The Impact of Distance Education on Teaching Reading and Writing Skills: A Study among First Semester Students at the Faculty of Languages at Benghazi University

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty members and students had to leave their classrooms and move into online education contexts. This study has attempted to explore the effect of distance education on reading and writing skills among first semester students at English department, faculty of languages at Benghazi University. To do so, firstly, the starting point was comparing students' performance on two tests one after face to face teaching and the other after online teaching. Then a semi structured interviews were conducted with 20 students who were chosen randomly to understand the reasons behind their performance. Using Thematic Analysis (TA), students' responses were transcribed, codified, and interpreted. The findings of TA revealed that along with several disadvantages and challenges that students experienced in distance education with regard to learning English reading and writing skills, distance learning provided some opportunities and benefits for their learning. The study also provided some solutions regarding online challenges.

Keywords: distance education, online teaching, face to face instruction

Introduction:

Universities worldwide are strongly affected by (COVID-19). Keeping safe distance was considered very important to survive and stop spreading the viruses. Thus, many schools were closed and the need to continue teaching and learning resulted in implementing of online teaching. The development of new technologies has also encouraged online learning. Therefore, distance education has shown itself as an undeniable part of education in general and language learning in particular. This type of learning has its own benefits. For example; flexibility in timetable and the consistency in practice are the major advantages of distance learning (Means, 2000).

University of Benghazi just like many schools and universities has transferred the established "face-to-face" learning to online learning in the spring term 2020. The effects of those online courses on learning language skills at faculty of languages have not been studied

extensively. And the need to understand students views regarding this kind of courses need to be established. Hence, this research seeks to determine the efficacy of distance education in teaching reading and writing skills at the English department at the faculty of languages. This is achieved by comparing student's performance on two tests one which is conducted after face to face teaching and the other after online teaching and also by students' interviews. In doing so, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of distance education that first year students have experienced in learning English reading and writing skills?
- What is the most positively\ negatively affected skill?
- What are the possible solutions of distance education problems?

Since implementing distance education is needed nowadays, this research aims to highlight the effectiveness and drawbacks of distance learning in order help teachers and learners at the English department of the faculty of Languages to use this method of teaching and learning effectively and to overcome its shortcomings.

Distance Education

Distance education has been referred to by different terminologies such as online education, web-based learning, e-learning, and remote education (Russel, 2001).

Distance learning is a learning system when the teacher and student are separated geographically or technologically. It involves fully online course that make use of the new world wide technology to design, manage and facilitate both teaching and learning (Rogers, 2009).

Distance education has been viewed as a mode of teaching in which time, place, and situational barriers are removed from consideration and the most emphasis is given to develop high quality interactions between teachers and students even when they are not place in the same physical area (Carver, 2020).

Effectiveness and Drawbacks of Distance Learning

Online teaching introduces both teachers and students to the new technology and help them make use of it to facilitate both teaching and learning. Technology provides teachers with the ability to tailor instructional materials and assessments to directly address their students' learning needs; offers access to more authentic material to assist in the development and delivery of lessons; and provides additional sources of information for their students to draw upon in the classroom (Dunleavy et al., 2007; Waddoups, 2004; Healey, 2001).

Many studies showed that online education could improve critical thinking ability and knowledge application beyond physical classroom boundaries (Schlenz et al., 2020).

According to a number of research, using technology in teaching and learning has many advantages since it facilities learning by providing students with the following opportunities (Honey et al., 2005; Gahala, 2001; Fouts, 2000; Johnston, 2000; Means, 2000):

- It gives the students means of drilling and practicing with increasingly difficult content

- It provides the students with access to a wide variety of information and gain knowledge from many sources
- It makes the students interact with data, engage in hands-on learning, and receive feedback; and manage information, and solve problems.

For learning to occur, learners should participate and be engaged in the process of learning, however, anxiety or being afraid to make mistakes has been classified as a major obstacle for second language learners. Many studies have shown during online course learners are more relaxed and show less anxiety (Horwitz, 2012).

