The Impact of COVID-19 on English Language Teaching: An Examination of Problems and Strategies

Assistant Lecturer
Ahmed Thaer Abdulzahra
The Islamic University, Najaf
ahmed_thaer94@iunajaf.edu.iq

تأثير جائحة كورونا (كوفيد – ١٩) على تدريس اللغة الانكليزية تحقيق في المشاكل والاستراتيجيات

المدرس المساعد
أحمد ثائر عبد الزهرة
الجامعة الإسلامية ـ النجف الأشرف

Abstract:-

This study examined the effects of COVID-19 on English language teaching in Iraq. There were many challenges faced by Iraqi University teachers in their teaching through online platforms during the pandemic. Furthermore, this study investigated the strategies followed by those teachers to overcome these challenges and also this study sought to identify their feelings toward teaching. A semi-structured interview was carried out for data collection purposes. The number of participants was 30 full-time faculty members at different Iraqi Universities. The findings of this study revealed many challenges faced by Iraqi EFL University teachers while teaching through online platforms. Furthermore, it has been noticed that most teachers have negative feelings toward teaching in regard to the status of higher education in Iraq during the pandemic. So COVID-19 has strong effects on teaching and the methods used by teachers. An implication for this is the possibility to move into in-person classes especially after students and teachers were vaccinated and the virus became low-prevalence.

Keywords: Pandemic, Challenges, Strategies, Feelings, Methods, Online Platforms.

الملخص:

شملت هذه الدراسة التحقق من تأثيرات (كوفيد – ١٩) على تدريس اللغة الانكليزية، هنالك العديد من التحديات والصعوبات واجهت أساتذة الجامعات خلال جائحة كورونا وذلك عندما تحول التعليم من حضوري إلى اعتماد المنصات الالكترونية. وكانت تجربة جديدة تخللها العديد من المشاكل.

تم استخدام المقابلة شبه المغلقة كأداة لجمع البيانات منها المشاركين في هذه الدراسة، عدد المشاركين كان ٣٠ أستاذ من مختلف الجامعات في تخصص اللغة الانكليزية، أظهرت النتائج العديد من المشاكل منها كان معظم الاساتذة يشكون من عدم تفاعل الطلبة في التعليم الالكتروني وكذلك ضعف خدمة الانترنت، بالإضافة إلى ذلك تدريس اللغة يتطلب وجود حركة الجسد والإيماءات لايصال المعنى بسلاسة ووضوح إلى الطالب، أيضاً كان هناك مشاكل في اتباع طرق التدريس وعدم القدرة على تطبيقها في الصفوف الافتراضية، من الاستراتيجيات التي اتبعها معظم التدريسيين في الجامعات هي استخدام بعض الانشطة التفاعلية في الصفوف الافتراضية ولكن لا زال ذلك ليس بالمستوى المطلوب، لذلك اقترحت الدراسة ضرورة العودة إلى التعليم الحضوري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجائحة، التحديات، الاستراتيجيات، الطرائق، المنصات الافتراضية.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has spread all over the world and it changed the way of life in general, including education systems. This pandemic has its own effect on teaching process because all educational systems around the world moved to adopt the use of E-learning to reduce the virus spreading among students. Nowadays E-learning is becoming increasingly popular in high education (Tsai, Shen, & Chiang, 2013; Wu, 2016) as the applications of information and communication technology (ICT) continue to provide a variety of teaching and learning options for faculty and students (Sarabadani, Jafarzadeh, & ShamiZanjani, 2017). E-learning can be seen as an innovative approach to the delivery of educational services through electronic forms of information that enhance knowledge, skills, and other outcomes of learners (Fazlollahtabar & Muhammadzadeh, 2012). The use of E-learning in developed countries is very common as many universities around the world adopt this approach, especially for international students who may experience difficulties in attending and studying in person classes. But this experiment which recently imposed by COVID-19 pandemic remains new to many countries and has created many challenges in teaching and learning processes.

