



Factors Affecting e-learners' ability to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) online: A Literature Review

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الخلاصة

ادى قرار الجامعات العراقية بتطبيق التعلم الإلكتروني كجزء من عملية التدريس والتعلم إلى تغيير طريقة تدريس المواد الدراسية وتعلمها. بالابتعاد عن الفصول الدراسية التقليدية حيث يجب أن يكون كل من المعلمين والطلاب حاضرين فعلياً للدروس ، فتح التعلم الإلكتروني الحدود للسماح بإجراء الفصول الدراسية والوصول إليها بما يناسب الطلاب. ومع ذلك ، فإن التعلم الإلكتروني لا يخلو من عيوبه ، لا سيما في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL)، إذ يتم تدريس الموضوع عادة في الفصل الدراسي وجهاً لوجه. يتمتع متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بمستويات مختلفة من الكفاءات ويميل المتعلمون الأضعف إلى التخلف عن الركب لأنهم أكثر تحفظاً وخجلاً مقارنة بأقرانهم الأكثر بلاغة. ومن ثم ، تحاول هذه الورقة تحديد العوامل التي يمكن أن تؤثر على قدرة المتعلمين الإلكترونيين (EFL) على التعلم عبر الإنترنت والخطوات التي يمكن اتخاذها لتصحيح المشكلات. بناءً على التحليل ، تم تحديد أربعة مجالات حرجة وهي: (1) نقص القدرات المعرفية ؛ (2) نقص القدرات الإدراكية المعرفية والاستعداد والحافز لتعلم اللغة عبر الإنترنت ؛ (3) نقص التفاعل مع الأقران والمعلمين و (4) استخدام محتوى غير ملائم أو غير مناسب للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

الكلمات المفتاحية: البنيوية ، اللغويات ، المعنى ، الدلالة.



Factors Affecting e-learners' ability to learn English as a Foreign Language

(EFL) online: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The decision recently taken by Iraqi universities to adopt e-learning as a teaching and learning mode has its own pedagogical effects. This is mainly represented by replacing the traditional physical setting by a new virtual one widely opening the door for new learning opportunities. Highly demanding as it is, e-learning is not without drawbacks. especially in the domain of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching. EFL e-learners have different levels of proficiencies and weaker ones tend to be left behind as they are more reserved and shier compared to their more eloquent peers. Hence, this paper attempts to identify factors that potentially affect (EFL) e-learners' ability to learn online and steps that could be taken to rectify issues related to weak and shy EFL e-learners. Based on the analysed literature, four critical areas were identified and they are: i) lack of cognitive abilities; ii) lack of metacognitive abilities, readiness and motivation to learn language online; iii) lack of interaction with peers and teachers and iv) use of inappropriate or unsuitable EFL content.

Keywords: E-learning, E-learner, English as a Foreign language (EFL), low proficiency EFL e-learners



1.0 Introduction

Over the past decades, Information Communication Technology (ICT) has played a crucial part in digitalising language education. When Internet is massified, the availability of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s has opened pathways where materials can be edited, published and humans are able to communicate with anyone via the internet. As ICT has developed strategies and concepts of teaching and learning language in the 21st century, implementation of online learning or e-learning has minimised the use of face to face meeting. ICT is seen as a solution to ensure that teaching objectives and learning outcomes. In education, technology is used to design and implement online programmes whilst the introduction of blended learning and flipped classrooms integrate existing online modules with conventional person in person lessons (Powell et.al.2015).

This paper views e-learning as a mode where learners learn using different ICT tools such as personal computers, laptops, mobile phones etc. to access learning. E-learning is used to reduce time and cost incurred by classroom learning activities.

Wheeler (2012) defined e-learning as a learning process enhanced by technology or digital learning. In the context of e-learning, technology supports learners' learning process, evaluation and instruction (Valverde-Berrocso et.al. 2020). Unlike using technology to learn, e-learning is a process where technology mediates learning where learners interact and receive instructions from their instructors via technology. E-learning also refers to the act of using internet-related technology to search for relevant information and communicate with peers and instructors to increase knowledge and improve academic performance (Vahedi et.al. 2019).