By the development of new technologies, distance education has shown itself as an undeniable part of education in general and language learning in particular. The way distance education is implemented can be divided into two categories of synchronous and asynchronous learning with each category having its own advantages. In synchronous language learning, all participants are simultaneously, though not in a same location, connected to each other via a shared network. As an example, this synchronous language learning can be put into practice by video conferencing and live instructional programs online and on air. Also called "paced model of distance learning", the synchronous type of education is the most common way of instructional technology. Moreover, it implies a real sense of being inside a class as each participant can dynamically engage in the learning/teaching process. Simultaneous education fosters cooperative activities to get the projects done on time and to form student communities (McKinney, Dyck, & Luber, 2009; Muppala & Kong, 2007; Chester, Buntine, Hammond, & Atkinson, 2011).

Asynchronous instruction, on the other hand, offers the opportunity of benefitting the classroom at any time regardless of time restrictions. Perfect example is podcasting in which students can download the recorded materials and use them in their convenient time. Students can listen to/watch the professors' lectures as much as needed. This clearly offers troubleshooting the potential problems since students can review the problematic areas as much as needed. This type of learning has its own benefits as well flexibility in timetable and the consistency in practice are the major advantages of asynchronous distance learning (ibid).

On the other hand, according to many researchers, there are also many drawbacks regarding online education (Jayathirtha et al., 2020; Sankaranarayanan et al., 2020; Fulton, *2020;* Dong & Cao, 2020; Nimavat et al., 2021;). Most of online classes suffer from interaction and technical difficulties. Problems related to direct- student interaction might affect students understanding of practical concepts.

In a study using the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) that includes items developed for online study, the students in web only courses were less engaged than students in blended classes (Fisher, 2010).

However, other studies has proved that the lack of engagement which was seen in online courses was not because of the online setting rather it was attributed more to students not experiencing active and collaborative pedagogies, interacting one-on-one with faculty, or experiencing social and academic support (ibid).

Fisher (2010) has suggested that an excellent introduction to the contents of this monograph might help in clarifying problems of engagement (or learning or retention) in order to design appropriate pedagogical choices that include the kind of learning activities that seem to encourage student engagement in online learning.

The Need for Distance Education

During the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty members and students had to leave their face-to-face (FTF) classes and move into emergency distance education (EDE) contexts.

COVID-19 pandemic, made distance learning not an option but an obligation for the sake of the educational process to go on since most of the counties around the world have shut down their schools and universities to prevent the spread of the virus by minimizing physical contact(Carver, 2020).

However, distance learning has not emerged only during Covid-19 pandemic, it has been used in many countries around the world in the age of globalization. For example; it has been integrated into the US education system from the very start (through to 1990s) (Sethy, 2008).

Online teaching was considered as a tool which allows delivering education to individuals who could not attend full-time classes for obvious reasons: students with disabilities, health problems, and students, who lived far from school and had no opportunity to attend it on a daily basis (Carver, 2020).

The Importance of Teaching Reading and Writing Skill

Writing is used on an everyday basis to communicate what one thinks and feels and reading makes these thoughts and feelings understood by others.

Reading and writing skills are very important for second language learning to take place. Knowing how to read and write is vital to tackle the basis of instruction in all aspects of language learning: using textbooks for language courses, writing, revising, developing vocabulary, acquiring grammar, editing, and using computer-assisted language learning programs (Spack, 1985).

Language and literacy surrounds people every day. Babies once they are born are faced with world full of language and literacy. They hear language which consists of four major levels: the sound system (phonology), the system of meaning (semantics), the rules of word formation (morphology), and the rules of sentence formation (syntax) (Ibid)

Methodology

The paper used mixed method research. It used both qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research, relying on thematic analysis (TA). The quantitative research used numerical analysis by using SPSS statistics.

The participant of the study were first semester students. The researcher taught a number of 54 students' English reading and writing skills. The lectures took place in university campus classrooms. After six lectures, the students were given an exam of what they have covered through classroom instruction. At the next part of the course, the same group of students were taught online through telegram platform. At the end of

the course, mainly after six lectures, the student were given another exam to assess what they have learnt from online teaching of reading and writing skills.

For better understanding of students performance in the two exams mentioned earlier, semi-structured interviews were conducted. A number of 20 students were interviewed to gain insights about their perspectives of both online and face-to-face lectures in order to make their exam results more meaningful.

The questions of the interview were as the following;

1. What do you think advantages/positive affects you experienced with regard to learning English reading and writing skills?
2. Which is the most positively/negatively affected skill (writing or reading,)?
3. Are there any problems/challenges/negative that affected you with regard to learning reading and writing skills? If yes, what are they?
4. Do you have any comments on solving the problems of learning reading and writing skills in distance education?