This study aims to investigate the challenges and difficulties faced by Iraqi EFL teachers to teach English language in E-learning and how COVID-19 pandemic affects the teaching methods and techniques or even their approach to language teaching. Some fields may face fewer difficulties in using E-Learning and even in mastering the content, but when it comes to the fields of teaching languages it could be more challenged. Because the main purpose of learning any language is how to use or communicate in this language. Thus language learners faced difficulties when interacting in the target language through online courses as well as many challenges faced by teachers to get students interact or to improve their oral skills specifically. As a result, the language teachers may face difficulties in using some techniques or following the methods of teaching due to the changes happened from adopting in person class into online courses.

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No. 67
Part: 2

ISSN 1997-6208 Print
ISSN 2664 - 4355 Online

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1.1 Research Questions:

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1- What are the challenges faced by Iraqi EFL university teachers in teaching English through online platforms?

2- What are the feelings of Iraqi EFL university teachers toward teaching in COVID-19 pandemic?

3- What are the strategies followed by Iraqi EFL university teachers to overcome the problems that they face in their teaching through online courses?

2. Literature Review

E-learning can bring about many benefits for both universities and students (Bhuasiri, Xaymoungkhoun, Zo, Rho, & Ciganek, 2012). For universities, firstly, e-learning helps universities save substantial costs related to the investment in physical teaching and learning infrastructures (Arbaugh, 2005). This is somehow unreasonable because the main aim of higher education is how to make creative generations through develop their abilities and increase their knowledge and this requires providing suitable environment for both teachers and students. Secondly, e-learning helps universities become more digitized and contribute to the formation of a digital and knowledgeable society where learning and knowledge sharing can be conducted in a simple and fast way at anytime in anywhere with the help of Internet enabled technologies (Taylor, 2007). Thirdly, e-learning helps universities integrate further into the global educational environment (Lee, 2010). In particular, international cooperation and links in the field of teaching can take place beyond the boundaries of one country; for example, joint training programs in which domestic students are not required to go to a university abroad to study, but are able to receive full academic services provided by the foreign university. But when students go to study abroad they will live in new culture and they will have wide view about the new cultures and how they are effective in language learning generally.

COVID-19 has led to an unprecedented biggest disruption of education worldwide (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). However, no one was really prepared for the sudden shift towards on-line instruction.

The Islamic University College Journal
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ISSN 1997-6208 Print
ISSN 2664 - 4355 Online

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Adopting online education during the pandemic is not the case in Iraq only but this was new experience for many countries all over the world. "Locally in Oman, policy makers announced a long break for public-school teachers that lasted for half a year and at that same period, private school teachers, especially in prestigious schools, were continuing teaching their students online during the months of March, April, and June" (Al-Zaabi, 2021; p.p. 14-19). As Al-Zaabi (ibid) mentioned in her study from her own perspective, teachers took the advantage of two types of professional growth sources: formally given by the ministry and informally initiated by teachers' efforts to develop their own practices. As for the formal teacher education, she mentioned that she received a one-week course on how to use Google classroom from the ministry of education. Unfortunately, the course trainer was not an English academic and hence the online training course was not comprehensive and over locked many crucial online aspects in terms of lesson design, teaching strategies, and assessment techniques. To fulfill the missing gaps, she said that she had to cooperate with her fellow English teachers and share our teaching experiences. Also, on-line you-tube videos have proved to offer a repertoire of creative online ideas. The strategies that mentioned above still are not appropriate to create interactive situations in classes and not motivated enough to increase the students' desire to learn and improve their language skills.