According to Soliman (2014), e-learning is made up of five categories namely i) learner-led; ii) instructor-led; iii) embedded; iv) facilitated and v) tele-mentored. Table 1 explicates the types and their urposes.

Table 1 Types of e-learning

No	Types	Explication
1	Learner-led	Learners are given access to learning materials via e-learning platforms
2	Instructor-led	Teachers hold lessons via real-time teleconferencing
3	Embedded	Teachers share links or videos related to the subject to help enhance students' understanding
4	Facilitated	Learners are encouraged to use online forums and chats to discuss with peers and teacher
5	Tele-mentored	Used extensively in distance learning programmes where learners use technology for learning purposes.

Source: Soliman (2014)

E-learning comes with its own sets of advantages as with good accessibility and availability. It effectively reaches out to learners and the technology simplifies complex learning factors while



minimising cost and use of materials such as papers and textbooks. Available in forms of learning platforms, websites, video conference, computer and mobile applications and other blended learning tools, Ma et.al (2008) believed that e-learning, which utilized modern element in ICT, ideally creates a learning environment that transforms how students learn and teachers teach.

Integrating technology with education changes learners' roles from being recipients of information into active participants as barriers such as distance and time preventing them from accessing education are eliminated. In language learning, e-learning allows learning process to focus on learners instead of instructors. Learners are given the flexibility to learn at their own preferred space, time and convenience, choose their preferred activities (downloadable materials or websites) and control their own learning pace. Via e-learning, learners are able to take part actively in group discussions, language activities and work with their peers.

As e-learning is used extensively in universities world over Iraq, not wanting to be left behind in integrating their programmes with technology, began introducing e-learning in three higher education institutions. three institutions of higher learning namely Baghdad, Basrah and Salahaddin universities in 2015 (Ameen et.al., 2017). The Higher Education Ministry decision to implement e-learning is to allow course instructors to use e-learning to narrow existing gaps between the university and students. Course instructors are to create online materials to complement students' in-class learning, enhance a more interactive student-centred learning experience, provide more current materials for students' reference and encourage students to experience learning using updated ICT tools (Elameer & Idrus, 2011 as cited in Ameen et.al., 2017).

E-learning is now used to teach various university subjects including English in Iraqi universities .E-learning can fill many gaps that exist in Iraqi universities such as; giving learners access to information, teaching learners to adapt to new modes of learning and improving their learning experience with the integration of different learning pedagogies (Al-Azawei et.al. 2016).Despite the benefits e-learning offers, there are several issues affecting the effectiveness of using e-learning among (EFL) learners. In the context of e-learning, meeting its intended objectives and outcomes is crucial as availability of good and stable internet access and computers is not enough.

This paper focuses on identifying challenges faced by EFL language e-learners and the findings can be used by language lecturers and higher education planners as a checklist to determine whether current materials and techniques used to teach English to Iraqi universities' EFL e-learners are sufficient or should be improved to enhance learning experience and achievement.

To perform this systematic literature review for this paper, the research questions are as follows:

- i. What are the factors behind the low performance of e-learners using different platforms to learn language via E-learning platforms?
- ii. What steps must be taken to ensure that all EFL e-learners are making fruitful use from the e-learning platforms?



2.0 Literature Review

Universities opted to adopt e-learning to further improve their students academically and expose them to 21st century learning techniques (Al-Azawei et.al. 2016). While the country puts in extra effort to effectively provide online platforms to enhance how education is delivered, successful e-learning models were used to benchmark the efficacy of the system used in Iraq. The implementation is not without any challenges as Iraq is still struggling to ensure that their current population has access to internet. To date, approximately 29.82 million Iraqis have access to internet in 2020 compared to 1% of the population in 2009 (Kemp, 2020). Yet, the success of e-learning does not solely fall on the availability of fast internet and state-of-the-art computer devices, but the success also depends on whether the users, students and teachers, are capable in coping with the fast changing pace of technology in education.