Data Analysis:

The results of the two exams were compared in order to see the impact of online teaching on learning reading and writing skills. This comparison of the results was done by using *IBM SPSS* statistics.

To analyze the interviews, the researcher used thematic analysis which was explained by Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology of TA. At the first stage, the researcher read the interview script in order to be familiar with the concepts discussed. Then, the researcher identified the units of analysis by breaking up the interview in to useful data in form of chunk of words and phrases. In the third stage, the chunk of the interview data were summarized into one or two word summary or code. Then the number of codes is reduced by omitting the repeated codes. The following stage is to code the codes in order to derive categories or themes. The final stage is writing up a narrative from the theme, sub-theme and codes. In this description of themes, quotes from the interviews were used to support the ideas mentioned. This analysis followed by illustrating the frequency of each them and its percentage by using the following applications:

IBM SPSS STATISTICS VERSION 25
MICROSOFT OFFICE EXCEL 2019

The Results

By comparing the two exam results, it was noticed as the following vertical graph shows that most of students' performance has improved. The SPSS Statistics measurement showed that about 75% of the grades improved and only 7% of the grade decreased after online teaching. 18% of the grades remained the same. The following vertical graph illustrates that;

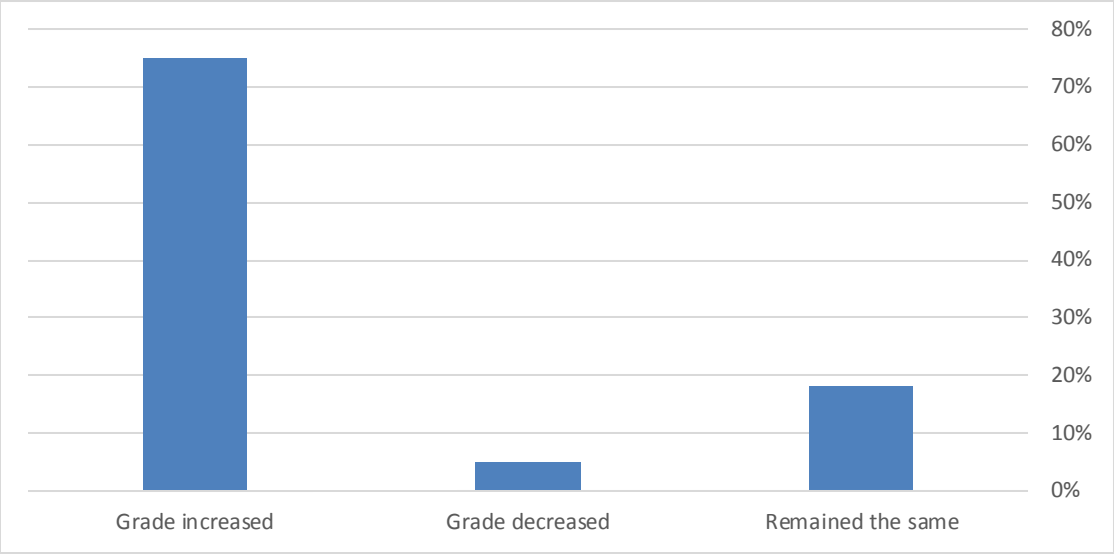


Figure (1): Students Performance on Reading and Writing Skills after Distance Education.

In order to have a better understanding of reasons behind students' performance on the exams and the impact of distance education on their learning reading and writing skills, the researcher interviewed a number of 20 students.

The results of the interviews presented the positive and negative effects of distance education on learning English reading and writing skills of first semester students at the English department at faculty of languages. On the basis of the research questions, five general patterns arose:

(I) The advantages/positive aspects of distance education for learning English reading and writing skills of first semester students at the English department of university of Benghazi

(II) The disadvantages/negative aspects of distance education for learning English reading and writing skills of first semester students at the English department of university of Benghazi

(III) The most positively influenced skill (reading or writing) by distance education.

(IV) The most negatively influenced skill (reading or writing) by distance education.

(V) The solutions for solving the challenges of distance education contexts.

These five patterns are represented by a variety of themes. These themes are illustrated in details on tables and their relevant frequencies and percentages were represented.