There is a need to design a comprehensive teacher education program to meet the demands of the recent era of online instruction. It is undeniable that the recent health crisis has created multiple obstacles for ELT, yet there are windows to be explored (Flores and Carrilo, 2020). Active participation of learners goes hand in hand with implementing innovative instructional strategies by the teacher (Philips, 2005). Teaching methods refer to the practices that teachers use to achieve the lesson objectives, cultivate student motivation, and cater for individual varied learning styles. According to Al-Zaabi (2021) "Since maintaining learner motivation on-line, from my experience, proves to be a challenging territory, English teachers need to find interactive platforms to engage student interest and extend their concentration span" (p.p. 14-19).

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3. Method

3.1. Design of the Study

In order to answer the research questions of this study, a case study was used in order to investigate the real-life situation of Covid-19 and its impact on teaching process in Iraq. This study is qualitative in nature and explored the status quo in order to provide a better understanding of problems and challenges faced by Iraqi university teachers in teaching English during Covid-19 period. Furthermore, this study aimed to wider-view about teachers' feelings and emotions about teaching in E-learning platforms with comparison to in person classes.

3.2. Participants

A total number of 30 full-time faculty members at Islamic University of Najaf, University of Kufa, Al-Sadiq University, University College of Tusi, and Al-Zahraa University participated in this study. All of the teachers are Arabic native speakers and they were from Iraq. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from 3 to 32 years of being language teachers. Seven teachers had PhD degree and twenty-three teachers had MA degree. The Participants were from 28 to 65 years old. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the study. The participants were assured that their information would be kept confidential and the results would be reported anonymously.

3.3. Instruments

A semi-structured interview was used for data collection purposes. The interview questions were designed to address the main research questions of this study and follow-up queries were made based on the responses drew from the participants. First, the participants were asked about their age, experience and educational degree. Then they were asked about the effects of Covid-19 on their teaching when the educational system in Iraq shifted to E-learning. After that, they were asked about their feelings and emotions about teaching in virtual classes and also about the effects of Covid-19 on their feelings. Based on their responses they were asked about the strategies they followed to overcome the challenges that they faced in teaching English. Furthermore, they were asked about the use of

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ISSN 1997-6208 Print
ISSN 2664 - 4355 Online

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different teaching methods in virtual classrooms and the implementation of their techniques through comparing it to in person classes. Finally, the participants were asked if they think that the situation of teaching during Covid-19 has any effect on competition between teachers.

The first researcher of the current study had interviewed the participants. The interviews were conducted through using mobile phone and this way was used with all the participants of this study. The interviews were performed in Arabic language in order to help the participants to express their feelings easily. The data were recorded through using voice chats.

3.4. Procedure

The interviews that were conducted in this study were in virtual form. All talks in interviews sessions were recorded with permission of the participants for subsequent analysis. Also permission was received from officials to collect the data. Each interview session was lasted between 20-45 minutes and respondents were given the chance to think about their answers beforehand. Collecting data took time from 15 October to 9 November. Following the data collection phase, all responses in interview sessions were transcribed through using the NVivo software package. This facilitated the process of analysis through categorizing responses and identifying commonalities and differences in opinions among the participants.

4. Results

This study utilized the qualitative research tradition; the semi-structured interview questions were designed to find out the major consequences of adopting online courses to teach English language reported by university teachers. The first researcher interviewed 30 faculty members regarding their experience of teaching English before and during the pandemic of COVID-19. Attention was focused on the participants' beliefs, experiences, and feelings in order to generate an enlightening narration of the participants' perspectives of foreign language teaching through online platforms and how this affect their teaching. The interview questions asked the participants about the effects of the pandemic on their teaching, their emotions and feelings about teaching in virtual classes, the effects of pandemic on using different teaching methods in online courses, and

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the effects of pandemic on the competition between teachers. Furthermore, based on their responses the participants were asked about the strategies that they follow to overcome the challenges faced by them. The responses to these questions are reported below and all responses have been translated into English and presented as quotes.

