instructor fatigue, and create negative attitudes toward online teaching (Wen, 2023; Alemu, 2024; Faza et al., 2024), thereby hindering the effective delivery of online lessons. ElZoghbi and Khashkhush (2013) reported that infrastructure deficiency posed a barrier to adopting online teaching. Similarly, Idris and Osman (2017) found that challenges about low infrastructure (poor internet services) hindered the implementation of online teaching. They contend that reliable infrastructure, including stable electricity, access to modern technology, and a reliable internet connection, secures successful online teaching courses. In addition, instructors encounter pedagogical challenges when teaching online, as learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction is limited in online settings. Such isolation reduces engagement and negatively affects collaborative learning. Moreover, instructors find it challenging to create a sense of community and belonging among learners (Ahmed & Opoku, 2022; Aladsani, 2022; Tao & Gao, 2022). To foster learner engagement, Richards and Thompson (2023) reviewed the literature and found that delivering interactive content, designing collaborative projects and creative activities, and providing clear communication were effective methods. Additionally, adapting to online teaching was another challenge identified in the literature. In particular, instructors struggle to use online learning platforms in online classes

(Huang, 2020; Joshi et al., 2020; Sunasee, 2020). This challenge stems from a lack of skills for teaching via online platforms, no prior experience, and insufficient knowledge of teaching online due to no previous adoption (Zhang et al., 2020; Hadjeris, 2020). To mitigate such a challenge, Na and Jung (2021) recommend that instructors be provided with tutorials addressing the distinction among online platforms and their features, and offering practical guidance on operating online classes. Such tutorials help instructors with limited online teaching knowledge not only gain experience, but also choose a suitable platform, thereby guiding instructors to conduct effective online courses. Online assessment is also among the trends of online instructor challenges in the literature (Jacobs, 2014; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Boitshwarelo et al., 2017). The concern lies in preserving academic integrity, i.e., eliminating learner cheating (Arnold, 2016). Pagram et al. (2018) claimed that in the absence of monitoring learners during online assessments, it is easier for them to cheat. To remedy this challenge, Ahmed and Opoku (2022) found that instructors turned a midterm exam into a project-based exam and utilised Respondus Lockdown Browser and iLearn platforms as online assessment tools that eliminate learner cheating.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool. In essence, interviews can elicit detailed and comprehensive responses from participants (Cohen et al., 2007), offering a deeper understanding and detailed insights into a social phenomenon (Gill et al., 2008). Semi-structured interviews are characterised by asking participants pre-formulated questions, allowing interviewers the flexibility to probe/prompt participants for further details (Lune & Berg, 2017). This approach was deemed ideal for capturing rich, in-depth information and uncovering nuanced insights into the strategies Libyan university EFL instructors adopt and the challenges they face when they teach online. Thus, a semi-structured interview guide was designed (see [Appendix](#)). To validate the interview questions, the researcher consulted three research experts who provided useful feedback on the relevance and alignment of the study aims with the interview questions. Interviews were conducted with nine EFL instructors recruited using purposive sampling until thematic saturation was reached. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants who meet certain criteria relevant to the research questions, specifically those who have experienced a certain phenomenon or a key concept (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Instructors with online teaching experience were selected as the criteria for selecting the study participants, whose responses were analysed using the thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Data Analysis and Discussion

The following table shows an analysis of themes emerging from the data. Participant quotes are also shown to support the analysis.

Table 1. Emergent Themes from Data Analysed with Supporting Participant Quotes.

Theme	Analysis	Participant Quote
Online Teaching Platforms	Participants reported that they mainly use Telegram for online instruction. In addition to Telegram, four participants revealed utilising video-conferencing platforms such as Google Classroom for lesson delivery.	<i>"I use Telegram to teach online because it is easy to use and supports uploading large-sized files and videos and a lot more features. I also use Google Classroom because is easy to use and control the online class when delivering live video sessions".</i>
Communication Tools	Participants reported using Telegram to create a course group to communicate with students about course-related information and updates, such as announcements, deadlines, PDF/PPT files, and schedules.	<i>"I post announcements, assignment due dates, materials, like PPT files, and every update related to the course on Telegram".</i>
Strategies of Online Lesson Delivery	Participants said they upload materials on the Telegram group. Online instruction was delivered either synchronously (by Google Classroom) or asynchronously (self-recorded explanations supplemented by relevant YouTube videos). Instructors also noted that they foster discussions and provide feedback.	<i>"First, I upload materials in PDF or PPT. When the internet is stable, I set up a live video session to explain the lesson. If the internet is not stable, I record a video explaining the lesson on my whiteboard at home. I also record my voice for extra clarification. I also discuss the lesson with my students and give them my feedback.".</i>