In the case of EFL e-learning, several aspects is looked into to determine if the universities present language learning module available via E-learning has the capacity to meet the intended learning outcomes and objectives, hence equipping their learners with the target language's important skills.

2.1 Cognitive abilities to learn via E-learning

It is important to note that e-learning is not just a tool, but its existence transforms learning and teaching at all levels. It not only revolutionizes how subjects are taught and learned, but it reshapes how teachers and students behave towards changes brought about by technology in education (Kinshuk et.al. 2016). In short, e-learning creates a smart learning environment adapts digital devices to provide learners a stimulating learning experience.

E-learners need to be cognitively abled when switching to e-learning. Being cognitively-abled means that the learner is capable of understanding what is taught and learned, synthesise learning input and choose information based on relevance and importance and use new input to enhance learning acquisition. As the learning process centres mainly on learners, they need to have high cognitive capability dealing with the varying magnitude of virtual learning tasks and complex learning contents (Gillett-Swan, 2017). As universities and other higher learning institutions begin to offer different pathways to improve delivery of education where students are provided with various academic paths such as online exercises, quizzes, videos and links where they can download relevant notes.

Hence, students who learn online must have the technical know-hows to benefit fully from e-learning. According to Fraillion et.al. (2014), e-learners must know how to operate ICT tools, open windows and save files to ensure that they are able to engage fully with learning. Apart from students, Ghavifekr et.al (2016) stated that the success of any e-learning platforms also depends on teachers' ability to use and manipulate ICT while preparing learning materials and teaching. Some teachers' do not feel comfortable using technology as part of their teaching tool and they have to



learn to utilize and maximize the learning platforms' capacity in providing their students with an enriching learning experience that is similar or better than face to face interaction.

2.2 Metacognitive abilities, readiness and motivation to learn language via E-learning

Metacognitively, students, via e-learning, are given flexibility to access learning at their own convenience or attend classes from their own personal space.. Sethuraman and Radhakrishan (2019) mentioned that students who strategize metacognitively will have the ability i) regulate their own learning; ii) manage time effectively; iii) set personal and academic goals; iv) monitor their own academic progress; v) evaluate their own progress; vi) concentrate on improving themselves and vii) apply self-awareness techniques. These seven strategies are critical and must be applied effectively by e-learners. According to Khabbaz and Najjar (2015), students who learned English via Moodle language programme, especially those with poor or low metacognitive abilities, were not able to learn autonomously as they could not cope with the technology's demands, hence affecting them academically.

After online classes or lectures, students are often expected to monitor and self-regulate their learning by having specific schedule to ensure that their assigned tasks are completed. According to Sharma et.al (2007), e-learners must learn to regulate themselves with different modes of learning, expectations and challenges as when the traditional classroom is out of the academic equation, these learners must discipline themselves to be on track with e-learning demands.

Nevertheless, self-regulation is not easy for foreign language learners with low motivation as their determination to persevere is lower than their peers with better proficiency. Wang and Zhan (2019) believed that e-learners' ability to self-regulate while learning online is crucial as the act of self-regulation enables them to sustain their effort and helps in foreseeing their learning outcomes. E-learners with low language proficiency might struggle to cope with e-learning, causing them to feel anxious, less confident and poor motivation levels to persist. Such rollercoaster of emotions could affect their willingness and readiness to learn language via e-learning platforms. Therefore Öz (2016) believed that for any form of language learning to occur successfully, learners must be taught to develop positive metacognitive abilities before embarking on the new e-learning modules.

