

Face-to-face Vs. Online Learning: Differences and Challenges in Communication

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The current study attempts to investigate perceptions of EFL learners towards face-to-face vs. online learning focusing on differences and challenges in communication. The study used a mixed-method design to explain and thoroughly explore the issue. Quantitative data were collected and analyzed in the first phase, and qualitative data were collected and analyzed in the second phase. Quantitative findings reveal that most of the participants think that it is easier to communicate in a face-to-face learning class as opposed to an online learning mode. In all four variables—time management, motivation, ease and flexibility, and use of technology, the mean score for face-to-face learning is higher than for online learning. Though qualitative findings exhibit that the participants perceive both modes of learning as challenging, most of them think that communication in online learning has more challenges than in face-to-face mode of learning. The participants also proclaim that the low quality of the internet and little interaction are two significant issues in online communication which, they think, have no solutions. The study concludes that learners are satisfied with face-to-face learning as communication can be accomplished with little or no interruption. The findings of the current study suggest important implications for future research .

Keywords: Face-to-face learning; online learning; communication; challenges

The educational sector has recently experienced a notable shift due to the rise of online learning as an alternative to traditional in-person teaching methods. This shift has been further accelerated by the unprecedented challenges brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic, prompting educators and students alike to swiftly adapt to virtual learning environments (Sa'diah, Mujahidin, & Hartono, 2020). Online learning is a form of distance education that offers the courses synchronously, i.e., in live sessions, or asynchronously, i.e., students access the online material in their own time (Chisadza, Clance, Mthembu, Nicholls, & Yitbarek, 2021).

The change from face-to-face to online learning brought many challenges with it. Time management, motivation, the ability to use technology, availability of the internet, and quality of the internet service are some of the important factors to consider. However, for some students, this change might have brought some positive aspects, too. For example, saving commuting time, having flexible schedules, working at your own pace, and feeling confident being alone may be seen by some as positive aspects of online learning. Therefore, the need to examine the dynamics between face-to-face and online learning has become increasingly apparent, necessitating a thorough investigation of their strengths, challenges, and implications across various educational contexts.

Recent research underscores the growing importance of online learning, as technology offers flexibility and accessibility to learners (A. Ali, Khan, & Alouraini, 2023) who may be less satisfied in traditional classroom settings (Chisadza et al., 2021; Sa'diah et al., 2020). However, while online learning shows potential as a versatile educational tool, its effectiveness and suitability compared to face-to-face instruction require careful consideration, especially within the realm of language education.

Within the context of EFL, the distinction between face-to-face and online learning assumes particular significance, given the unique communicative demands and pedagogical objectives inherent in language learning. Despite the widespread availability of online courses, there remains a dearth of research focusing on the perceptions and views of English majors, particularly within the educational landscape of Pakistan.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the perceptions of Pakistani EFL learners regarding face-to-face and online learning, with a specific emphasis on communication nuances. Through the utilization of an explanatory sequential design, this research seeks to delve deeper into the multifaceted aspects of learning modalities and their implications for language acquisition and pedagogy.

The study has two main objectives:

1. To investigate English majors' perceptions of face-to-face and online learning regarding time management, motivation, ease and flexibility, and use of technology.
2. To explore the challenges in communication encountered by English majors in face-to-face and online learning environments.

Research Questions

1. What do English majors think about face-to-face and online learning in terms of time management, motivation, ease and flexibility, and use of technology?
2. What challenges do English majors face in communication in face-to-face and online learning settings?

Literature Review

Online Vs. Face-To-Face Learning

Online learning has appeared as a substitute for face-to-face learning. Tang and Lim (2013) claim that learners prefer online learning as opposed to face-to-face learning instructions because they are competent and confident in using technological tools and can learn independently. Other researchers have mentioned different reasons for choosing online learning. For example, Croxton (2014), Serttaş and Kasabalı (2020), and Wright (2017) consider the flexibility of time and place as an essential feature of online learning. However, both modes of learning can pose different challenges to students in different contexts.