The first question asked the participants about the influence of COVID-19 on their teaching English language. In response to this question, most of the participants said that it has negative effects on their teaching and they faced many challenges with lecturing in online courses. For example, Aqueel who is a full-time lecturer of English language at Al-Kafeel University said that the pandemic reduced the teachers' incentive and students' motivation as well due to the poor network in Iraq since the lectures became a useless routine. Another participant who is a full-time assistant professor English literature at Islamic University of Najaf said that teaching language requires interactive atmosphere and this is not found in online courses as compared to in person class. Some of the participants responded to this question positively in some cases and negatively in other cases. For example, Dhaif Allah who is a lecturer of linguistics at Alzahraa University said that "I can divide the effect of COVID-19 into two stages; the first stage can be called inconvenience stage in which there were strong challenges faced by teachers such as how to use online platforms and lack of knowledge of electronic means." Meanwhile, he said "the second stage can be called conditioning stage in which most of teachers could overcome many challenges that they faced in the first stage but the big problem is that a lot of students do not deal with their lectures seriously, this made lectures beneficial for limited number of students."

The second question asked the participants about their emotions and feelings about teaching during Corona Pandemic. In response to this question all of the participants said that they have negative feelings about teaching due to the lack of interaction of students. Most of the students are not seeking to learn and increase their knowledge and they are interested to get the certificate. Unfortunately E-learning made this easy for them because it is too difficult to administer the online tests and students can cheat in many ways. For example, Saeed who is a full-time lecturer of English

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language at Alsadiq University stated that "I feel I have no strong incentive to teach through using E-learning platforms because of the difficulties and constraints, and also the lack of interaction of students in online courses and there are many challenges in online tests when most of the students are cheating, so it is too difficult to control this situation." Abbass who is a lecturer of linguistics at Islamic University of Najaf said that "I have negative feelings about E-learning due to the lack of interaction between teachers and students and students do no initiate interaction in virtual classes even if their teacher initiates interaction most of them would not respond, so this will lead to unsuccessful environment in online classrooms."

The third question asked the participants about the effects of COVID-19 on using different teaching methods and techniques of English language in online platforms. In response to this question, most of the participants noted that it is too difficult to apply the techniques and principles of different methods of teaching in virtual classes such as dividing students into groups, using language games, focusing on writing skill and even other skills. For example, Mujtaba who is full-time assistant professor of English literature at Alsadiq University stated that "COVID-19 pandemic did not have any positive effect on adopting new methods or techniques, it reduced teachers' creativity because most of teachers use the same ways in their teaching and there is no flexibility in E-learning." In addition to these negative effects few of the participants add some positive points such as sharing videos and pictures through online platforms. For example, Hayder who is adjunct lecturer of English language at Islamic University of Najaf said that "I could use many electronic tools such as sharing videos and pictures to increase students understanding of content easily without costs." Akram who is a full-time assistant professor of linguistics at Islamic University of Najaf said that "E-learning reduced anxiety for some of students and they found it good opportunity to increase their participation in virtual classes but this still for very limited number of students."

The fourth question asked the participants about the effect of COVID-19 on the competition between teachers. In response to this question, most of the participants said that the pandemic did not affect on the competition between teachers because all of them are equal in using the same ways of teaching and facing the same

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challenges in E-learning. For example, Zaid who is a lecturer of English language at Alsadiq University noted that "COVID-19 did not affect on the competition between teachers because all of them faced the same difficulties and they use nearly the same style in their teaching while teachers are more creative in in-person classes." While some of the participants said that the pandemic affected the competition between teachers in adopting strategies to overcome the problems of E-learning. For example, Ahmed who is a full-time lecturer of English language at Altoosi University College said that "I think E-learning contributed to create competition between teachers to overcome the challenges that they face in their teaching and to have interactive classrooms."