The Positive Effects of DE in Learning English Writing Skills

Regarding the positive effects of distance learning in learning writing skills of first semester students, nine themes have emerged from students' responses (Table 1).

Among them, *the chance of reviewing what the teacher has instructed (72%), faster writing and less errors (64%), more emphasis on writing skills (60%), use of computer online resources and facilities (60%),*and *benefit from wide variety of tools and resources (60%)* are the most frequent themes respectively.

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Appropriate Assignment and home work	10	40%
More emphasis on writing skill	15	60%
Use of computer online resources and facilities	15	60%
Benefit from wide variety of tools and resources	15	60%
Faster writing and less errors	16	64%
More time for practice	14	56%
More convenience	5	20%
The chance of reviewing what the teacher has instructed	18	72%
No Advantages	5	20%
No Answer	-	

Table (1)The Advantages/Positive Aspects of Distance learning for Learning English Writing Skills.

According to the above table, the most frequent theme related to the positive aspects of distance education on learning writing skills is the *chance of reviewing what the teacher has instructed* (72%). Most of the students stated that since most of the lectures are downloaded online so the students have the chance to repeat the lectures as many times as they need. The following extracts represent the students' perspectives, students were indicated by number not by names. These extracts are followed by a pie chart to illustrate the theme:

> ***S 13 the teacher created a group on telegram and she sends word documents files and voice files and sometimes videos. I have downloaded them so I can review what the teacher has explained and pause on the areas which I have difficulty to understand.***

> ***S 19 I like studying at night when home is calm. Distance education help me do so since I can listen or watch the lecture anytime I want.***

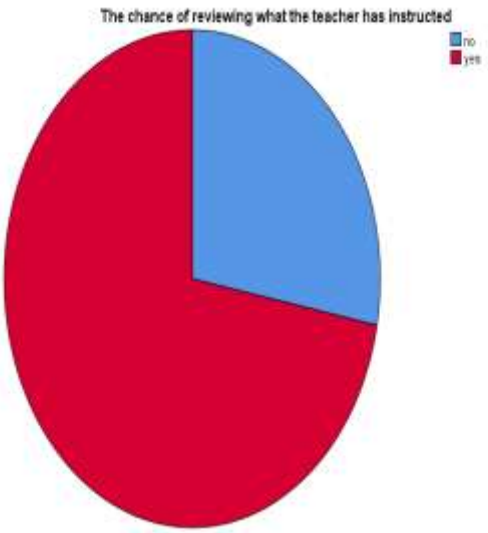


Figure (2) the Chance of Reviewing What the Teacher Has Instructed.

The other recurrent theme which highlights the advantage of distance education on learning writing skill is *faster writing and less errors* (64 %). According to many students this theme can be resulted from the other two themes *benefit from wide variety of tools and resources* (60%) and use *of computer online resources and facilities* (60%). This can be illustrated from students' comments:

> ***S10 ….in writing my assignments, computer online tools facilitated my writing, helped me in correcting my writing and know my mistakes and this has improved my writing and made me faster writer***
>
> ***S 14 ….in most of my homework, I got few mistakes. This is because I got many programs that can help me deduct my mistakes and correct them quickly.***

Another frequent theme among students' comments is *more emphasis on writing skill* (60%) two students have stated:

> ***S5 .most of assignments and homework in this subject and other subjects are done in written form, which led to an increased amount of practice in writing, and finally, an improvement in my writing skills.***
>
> ***S 17 .in telegram application, there is a chat group that is the main way of communication between teacher and***

students. We have to type most of our requests, demands, questions, answers and other things we want to say to our teachers or to each other.

The Positive Effects of DE in Learning English Reading Skills

Regarding the advantages of distance education in learning reading skills, eight themes were extracted from students' responses (Table 2). Table 2 indicates that the themes with high percentages are *use of online resources and material* (72%), *comfortable environment* (48%) and *more time for extra reading and self-reading* (44%). In addition to these, the same theme which has been claimed that it has affected positively writing skill, *the chance of reviewing what the teacher has instructed*, mentioned also among the positive themes in reading skill with percentage (44%).