Time management is a significant aspect of face-to-face and online learning. While some learners believe that online classes save time, others think it is difficult to manage time in online

classes. Serttaş and Kasabalı (2020) found that managing time is a challenge for learners in online learning as they can easily get distracted by instant messaging and browsing the internet. This has been observed by many other researchers, too. For example, Yeboah and Smith (2016) discovered that participants in their study had issues with time management in online learning. Therefore, the learners' choice, their willingness to participate, and their past experiences are some of the aspects that should be considered in studying the two modes of learning.

Learners' choice is very important in teaching-learning processes as some of the learners may feel more comfortable in one mode of learning than the other. Generally, it is observed that shy learners participate more in online classes than in traditional classrooms. Therefore, Alammary (2022) opines that a harmonious balance between face-to-face and online learning may increase student engagement. Proponents of this idea present different arguments in support of their claim. For example, Wright (2017) asserts that shy learners may not ask for an explanation in a face-to-face class because of the presence of their classmates; therefore, online classes give them a chance to become independent learners.

Motivation is another crucial factor in language learning. It gives learners a drive to get involved in a task or an activity (Ishtiaq, Hussain, & Ahmed, 2020). Scholars argue that allowing students autonomy can promote their motivation in an online learning environment (Abuhassna et al., 2020; Alzahrani, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020). However, all learners may not be equally comfortable with online learning. Yeboah and Smith (2016) suggest that new generations expect their instructors to mix online learning management systems into face-to-face classes. This might cater to the needs of both types of learners—those who feel motivated in online classes and those who feel comfortable in face-to-face classes.

Though online learning is considered easy and flexible, some learners may be reluctant to choose it for different reasons. One cause of reluctance may be the negative experience that learners or their peers may have had in an online course (Jaggars, 2014). These negative experiences might be different for different learners. For example, learners may not be proficient with the use of technology or they may not have a good internet facility. A bad connection might cause a lack of motivation among learners. Cigdem and Ozturk (2016) argue that the quality of internet service is very important in online classes as a server breakdown may negatively affect learners' participation and motivation.

Online medium changes the nature of student-student and student-teacher relationships (Arias, Swinton, & Anderson, 2018). The use of online material, in addition to the classwork, may supplement learners' understanding of the subject. Coates and Humphreys (2001) believe that the availability of online material is useful, but students should utilize it by actively engaging in it (as cited in Arias et al., 2018). In other words, technology is seen as something that learners can interact with. Shahid and Shaikh (2019) conclude that WhatsApp is a valuable tool for enhancing students' cognitive skills and fostering interpersonal connections between teachers and students. Thus, technology may serve as a facilitator in student-student and student-teacher relationships if learners can utilize it.

The Role of Communication in Learning

Communication is considered the soul of language learning. Abdul, Mahmud, Wello, and Dollah (2020) argue that it is one of the most important aspects that plays a crucial role in successful language learning. It is not only an exchange of ideas but also the exchange of meaning and understanding between teachers and students. It is a vent that lets the speaker and the listener transmit their feelings, emotions, gestures, and opinions. Communication is a dynamic process in which the speaker and the listener are actively involved, and their relationship in communication continuously

grows and develops. Ibsen-Jensen, Tkadlec, Chatterjee, and Nowak (2018) assert that the role of communication in language acquisition is undeniable.

Communication involves interaction between the speaker and the listener. It is a process of sending and receiving information and producing a suitable response (Mohammed, 2021). In other words, it does not just involve the meaning-making of the spoken words between teachers and learners and learners but is an exchange of gestures, facial expressions, and body language. Thus, for effective communication to occur, both the speaker and the listener must play their roles. However, with the advent of online learning, the dimensions of communication have also changed a lot. Sa'diah et al., (2020) argue that communication among parents, teachers, and learners becomes more important during online learning.

Previous Studies on Face-to-Face and Online Learning

Since the commencement of the online learning mode, a considerable amount of literature has been published on online learning and teaching. Al-Khresheh (2021) explored Jordanian EFL teachers' perceptions of online teaching, Jaggars (2014) compared face-to-face vs. online courses in a qualitative study. Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, and Thompson (2012) employed sociology students while Tratnik, Urh, and Jereb (2019) recruited business English students to compare their satisfaction in online vs. face-to-face classes. However, all these studies met conflicting results. Therefore, regional and demographic dynamics should also be considered while studying the two modes of learning.