With regards to readiness to learn via e-learning, Rasouli et.al (2016), based on a previous study by Seraji and Yar Mohammadi (2010), posited that prior to being part of any e-learning modules, e-learners have to possess five basic competencies specifically metacognitive, cognitive, self-navigation, communication and collaborative skills that will allow them to use computers with existing accessibility to internet effectively. As learning shifts to focus on students, teachers and students must work together ensuring that the new approach's benefits towards learning outweigh the weakness. However, in language learning, weaker students maybe at the losing end as their reluctance to actively participate during lessons might deprive them of the opportunities to use the language skills. Unlike face to face learning in a traditional classroom, students with weaker proficiency will not have the chance to interact freely with their language instructors as the ones



with stronger language skills will tend to dominate the virtual interaction during e-learning. Learning foreign languages online may help to transcend over time, distance and culture, but acquisition of specific language skills is only possible when the learner interacts actively in a conducive and less intimidating learning environment (Yuyun, 2013; Akbari, 2015).

El-Seoud et.al (2014) explained that when language e-learners fail to self-regulate their online learning schedule and do not put in effort to persevere throughout the learning process, they would not be ready to learn as embedding technology in learning does not guarantee that learners, especially university students, to be continuously motivated in their learning. Shifting traditional classroom interaction to a virtual platform does have its own advantages but in language learning, if the subject content and tasks could not reach out to each learner regardless of their proficiency, learning will not be successful as the platform does not give them the same form of approach that they will get in a face to face lesson.

The importance of e-learners being motivated cannot be underestimated as it not only gives them the drive to learn new languages but is helps in intensifying their interest and emotions towards the language. Wang and Zhan (2019) posited that Chinese undergraduates who saw English as a subject they need to pass performed poorly in comparison to their peers who believed that their mastery in English will help them in their professional and personal endeavours. Therefore, motivation determines the effort language learners will put in with the intention of either passing their examinations or acquire the language for career and personal development (Akbari ,2015).

To ensure that learners have the same motivation to learn language online, they must have the capacity to use suitable metacognitive strategies to improve their readiness to learn language via e-learning and eventually, build the confidence they need to acquire the language skills efficiently.

2.3 Lack of Interaction with peers and language instructors

Another factor that impedes successful language learning via e-learning platforms is lack of interaction in the target language with peers and language teachers. The use of e-learning to teach foreign language like English deprives learners, especially weak and shy ones, from opportunities of communicating directly with their instructors and peers. According to Mohammadi et.al (2011) e-learning is responsible for not in decreasing social connection among learners and deprives them from receiving personalised guidance from their language teachers. As language learning requires the learner to understand the cultural aspects of a foreign language, being taught online prevented them from appreciating the differences and comprehend the suitability of the differences in their society.

Although various studies reported that e-learning is better for students compared to face to face lessons, the lack of communication between learners and their instructors could result in negativity as reported by Heppen et.al. (2017) who discovered that students who studied algebra online felt that the subject is challenging and inevitably, with little supervision from their instructors, they began to develop negative perceptions towards the subject as a whole. Similarly, a study by



Cinkara and Bagceci (2013) reported that e-learners' attitudes towards English were influenced by their rapport with peers and teachers. The positive relationship enhanced their motivation and they began to develop a more positive attitude towards learning English via E-learning platforms.

2.4 Poor E-learning EFL course content

Poor EFL course content or a weakly designed curriculum is another factor that prevents weak EFL e-learners from benefitting from online language lessons. Souriyavongsa et.al (2013) stated that a weak curriculum designed without taking learners' proficiency, learning styles and needs would only worsen the learning process as learners would not gain any knowledge from lessons using the existing content. Akbari (2015) further reiterated that language teachers are often put in a spot where they have to use the prepared modules instead of preparing lessons based on students' varying proficiencies. Teachers are normally expected to base lessons on the modules given by the Ministry, hence the teachers' attitudes are affected by expectations posed by the ministry, learning institutions and students.

Soliman (2014) suggested that for language modules to be used for e-learning should help in enhancing learners' language skills and allowing them to learn independently. As e-learning aims in helping learners to become independent academically, it is compulsory that EFL modules are designed to provide them with opportunities to learn on their own. Teachers are necessary to guide learners throughout the learning process and if modules used fail to emulate teachers' roles, learners will be left confused and clueless. Her views are in line with Soong (2012) who stated that language lessons carried out using e-learning will not help students at all as the digital approach cannot replace a teacher's role as facilitator and guide. To make matters worse, poorly crafted modules will not aid learners' especially when they are expected to explore and learn using the module on their own.