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Appropriate reading activities and homework	**10**	**40%**
Use of online resources and material	**18**	**72%**
More time for extra reading and self-reading	**11**	**44%**
Comfortable environment	**12**	**48%**
Less stress, embracement and anxiety, and more self-confidence	**8**	**32%**
The chance of reviewing what the teacher has instructed	**11**	**44%**
No Advantages	**5**	**20%**
No Answer	-	-

Table (2): The Advantages/Positive Aspects of Distance learning for Learning English Reading Skills.

Regarding the first theme, many participants mentioned that they could make use of online resources and material which enabled them become more skillful readers (72%). For instance, participant 6 stated that:

S 6 In online education, my teacher shared with us many useful websites and programs that facilitate reading skill. In one of these programs you have a reading text and if you come cross an unfamiliar word, you just press the word then the program will provide the correct pronunciation and translation. This motivated me to read more books and novels.

This could be seen clear from the following pie chart:

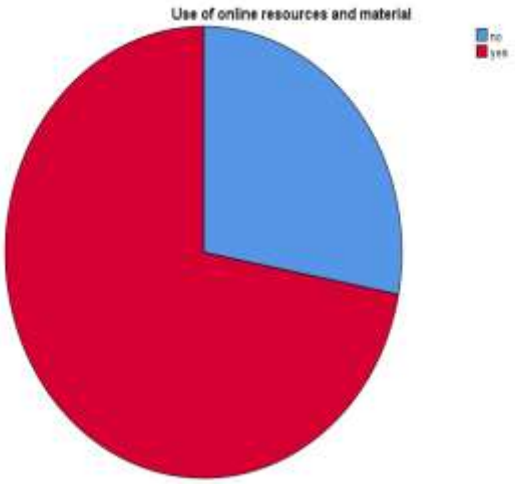


Figure (3) Use of Online Resources and Material.

The other recurrent theme presented on the table is *comfortable environment* (48%). Most of the respondents stated that, due to the relaxing atmosphere of home, they experienced less stress, anxiety, and embarrassment in online classes compared to real classroom contexts. The following extracts represent the students' opinions:

S 4: I think those who were a little shy or uncomfortable to read in front of the class felt more comfortable and improved their reading skill by reading with microphones on the virtual surface.
S 20: I feel more comfortable while reading in my own room without having any one staring at me.

The last theme which highlights the advantage of distance education on learning reading skill is *more time for extra reading and self-reading (44%)*. To illustrate, here is two of students' comments:

S16: We had more time to read.
S 18: .we had more free time to read lots of novels and books related to our field of study.

The Negative Effects of DE in Learning English Writing Skills

The second question, respondents were asked is about the disadvantages/negative effects of distance education for learning writing, and reading skills.

For the disadvantages of distance education on learning writing skills, eight themes were identified in total (Table 3). Among them, *Technical problems, blackout*

and poor internet service (80%) and *High reliance on computer facilities* (68%) are the most frequent and recurrent themes.

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
High reliance on computer facilities	17	68%
Insufficient feedback	5	20%
Lack of immediate answer	4	16%
A lot of assignment	10	40%
Afraid to ask or contact the teacher in inappropriate time	4	16%
Technical problems, blackout and poor internet service	20	80%
Boring not challenging	3	12%
No Answer	2	8%

Table(3) The Disadvantages/Negative Aspects of Distance Learning for Learning English Writing Skills.

Most of the students expressed that due to poor internet connection and due to the black out which is a major problem among all Libyans. These results in not being able attend online lecture and interact with the teacher directly. Complaining about internet services and black out appears clearly in most of students comments:

> S 15 I don't think online education in our country is a good idea. It is not practical. No good internet service, no power even no equipment. I don't have a laptop I need to go to my cousin's home to attend and download my lectures and send my assignments.

The following figure shows how many students suffer from technical problems in online education regarding writing skill;

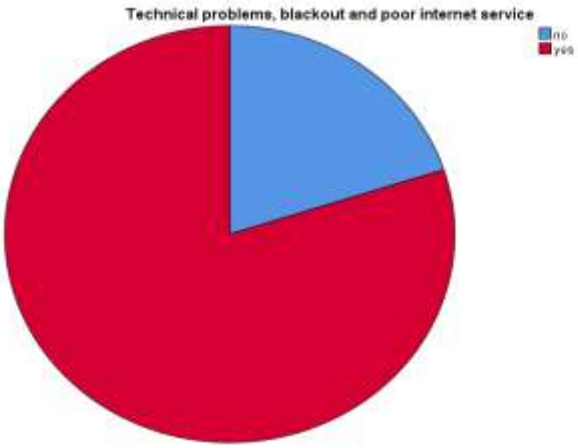


Figure (4) Technical Problems, Blackout and Poor Internet Service.