The studies conducted in Pakistan also met mixed findings. Abbasi, Ayoob, Malik, and Memon (2020) and Shahzad and Aurangzeb (2021) found that students have negative perceptions about online learning. On the contrary, Z. Ali (2014) observed that students have positive perceptions about using the Internet for assignments and academic instruction-related information. The author discovered that female students were more positive about online learning as compared to male students. However, all these studies, just mentioned, have employed students of different majors, and it seems that students majoring in English have been ignored.

More recent studies have tried to study English majors' perceptions of face-to-face and online learning. Saputra, Saputra, Handrianto, and Agustinos (2022) investigated EFL students' perceptions of online learning in Indonesia. The study uncovered that students had positive perceptions of online learning. In a similar vein, Al-Mutairi and Elsayy (2022) studied the English Department's students and faculty members' perceptions in a university in Saudi Arabia. The authors unveiled that both the students and the faculty members were satisfied with the online mode of learning.

The literature review shows that extensive research has been carried out on online vs. face-to-face learning. However, no single study deals with the topic in greater depth. The vast majority of studies on online learning are either quantitative or qualitative. To date, no study has given a detailed account of the issue. Moreover, none of the studies mentioned above investigated English majors' perceptions of the two modes of learning in Pakistan.

This study makes a major contribution to face-to-face and online learning research in two ways. First, it employs an explanatory sequential design to study the issue in greater depth. Secondly, it attempts to uncover EFL students' perceptions of face-to-face and online learning in a Pakistani university.

Methods

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed method using an explanatory sequential design. The data were collected in two phases—quantitative data were collected and analyzed in the first phase, and qualitative data were collected and analyzed in the second phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Ninety-five students participated in the questionnaire survey and sixteen students volunteered to be interviewed. Open-ended interviews were conducted in the second phase. Due to the complete lockdown during COVID-19, the questionnaires were administered online, and the interviews were conducted in written form using Google Docs.

Participants

The study took place at a private university in Lahore, Pakistan. The participants were undergraduates and postgraduates pursuing their bachelor's, master's, and MPhil degrees in English. All the participants were Pakistani nationals. Participation was voluntary, and the participants' anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. It was made clear from the very beginning of the study that the participants could withdraw at any time.

Data Collection and Analysis

A 24-item questionnaire was used to collect the quantitative data in the first phase. Later, an open-ended interview was conducted to collect the qualitative data. The questionnaire and the interview were sent to five professors to check the validity of the instruments. Three professors responded with some recommendations. Most of these recommendations were about the number of statements in the questionnaire and wordings in both the questionnaire and the interview. Their recommendations were considered, and the required changes were made in the questionnaire and the interview. The questionnaire was piloted on ten students, and the interview was piloted on three students. Cronbach's Alpha was used to find the reliability of the questionnaire ($\alpha = 0.73$). The questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive analysis, and the interview was analyzed using thematic analysis.

Phase I: Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was split into two sections—demographic analysis and survey findings. The descriptive analysis of the closed-ended questionnaire items is presented first, followed by the explanation of the main findings. The results of each questionnaire item are displayed in the following tables. Table 1 shows a demographic analysis of the current study.

Table 1

Demographics

Total Participants	Gender		Age		Qualification	
95	Males	52.1 %	Above 23	51.1 %	Master's	61.7 %
	Females	47.9 %	21-23	30.9 %	Bachelor's	26.6 %
			18-20	18.1 %	SSC	11.7 %

As shown in Table 1, males accounted for 52.1 percent, while females accounted for 47.9 percent of the study participants. The statistics reveal that the participation of both genders is almost equal. The majority of the participants were above the age of 23, accounting for 51.1 % of all the participants. The participants between the ages of 21 and 23 were 30.9 %, while 18.1 % fell in the 18 to 20 years of age category. Regarding qualification, 61.7% have completed a master's degree, 26.6% of the participants have a bachelor's degree, and 11.7% have a secondary school certificate.