Based on the literature reviewed, Table 1 summarises the factors identified affecting the successful use of e-learning in the teaching and learning of EFL.

Table 2: Summary of Factors affecting successful use of e-learning in the teaching of EFL

EFL E-learners	EFL Language Instructors
Poor metacognitive strategies	Failure to create a learning session that allows learners to engage actively with lesson
Poor cognitive strategies	Poor interaction with learners
Poor interaction with peers and teachers due to motivation and confidence issues.	Use of inappropriate or poor EFL module
Low level of readiness to become e-learners	Adapting modules that do not meet e-learners language needs

3.0 Methodology



In this paper, a systematic literature review on e-learning and EFL e- learners has been presented. . The reviewed papers have been chosen on the basis of several predetermined characteristics specifically i) relevant and clear objectives; ii) research investigating E-learning and EFL in universities; and iii) research discussing effects of e-learning on EFL learners. The protocol is as follows

- i. Database search
- ii. Specific keywords related to the topic
- iii. Papers published from 2007 to 2020
- iv. Screening titles and abstracts-based on fixed inclusion and exclusion criteria
- v. Data relevant to the research questions are identified
- vi. Finalized data are summarized and reported
- vii.

The papers selected are discussing the following:

- i. E-learning and EFL
- ii. EFL e-learners
- iii. Effects of e-learning on EFL learners
- iv. Advantages and disadvantages of E-learning for language teaching and learning

The research questions are:

- i. What are the factors behind the low performance of e-learners using different platforms to learn language via E-learning platforms?
- ii. What steps must be taken to ensure that all EFL e-learners are making fruitful use from the e-learning platforms?

3.1 Data Extraction

The database search was conducted using search engines of notable digital libraries such as Elsevier, IEEE Access, Scopus, Taylor and Francis Group, Springer, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI). Articles were searched based on their title and abstracts and were further analysed based on their keywords and phrases: e-learning, EFL e-learning and e-learners, challenges and advantages of EFL e-learning.

Step 1: Title review

All articles within (Science Direct, Scopus, and Web of Science) and relevant abstracts databases spanning years 2000-2020 were considered for inclusion.

Articles found based on databased search using specific keywords
(n= 35)



Finalized 20 abstracts included. (n=20)

Figure 1: Steps identifying articles for the systematic review of literature.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

Based on the systematic literature review of previous research, there are four critical areas of language learning that must be addressed before implementing e-learning for English as a foreign language (EFL).

Table 3 Factors affecting successful use of e-learning in the teaching of EFL

No	Findings	Explication	Study
1	Lack of cognitive abilities affected EFL learners' ability to use e-learning effectively	There is a positive correlation between learners' lack of cognitive abilities and their use of e-learning.	Kinshuk et.al. (2016); Gillett-Swan (2017); Fraillion et.al. (2014) Ghavifekr et.al (2016)
2	Lack of metacognitive abilities, readiness to use and motivation to learn	Learners' lack of metacognitive abilities affected their readiness to use e-learning and lowers their motivation to learn English	Sethuraman and Radhakrishan (2019); Khabbaz and Najjar (2015); Sharma et.al (2007); Wang and Zhan (2019); Rasouli et.al (2016); Seraji and Yar Mohammadi (2010); Yuyun (2013); Akbari (2015); El-Seoud et.al (2014); Öz (2016)
3	Lack of interaction between learners and teachers.	Lack of interaction with their teachers is positively correlated with weak EFL learners from mastering the language and its related skills.	Mohammadi et.al (2011); Heppen et.al. (2017); Cinkara and Bagececi (2013)
4	Use of inappropriate/poorly designed module or language curriculum	There is a positive correlation between the use of unsuitable	Akbari (2015); Soliman (2014); Soong (2012)