In a follow up phase regarding the participants' responses to the interview questions they were asked about the strategies that they follow to overcome the challenges that they face in their teaching during the pandemic. Most of the participants said they could overcome some of the challenges that they faced through attending different workshops about using online platforms and administering the online tests specifically the old teachers who are not familiar with using technology to teach language. For example, Ghanim who is a full-time assistant professor of English literature at Islamic University said that "I faced a lot of problems with online teaching but somehow I asked some of my collogues to help me in overcoming these challenges and also I got a lot of knowledge about using online platforms from the workshops, but I still prefer in-person learning because it is more beneficial and interactive."

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This section discusses the findings that were presented in the previous section. After briefly reviewing each of the research questions, attempts are made to interpret results by situating them with the existent body of literature.

The first research question of this study sought to explain the effects of COVID-19 on language teaching through identifying the challenges faced by Iraqi University teachers in teaching English via online platforms. The findings of interview revealed the main challenges faced by the faculty members were the poor network in Iraq which in turn affects the interaction between teachers and

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ISSN 1997-6208 Print
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students in virtual classes and students' desire to learn has unfortunately been reduced because E-learning can be considered as a humdrum routine for both teachers and students. Furthermore, the absence of body language and face postures has great effect on delivering the ideas of content or instructions to the students and this affected students understanding. Last but not least the students are not motivated to interact and they feel that they are in the safe side when the teacher asks questions; they easily can claim their internet is poor and they cannot turn on their microphones, this seems sometimes logical reason.

Learning foreign language requires practice and interaction to develop the learner's ability in the four skills. As showed in the findings of this study one of the main problems were the difficulty of getting students to interact in English through online platforms. Following the teaching methods and using some techniques such as dividing the students into groups to develop cooperative learning was a big challenge in E-learning. Furthermore, administering the online test was a challenge because most of the students depend on cheating in their examinations. Although the status of administering the online test has been enhanced recently through following some strategies such as bringing random questions but most of teachers still prefer in person learning because they see it more valuable.

The second research question of this study sought to discover the feelings of Iraqi University teachers toward teaching in COVID-19 pandemic. As noted in the findings of this research many teachers have negative feelings toward teaching through E-learning due the challenges that they faced in their teaching and they prefer to shift into in-person learning. As showed in the result of this study many teachers look at E-learning as invaluable tool while very few of teachers found E-learning less effort because they can give their lectures from home and also they can share videos and pictures easily. As a conclusion E-learning has negatively affected education in Iraq due to the pandemic and also affected on teachers' performance and reduced their incentive and creativity.

The third research question of this study sought to identify the main strategies used by Iraqi EFL University teachers to overcome the challenges that they faced in their teaching during the pandemic. As can be seen in the findings of this study all of the Universities in

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ISSN 1997-6208 Print
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Iraq have introduced their stuff into workshops about E-learning to develop their competence and knowledge about using online platforms. Some teachers stated that they involve their students in classroom activities such as presenting a topic from content by students in order to increase interaction in virtual classes, but this still not the same as in in-person classes. As we can see in the result of this study some teachers used these strategies to have better competition between them. While many teachers noted that the status of teaching during the pandemic did not affect on the competition between teachers because they are all exposed to the same conditions.

In conclusion the main purpose of this study was to identify the effects of COVID-19 on language teaching in Iraq and also the problems faced by Iraqi EFL University teachers during the pandemic. The current study also sought to pinpoint the strategies that they used in order to overcome they encountered and also to explain their feelings toward teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. The data has been collected through adopting a semi-structured interview to address all of the research questions. The results showed that University teachers faced big challenges in their teaching through using online platforms such as the absence of teachers' incentive to teach English through online courses, the interaction of the students has been reduced during the pandemic and also the technical problems of online platforms were well noticed in this study. In addition most of Iraqi EFL University teachers do not have great incentive to teach through online platform and as they claimed their students are not motivated to learn and increase their knowledge, so most teachers have negative feelings toward teaching during the pandemic. To sum up with the findings COVID-19 has great effects on teaching and the methods and techniques of teaching English.

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ISSN 1997-6208 Print
ISSN 2664 - 4355 Online

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