Phase II: Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic data analysis. The interviews included six (6) open-ended questions to supplement the quantitative findings. Sixteen respondents were asked to provide their views on online and face-to-face learning challenges in the first two open-ended questions. In the third question, they were asked to share their thoughts on how time management can be difficult in online or face-to-face learning. Similarly, the fourth question sought students' opinions on demotivating factors in the two modes of learning. In question 5, they were asked to explain the difficulties in communication in both modes of learning, and question 6 sought their opinions about the major challenges in using technology.

Six-phase model of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the qualitative data. The model includes these phases: familiarizing with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Atlas ti 9 was used to analyze the data. Open coding and in vivo coding were used. Earlier forty-seven codes and five themes were generated. The themes were reviewed and merged into more relevant themes, thus creating two main themes and six sub-themes at the end.

Results

Survey Results

Research Question 1: What do English majors think about face-to-face and online communication in terms of time management, motivation, ease and flexibility, and use of technology?

The second part of the questionnaire was divided into four sections: 'time management; 'motivation'; 'ease and flexibility; and 'use of technology.' Six questionnaire items (three for face-to-face and three for online learning) were created for each area to investigate the students' perceptions towards face-to-face and online communication. Table 2 shows an analysis of the first section—time management.

Table 2
Analysis of the first section—Time Management.

Face-to-Face Learning	N	Minimum	Maximum	mean
I think face-to-face communication saves time because it has little or no interruption.	95	1	5	3.96
I like face-to-face communication because repetition wastes time in online classes.	95	1	5	3.86
In my opinion, face-to-face communication saves time as it allows avoiding conflicts and misunderstandings.	95	1	5	3.85
Overall mean	95			3.89
Online Learning Learning				
I like online classes because commuting to the university every day wastes time.	95	1	5	2.73
I like online communication because it is easier to manage time for it.	95	1	5	2.88
I like online communication because instant messaging saves time.	95	1	5	2.94
Overall mean	95			2.85

Table 2 shows the result of the statements concerning participants' perceptions of time management in face-to-face Vs—online learning. According to the data, most participants believe that the face-to-face mode of learning saves time (3.96) since communication is generally not

interrupted in this mode. The statement achieved the lowest mean score (2.73) that commuting to the university wastes time. Overall, the mean score for face-to-face learning (3.89) is higher than the online learning score (2.85). Most participants think that time management is easier in face-to-face learning compared to online learning.

Table 3*Analysis of the second section — Motivation.*

Face-to-Face Learning	N	Minimum	Maximum	mean
I like face-to-face communication because teachers' presence motivates me to participate	95	1	5	4.06
I like face-to-face communication because my peers' presence motivates me to join the conversation.	95	1	5	3.92
I like face-to-face communication because I feel active and energetic.	95	1	5	3.95
Overall mean	95			3.98
Online Learning				
I like online communication because I feel that I am not being judged.	95	1	5	2.73
I like online communication because I feel confident being alone.	95	1	5	2.64
I like online communication because this experience is more enjoyable for me.	95	1	5	2.74
Overall mean	95			2.70

Table 3 shows the findings related to the participants' perceptions of the preference for face-to-face or online learning. As shown in the table, most participants (4.06) like face-to-face communication because their teachers' presence motivates them. The lowest score (2.64) was attained by the statement that says that participants feel confident in online communication when alone. Overall, the participants think they feel more motivated in face-to-face communication (3.98) compared to online communication (2.70).

Table 4*Analysis of the third section—Ease and Flexibility.*

Face-to-face Learning	N	Minimum	Maximum	mean
I like face-to-face classes because I can easily communicate with my teachers and classmates.	95	1	5	3.91
I can improve my communication skills better in face-to-face classes.	95	1	5	3.95
I like face-to-face communication because body language helps a lot in learning/and understanding.	95	1	5	4.01
Overall mean	95			3.96
Online Learning				
I like online classes because recorded videos can be seen many times.	95	1	5	3.47
I like online communication because it gives me an additional option of texting.	95	1	5	3.08
I like online communication because I can talk to a larger class without talking too loud.	95	1	5	3.04
Overall mean	95			3.20

Table 4 demonstrates participants' preferences for face-to-face vs. online communication. A vast majority of the participants (4.01) think that body language helps them learn and understand during a conversation. The statement that participants can talk to larger classes in online communication reached the lowest mean (3.04). Overall, the participants perceive that they are more at ease with face-to-face communication (3.96) than online communication (3.20).