High reliance on computer facilities (68%), as the second recurrent theme of bad aspects of online writing skill course. It refers to the fact the students relies on the computer to accomplish most of the tasks assigned to them. And that is not good most of the time as explained by the following student:

> S 11 …during the online lectures, I use my laptop to write my assignments. Using computer programs helped me correct my misspelled words and use the write word form and punctuation which helped me a lot. Unfortunately, in the exam I could not do this since using computers and dictionaries are not allowed which has affected my grade negatively.

The Negative Effects of DE in Learning English Reading Skills

The following table presents the main issues regarding the negative aspects on distance education on learning reading skill for first semester students.

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Insufficient feedback	5	20%
Insufficient teacher's assistance	5	20%
Technical problems	16	64%
Insufficient practice	4	16%
Afraid to ask or contact the teacher in inappropriate time	4	16%
Boring	4	16%
No Answer	1	4%

Table (4) The Disadvantages/Negative Aspects of Distance for Learning English Reading Skills.

The same problem students suffer in online courses in writing skill appears also among the most negative aspect of online reading skill course which is *Technical problems* (64 %). They could not easily attend the online courses on time and sometimes the teacher requires from the students quick responses to some questions. Also sometimes it takes days from the students to get the internet service back. This theme can easily be illuminated through the below statements and can be illustrated from the pie chart:

> P8: Because of some problems with internet connection and power, some students may not be able to either down load the lectures or even watch them online.

> S 12: sometimes the teacher gives us a reading text and after that she ask us to answer related questions, she wanted us to

answer the question immediately after she posts them and that is not possible most of the time due to the poor internet services.

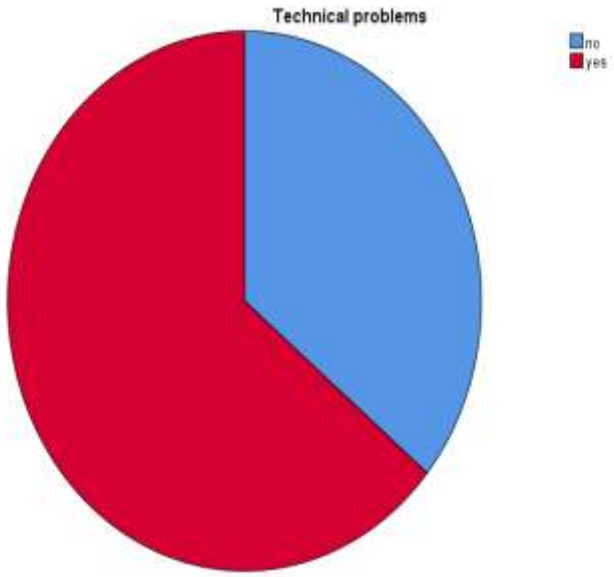


Figure (5) Technical Problems, Blackout and Poor Internet Service.

The Most Positively/ Negatively Affected Skill from DE

Students were asked which they think the most positively and most negatively affected skill by distance education. The following figures demonstrate the results of TA concerning the most positively and negatively influenced language skill. As Figures 6 and 7 depict, students disagree about which skill were affected positively more, however, regardless which was more positively affected, most of them agree that online teaching has a positive effect on them and there is only few negative aspects.