		curriculum or module with learners' lack of interest to learn English using e-learning.	
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The findings revealed that as e-learning is a learners-centred learning process, learners are responsible in ensuring that they have the capability to cope with e-learning demands and expectations. The shift from teachers to learners calls for learners to develop a habit of learning to become independent learners instead of being too reliant on their teachers for guidance. E-learners have full control of their own learning; therefore, the flexibility e-learning offers necessitates them to monitor their own learning process. In doing so, they will be able to determine or identify their own weaknesses. The ability to monitor learning means that the learners are metacognitively aware of their language learning process and in the context of e-learning, such awareness gives learners the capability of regulating and controlling their cognition and other related self-control characteristics as they learn English via an e-learning platforms.

The papers also emphasized ~~on~~ the significance of metacognitive skills in ensuring that EFL e-learners remain driven and motivated to learn the language. Metacognitive skills are the core of learning as it helps learners in their planning, sequencing and monitoring of their overall learning habits which eventually, will indirectly help to improve their academic performance in the subject. E-learning materials must be designed to encourage learners to think as learners must be encouraged to develop strong learning skills. Accessing e-learning materials also requires learners to have knowledge on how to use computers and the internet to aid their learning. Once learners have the necessary metacognitive strategies and the knowledge to use e-learning platforms, their readiness to use ICT tools as part of their learning will increase. Inevitably, the learners' motivation levels to learn English also increases as they begin to feel that they are in control of learning and can cope with the modules' expectations.

As e-learners are not able to interact fully with their peers and language instructors via e-learning platforms, the responsibility to ensure that communication does happen actively via online classes falls both on teachers and learners. Teachers must make time to initiate active sessions and use materials that support e-learners' language needs.

For e-learners, their metacognitive abilities play a significant role with regards to narrow the interaction gap between them and their teachers and peers. Better metacognitive skills allow e-learners, especially shy and weak EFL learners, to feel more comfortable reaching out to their teachers and working on assigned tasks with their peers

Based on the findings, the review revealed that for any EFL courses carried out via e-learning successfully, it is imperative that the e-learners are competent in using cognitive and metacognitive skills to help them to sustain and persevere when faced with difficulties learning



English online .E-learners with mature computer and metacognitive skills would benefit most from the online sessions hence metacognitive thinking is crucial for e-learners.

Teaching learners to strengthen their metacognitive skills will increase their readiness to learn via online platforms and they will have a better learning experience. Their readiness, cognitive and metacognitive abilities will help them to overcome issues linked to lack of interaction. Another issue that must be rectified before the commencement of any e-learning programmes is issue related to the course's content. The Ministry of Education, policymakers, courseware developers must ensure that the curriculum or module is designed with the EFL e-learners' language needs in mind. Adapting a curriculum used for native speakers will not help EFL learners to learn better as differences in how foreign languages is learned goes beyond location but appropriacy and culture.

5.0 Conclusion

E-learning is inevitable as many higher education institutions world over see the advantages that the transition from traditional classrooms to virtual learning space offers. Integrating e-learning to supplement traditional learning gives e-learners access to learning from anywhere in the world and teachers are able to create materials using online software. They are no longer restricted by costs that had initially prevented them from creating the materials for classroom use. However, to ensure that e-learning meets its intended objectives and learners are able to benefit from the learning outcomes, they must have the ability to cognitively and metacognitively cope with e-learning demands and expectations. Furthermore, higher learning institutions must be well-equipped with current computer technology and supported by fast and reliable internet providers. For teachers, preparing modules that meet learners' needs is crucial to ensure that the learning objectives and outcomes are achieved. Failure to prepare sufficient and suitable materials could have detrimental effects on learners' motivation and readiness to learn English online. Overall, analysis revealed that teaching e-learners metacognitive skills will help them cope with online learning demands as they begin to understand how to plan, monitor, regulate and reflect the entire learning process. The findings confirmed that the importance of metacognitive skills should not be overlooked and the skills must be taught to enhance e-learners' online learning experience.

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