Table 5

Analysis of the fourth section—Use of Technology.

Face-to-Face Learning	N	Minimum	Maximum	mean
I like face-to-face communication as I don't particularly appreciate using technology to learn a language.	95	1	5	3.19
I like face-to-face communication because I am not very good at using technology.	95	1	5	2.95
I like face-to-face communication because I can't focus on online communication due to the excessive use of Google and YouTube.	95	1	5	3.37
Overall mean	95			3.17
<hr/>				
Online Learning				
I like online communication because I have the knowledge and skills to manage different learning management systems.	95	1	5	3.11
I like online communication because I can gather more information about a subject with online support.	95	1	5	3.00
I like online communication because technology has made it more accessible.	95	1	5	3.11
Overall mean	95			3.07

Table 5 illustrates whether the use of technology has any role in communication. Composite scores have been attained in this section. The statement achieves the highest score (3.37) that participants cannot focus on online communication due to excessive use of Google and YouTube. The participants gave the lowest score (2.95) to the statement that they are not good at using technology. Technology does not significantly differ between face-to-face (3.17) and online communication (3.07).

Interview Results

Research Question 2: What challenges do English majors face in communication in face-to-face and online learning settings?

Following are the themes and the sub-themes that emerged from the data:

1. Challenges in Online Learning

i. Slow Internet in Online Learning

The first open-ended question concerned students' perceptions of significant challenges encountered during online communication. Respondents raised several concerns about internet problems. Due to poor audio quality, students regard internet issues as a barrier to comprehension. A student noted, "In online learning, sometimes I cannot comprehend some sentences owing to voice problems...I believe the main issue is audio". "There are various online obstructions such as internet issues and audio issues when sound breaks due to signal troubles," another student noted. One student sees the internet as the only barrier to online communication. Her response to the question about online communication challenges, "Just nothing but the issue of the internet signals," demonstrates

this challenge's intensity, which outweighs the challenges learners often experience during online communication.

The participants also proposed several ideas to deal with this issue. A student proposed that giving the lecture in written form may assist in overcoming such issues. He said, "To handle this problem, mentors should write whatever they say." Another participant suggested repeating and guessing the meaning as possible solutions to the issue. It was stated that "it is difficult to handle everything at once, so I repeat the same sentence or words or guess the meanings." Some students suggested that more money be invested in solving the problem. Comments such as "we try to get maximum speed by paying more cost" and "by reserving maximum budget to buy technology for online communication" indicate that purchasing higher quality internet packages is seen as beneficial by students to address poor internet connection during online learning. Furthermore, despite their best efforts, most participants proclaimed they see no solutions and cannot deal with these difficulties.

ii. Little Interaction in Online Learning

The respondents' second major problem in online learning was a 'lack of communication.' The absence of communication is closely related to the above-mentioned poor internet connection. The following is a participant's remark about the difficulty of maintaining smooth communication while communicating online: "One of the most significant issues is that the majority of online learning is one-way communication, with little interaction between learner and teacher." Similarly, students' responses to online communication challenges such as "can't raise the question during lecture ambiguities,," "lack of interaction,," "we have no gesture,," and "cannot interpret facial expressions" clearly reflect that lack of communication is a significant challenge that students face in online contact.