Theme	Analysis	Participant Quote
Fostering Student Participation	Participants stated that they encourage student participation in discussion by offering continuous, individualised support and also by awarding marks.	<i>"I motivate my students to take part in discussions by supporting them individually and offering extra marks".</i>
Online Assessment	Participants revealed employing continuous assessment to assess learners. In detail, they reported creating activities, exercises, quizzes, assignments, and projects, in addition to providing tasks and feedback after lessons.	<i>"I don't think examinations alone, whether midterm or final, are fair methods to assess students' performances; therefore, I conduct continuous assessment over the course and provide feedback".</i>
Challenges Faced	Instructor challenges in online teaching contained inadequate infrastructure (e.g., power outages, unstable internet) and pedagogical difficulties in time management, material design, and assessment.	<i>"Online teaching can be ineffective because we encounter a lot of electricity cuts and internet connection issues. Managing my time was also a major challenge, and designing materials for my students and assessing them online were challenging".</i>

Participants used a Telegram group to notify students of course updates, such as announcements and assignment deadlines. Navarro and McGrath (2021) state that sending course-related updates and announcements instils a sense of belonging and involvement among students, keeping them updated on course progress. Prior to the online lesson, participants uploaded lesson PDF and PPT files on Telegram. Participants delivered lessons synchronously (real-time instruction on Google Classroom) and asynchronously (posting pre-recorded videos on Telegram). Rampersad et al. (2024) also found that a blended approach, combining pre-recorded lectures and video-conferencing meetings, was adopted for online instruction, supporting the current study findings. In support, participants posted voice recordings and additional explanatory materials from YouTube. These findings concur with those of Seden et al. (2022) and Rampersad et al. (2024), who found that instructors led students to additional content resources through YouTube and other online links. After lesson delivery, participants established discussions and encouraged student participation by offering extra marks as an incentive. Baily and Card (2009) and Pagliari et al. (2009) stress that creating discussions is an effective strategy in online teaching, as it increases interaction and collaboration among students (Seetal et al., 2021).

Regarding assessing online learners, participants employed continuous assessment. This pattern of results is in line with Moallem's (2005) recommendations that online instructors should assess students using continuous assessment (as cited in Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 10). This approach involves creating activities, assignments, exercises, and tasks. These findings are consistent with Rampersad et al. (2024), who noted that instructors assigned students homework as a tool for continuous assessment. Furthermore, participants provided feedback to students after assessment. This aligns with the findings of Pagliari et al. (2009) and Hickling et al. (2021), who found that instructors provided timely feedback on assignments. Offering feedback after assessment allows students to clarify misunderstandings and achieve their learning goals (Martin et al., 2019).

During online teaching, participants identified insufficient infrastructure—unstable electricity and unreliable internet connection—as a challenge that negatively impacted the adoption of online teaching. This result is in line with Amro (2022), Idris and Osman (2017), and ElZoghbi and Khashkhush (2013), who found obstacles such as inadequate infrastructure (e.g., electricity and internet) hindered an effective online class. Participants in this study also faced pedagogical challenges, including material design, assessment, and time management. Junus et al. (2021) reported that assessing students' understanding, time management, and material design were significant instructor challenges, aligning with the present study results. In addition, Hickling et al. (2021) found time management being among the barriers to adopting online teaching, reporting that instructors often struggled with managing their time when designing materials and conducting assessments.

Conclusion

This study investigated the strategies adopted and challenges faced by EFL instructors when teaching online. Utilising qualitative semi-structured interviews, this study found that instructors employed the following strategies:

- 1- Establishing a course group on Telegram.
- 2- Keeping students posted on course-related updates, such as deadlines and announcements.
- 3- Uploading lesson PDF/PPT files to the Telegram course group.
- 4- Conducting synchronous lectures and posting asynchronous explanatory videos.
- 5- Adding further clarifications via self-voice recordings and YouTube-sourced videos.
- 6- Establishing discussions and encouraging participation by offering marks.
- 7- Conducting continuous assessment, e.g., activities, quizzes, and assignments.
- 8- Providing feedback.

The findings contribute to the local literature and provide valuable insights into instructors' strategies and challenges in online teaching. Practically, such insights indicate instructor readiness for adopting online teaching. They also guide university decision-makers and EFL instructors in adopting online teaching during disruptions such as petrol shortages and adverse weather, where face-to-face instruction becomes infeasible.

The study also found that online instructors encountered several challenges, including inadequate infrastructure (unreliable electricity and internet) and pedagogical difficulties (time management, material design, and assessment). This underscores the need for institutional training through professional development programmes focusing on providing instructors with organised lesson design, e.g., creating a repository of pre-designed, adaptable lesson templates and assessment tools to reduce time for individual planning. Programs should also focus on the effective use of online platforms (e.g., Google Classroom) for communication and collaboration. Besides, training should include comprehensive guidance on using online assessment tools such as iLearn and Respondus Lockdown Browser to ensure academic integrity and effective assessment, as found by Ahmed and Opoku (2022). The study was limited to investigating the challenges without probing into participant-proposed solutions, which warrants future research.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1: Semi-structured Interview Guide

No.	Questions	Follow-ups
1.	What online platforms do you use for lesson delivery? For what purpose?	Deadlines. Schedules.
2.	What teaching practices do you implement in an online lesson?	Live video sessions. Discussions.
3.	How do you motivate student discussions within your online teaching setting?	Continuous support. Marks.
4.	How do you conduct assessment? What techniques?	Activities. Assignments.
5.	What challenges do you face teaching online?	Connectivity.