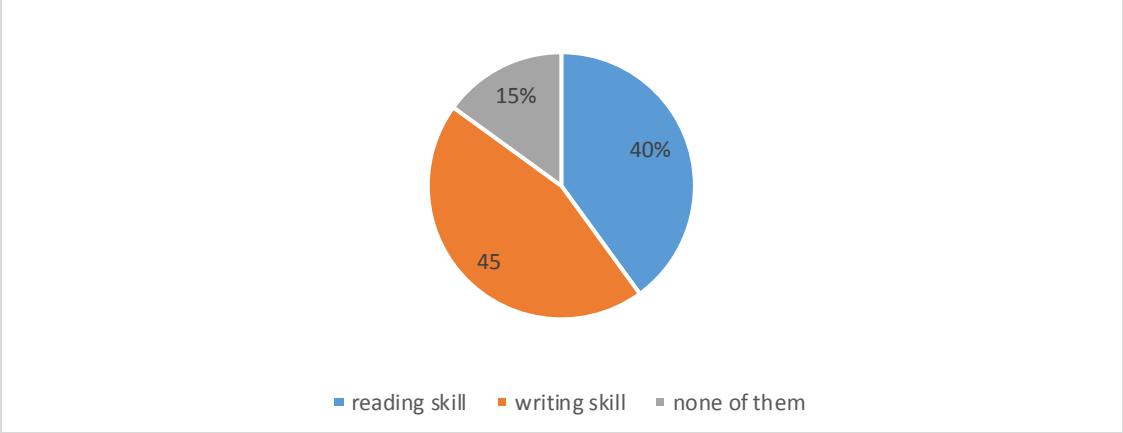


Figure (6): The Most Positively Affected Skill from DE.

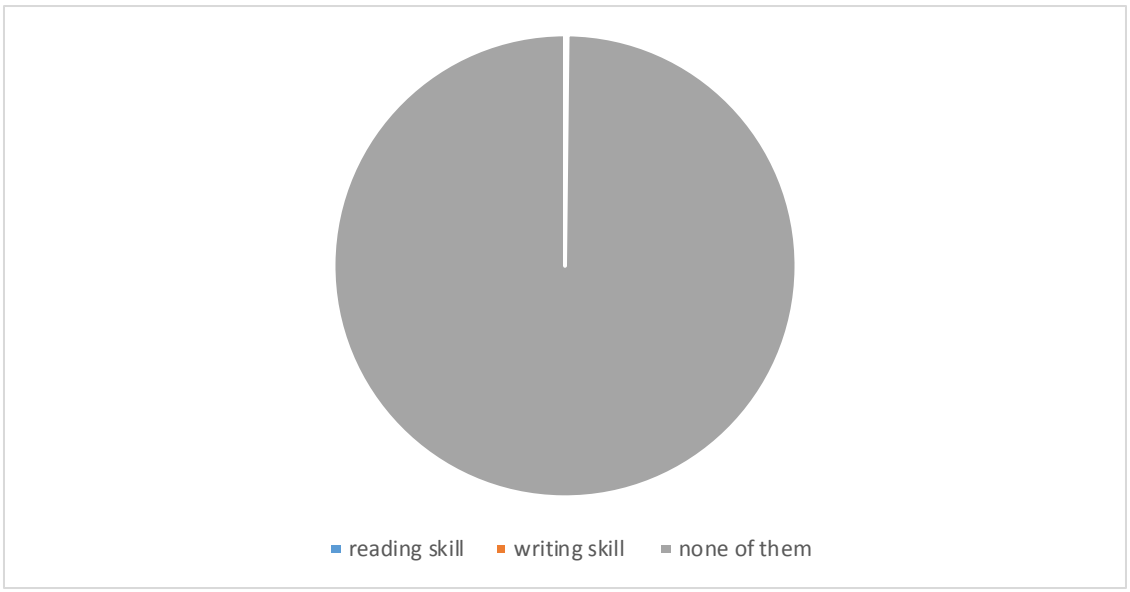


Figure (7): The Most Negatively Affected Skill from DE.

Solutions to Distance Education Problems

As the last question, the students were asked to mention some practical solutions to the problems of learning English language reading and writing skills in distance education contexts. Students' answers can be grouped into three main categories or themes as TA analysis maintained, including *teachers' role, students' role, and administrators' role.* According to students' responses, in order to solve the online teaching problems, the responsibility of all educational members should be adapted based on online education requirements.

Students have suggested solutions regarding the teachers' role which can be listed as follow:

Encourage the students to become more active
Employ more creative teaching strategies
Becoming more literate in running online classes
Give students more opportunity to practice
Provide students with meaningful feedback
Include pair work and group work
Give appropriate amount of homework and assignment
Use online platforms that supports visual interaction such as zoom

The other theme regarding the authority responsibility in improving online teaching is solving the technical problems. Some students recommended solving the black out problems as well as solving poor internet service problems as an essential step in order to be able to demonstrate online education. Some students went further and claimed that providing the students who do not have with the equipment needed for online teaching is the authority role.