The absence of mutual communication and other students' attitudes toward online learning were the most demotivating aspects of online learning. Following are some of the participants' notable remarks about demotivating aspects of online communication: 'don't comprehend some points and can't ask questions because of time constraints, 'simply sitting and listening, no opportunity to ask questions and eliminate ambiguities,' 'lack of facial expressions in online ...', 'can't sense attitude and body language in online...!', 'can't always listen correctly in online...!' According to the findings, a key element contributing to students' demotivation in online learning is the lack of communication.

iii. Load Shedding in Online Learning

Another significant challenge that interrupts communication in online learning is electricity load shedding. Respondents think that they "cannot concentrate" and their time is wasted in online learning because of electricity load shedding. Students' responses such as "poor net and load shedding distract learning in online communication" and "electricity issue interferes with communication" indicate that slow internet and load shedding make communication challenging for students in the online mode of learning.

iv. Irregular Schedules in Online Learning

The second issue was irregular scheduling in online learning. Due to the irregular schedule of online classes, students are sometimes required to attend classes beyond business hours. This makes time management challenging for some learners, as mentioned by respondents in the present study, for example, "attention diverts to home issues in online ...", "difficult to be a student at home," and "inconsistent timetable in online classes." These responses reveal that dealing with irregular or inconsistent schedules in online learning makes time management difficult for learners.

2. Challenges in Face-to-Face Learning

i. *Lack of Confidence in Face-To-Face Learning*

In response to the question about the main problems during face-to-face communication, students highlighted lack of confidence as the sole but significant issue. Due to hesitancy, a student finds it challenging to negotiate learning topics during the learning process. He stated, "Hesitation makes the selection of words and the agenda of the discussion very difficult to negotiate." Similarly, a student had a "feeling of hesitation in speaking and lack of confidence" during face-to-face communication. Another student commented, "English is predominantly instructors' medium of instructions, and since students are unable to speak English well, they do not ask them for clarification," this indicates that students lack confidence in speaking English, which prevents them from participating actively in in-class activities and leave their lessons full of ambiguities.

Lack of confidence was identified as the most demotivating factor. Due to a lack of confidence in face-to-face communication, students find it frightening and demotivating. One respondent stated that "other students' reactions" cause demotivation during face-to-face communication. One more respondent echoed this sentiment: "When I don't know anything in face-to-face learning, I feel insulted and demotivated." The findings imply that students' lack of confidence and the courage to seek clarification of their questions leads to demotivation in this learning mode.

Furthermore, when asked how they deal with the issue of lack of confidence in face-to-face learning, the participants responded that they used strategies such as "questioning through written text," "watching YouTube motivational videos," and "self-practice" to boost their confidence. Still, they think that these strategies rarely work.

ii. *Time Management in Face-to-Face Learning*

The participants perceive that time management is challenging in face-to-face learning. Home affairs and emergencies were the main challenges that make time management difficult in face-to-face classes. A student remarked on the causes of time management challenges in face-to-face learning, saying, "Time management is tough in face-to-face learning owing to emergencies at home." Another commented, "It is tough to be a student at home," which implies that students are occupied with their household tasks, making time management difficult for them in face-to-face classes.

Discussion

The quantitative results show that most participants prefer face-to-face learning to online learning in terms of time management, motivation, ease and flexibility, and use of technology. In all four variables—time management, motivation, ease and flexibility, and use of technology, the mean score for face-to-face learning is higher than for online learning. Especially in the first two variables—time management and motivation, the difference in mean scores is much higher for face-to-face learning than online learning. This means that participants are more motivated and can manage time easily in face-to-face classrooms. Moreover, participants prefer face-to-face communication to online communication because they think that body language helps much in learning and understanding. Though most participants believe they are good at technology, they prefer face-to-face learning settings because they can't concentrate in online learning due to excessive use of Google and YouTube.

The qualitative findings reveal similar results. Most of the participants perceive that face-to-face learning has fewer challenges. They proclaim that low quality of internet and little interaction are two significant issues in online learning which, they think, have no solutions. One of the participants even went on to say that online communication is one-way communication with little interaction between learners and teachers. Moreover, respondents perceive that load shedding and

irregular schedules also pose challenges in online learning. Though participants think that both modes of learning have some challenges, they believe that face-to-face learning is less challenging than the online mode of learning. They pointed out only two challenges in face-to-face learning and they are a lack of confidence and time management.

These findings are in line with those achieved by Wright (2017). In Wright's (2017) study most of the students preferred face-to-face grammar lessons compared to online mode of learning. The study also concluded that the participants were more motivated in face-to-face classes than in online ones. Students think that traditional in-class learning experience gives them a better understanding, more interaction, and more enjoyment (Wright, 2017). In the current study, too, the participants believe that communication in face-to-face learning is uninterrupted and does not depend on electricity or technology. Furthermore, they think there is a 'lack of interaction' and they 'cannot interpret facial expressions' in online communication.

These results are also consistent with those reached by Arias et al. (2018), Abbasi et al. (2020), Chisadza et al. (2021), Shahzad and Aurangzeb (2021), and Spencer and Temple (2021). Arias et al. (2018) concluded that the face-to-face class performed significantly better than the online class regarding the exam average and improved post-test instructor questions. However, there was no statistical evidence for a difference in improvement in total post-test questions. Abbasi et al. (2020) and Shahzad and Aurangzeb (2021) discovered that students are not satisfied with online learning. Similarly, Chisadza et al. (2021) and Spencer and Temple (2021) observed that learners preferred face-to-face learning to online learning.

The findings also support the work of some recent researchers on face-to-face and online learning. Lewohl (2023) and Pleša Puljić and Ribić (2023) recently discovered that learners consider face-to-face classes more beneficial for learning compared to online classes. In a similar vein, Sun (2023) revealed that participants' scores on face-to-face learning were higher than online learning. The author concludes that learners need more physical contact and student-student and student-teacher interaction.

The current study's results contrast with those reached by Shahid and Shaikh (2019) and Alzahrani (2022). The authors observed that the students were more confident and performed better in online learning as compared to the traditional method of learning. Nasim, AlTameemy, Ali, and Sultana (2022) met similar results. The authors concluded that learners performed better using technological tools as compared to the traditional method of teaching.

A possible explanation of the findings is that the students' perceptions are conditioned by the advancement in technology, especially in developing countries. As Saputra et al. (2022) argue online learning relies on the provision of technology, good quality of the internet, and better electronic devices. Pakistan is one such example where online learning should be studied keeping in mind these technological and economic factors. Slow internet connection and old technological devices may affect learners' communication during the lectures which in turn affects the participants' choices. Asgari, Gupta, Titiloye, and Jin (2022) also contend that students' socioeconomic background and lack of technological framework affect their communication with instructors and classmates and consequently affect their performance.

One of the more significant findings from this study is that the participants think they lack confidence in face-to-face learning. On the contrary, they did not consider it as a challenge in online classes. In general, a lack of confidence is considered one of the many challenges that EFL learners face (Mohammed, 2021). Therefore, a blend of face-to-face and online teaching can satisfy learners of different learning styles, improve their confidence, and enhance their proficiency in the use of technology.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to thoroughly investigate English majors' perceptions of the two learning modes—face-to-face vs. online, using an explanatory sequential design. The most prominent finding from the current study is the participants' perception that both learning modes have some challenges. However, most participants believe that they cannot communicate well in online learning due to internet issues. They believe that low-quality internet and poor electricity supply are two main reasons for the lack of interaction in online communication.

The study has also found that lack of support in online classes is a reason behind the participants' preference for face-to-face learning. Unlike face-to-face classes, students are expected to work independently in online classes, which might need more motivation. Moreover, gestures, body language, and audible cues play an important role in enhancing classroom communication and determining the classroom pace of face-to-face classes. However, if students are provided with enough support, motivation, and encouragement, they may consider communication in online classes as less challenging.

The current study had some limitations. The study was conducted in the Department of English at a private university. Students of different fields of study may have different perceptions about the two learning modes. Therefore, the study should be repeated in other fields to provide more definitive evidence.

Recommendations

In light of the research findings, it is recommended that universities should ensure the availability of good internet connections to their faculty for online classes. Moreover, continuous training sessions for online teaching and learning should be arranged. In addition to this, a blend of face-to-face and online classes should be conducted in different fields of study to cater to students of different learning styles. Furthermore, the provision of large classes on the part of the institutions and managing high tuition fees for face-to-face classes for the learners have remained two important considerations. Online classes may prove to be an affordable alternative. Therefore, future researchers may conduct experimental or quasi-experimental studies in larger classes to ascertain the efficacy of online learning.

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