As the TA revealed, many students acknowledged that students themselves could have a very in important role in improving online teaching by following these steps:

Ensure more academic engagement
Maintain Self-study
Improve good learning strategies to cope with online classes
Ask the teacher when assistance is needed
Include pair work and group work in studying

Discussion:

This study was an attempt to explore the effect of distance education in learning English reading and writing skills and which language skill has the most and the least advantage under the distance education contexts. The present study also aimed to propose some practical solutions to solve the probable problems and challenges of distance education.

As starting point, the researcher has compared the students' results in their mid-term exam where they were taught reading and writing skills directly, i.e.; face to face education, with their final exam results after they were taught online. The results have shown that the students' performance has improved through online teaching. To understand the reasons behind this improvement twenty students were interviewed.

Concerning the first research question, thematic analysis has manifest that the advantageous points of distance education for learning reading and writing English skills can be categorized into six unique themes *the chance of reviewing what the teacher has instructed, faster writing and less errors, use of computer online resources and facilities, benefit from wide variety of tools and resources, comfortable environment* and *more time for extra reading and self-reading.*

The results have shown numerous advantages of online learning. Many students emphasized the significance of online resources/facilities in learning language skills. Through online education, most of the students have experienced the positive side of it. They could make use of advantage of numerous computer/online resources and programs, such as spelling-check programs and online dictionaries. Moreover, with online education, some students could save more hours, which gave them more chances to do some extra activities outside the classrooms. Some researchers such as Toquero (2021) and Davis et al (2019) emphasized the role of comfortable environment in enhancing students' self-confidence and motivation in learning language skills. Enhancing self-confidence and motivation has been proved in this research that it could be achieved through distance education. Some students pointed out the importance of a comfortable environment in their rooms in which negative feelings (e.g., stress, embarrassment, and shyness) do not exist. Students assume that due to the removal of unpleasant feelings in online classes, they can perform better in reading and writing tasks and assignments and improve their reading and writing skill in general. Last but not least, advantage of using online platforms, students can access the recordings of the courses with no limitation.

The second question in this research was to understand the negative sides of the distance education in order to overcome them. From students' perspective, there are not much disadvantages regarding distance education. There are two main negative aspects in distance education: Technical problems, blackout and poor internet service and high reliance on computer facilities.

Distance education problem can be solved by authorities, teachers and the students themselves. Regarding the technical problems, this problem must be solved in the first place before designing online teaching. It is obvious that without good internet services and without power, online learning cannot take place. The authorities should work hard to solve this problem. Also the teacher might contribute to solve power and internet problems by allowing the students to participate in the lesson when they can make access to their lectures and not force them to attend the lectures on a specific time which might not be suitable for many of them. The second frequent problem regarding distance education, is high reliance on computer facilities. Both students and teachers can work on solving this problems. Students should increase their academic efforts to minimize their reliance on online facilities and resources. They should for example, do their assignment without using the dictionaries all the time and put in their considerations that such tools wouldn't exist in their exam environment. Teacher also could contribute in solving this problem by encouraging the students independence and being free from using such facilities by providing suitable tasks and activities.

Conclusion:

The present study was an exploratory study. It aimed to explore the advantages and disadvantages of distance education in learning English reading and writing skills, on the one hand, and to determine the most negatively and positively influenced language skill during this new mode of education. This study also intended to offer some practical ways to overcome the problems of distance education.

Based on the research findings, it can be inferred that along with few disadvantages and challenges that students experienced distance education with regard to learning English reading and writing skills, this type of education offered some opportunities and benefits for students, including the accessibility of different online resources, the availability of what teacher has instructed, comfortable environment, etc.

Besides the positive and negative aspects of distance education, students were asked about the most positively and negatively influenced language skills. Although the students disagreed about which most positively or negatively affected skill whether it is reading or writing skill, most of them agreed that the advantages are more than the disadvantages of learning both skills online.

The current research is informative for language teachers since it provides them with suitable knowledge to take advantage of opportunities and solve the challenges. Additionally, the findings of this research have important implications for administrators. They are responsible for the technical problems. Students themselves should work hard to make use of the important facilities of online education and be aware of these issues to enhance the efficiency of online courses and overcome its limitations.

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