

Teachers' Perspectives towards Online Learning in Saudi Elementary Schools

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Abstract

The elementary stage is of great importance in establishing and supporting students during the beginning of their school life. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the Saudi teachers' perspectives about online learning and its effectiveness on some students' skills. The sample consisted of 250 male and female elementary teachers from different Saudi regions, and they responded to an online questionnaire consisting of both open and closed items to investigate their perspectives on online learning and face-to-face learning. The results showed a great perception and awareness among male and female teachers about the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. In addition, the results show that elementary teachers prefer face-to-face learning because it is the most stable and avoids many of the disadvantages mentioned for online learning. From this point of view, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating the two types of learning and directing teachers' professional development practices towards enhancing and developing their digital skills.

Keywords: elementary, online learning, face-to-face learning, COVID19, Saudi teachers.

1. Introduction

Before COVID, online learning in Saudi Arabia for elementary, intermediate, and secondary students was mostly supplemental to traditional instruction, even though Vision 2030 prioritized growing infrastructure, capacity, and capability. The pandemic required a quick transformation in education delivery, including notably higher demands on schools and infrastructure to enable online learning [1].

Saudi Arabia commissioned a study to understand the situation of online K-12 learning before, during, and after COVID to ensure that high-quality online learning is provided. The goal was to discover areas of excellence that

might be emphasized against an evaluation framework for quality K-12 online learning while also highlighting areas of development [2]. The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) was invited to lead this initiative with the help of numerous major partners worldwide because of their extensive network and expertise. Experts from ISTE, UNESCO IITE, Quality Matters, Michigan Virtual, and the Illinois Virtual School were among those that participated.

On March 9, 2020, the first day of the school closure, EIN Satellite educational channels began streaming lessons from EIN Satellite TV and YouTube to all students around the Kingdom. Lessons began transmitting to students in their homes within 10 hours after the decision to stop school attendance. In addition to this first attempt at online learning, the MOE has created another alternative for online learning, the Unified Learning System (vschool.sa). It was launched a week after the last day of school. The Future Gate platform also introduces CMC tools to teachers and students using simultaneous interactive classes. This is an anytime option for middle and high school services. The Ministry of Education has also provided a unique virtual platform for kindergartens to teach children from three to 7 years old online under the supervision of their parents. It offers a variety of educational materials, instructions, and educational content through 11 units according to a schedule that monitors the child's progress and achievement. [3].

Several issues and aspects related to online and face-to-face teaching/learning processes have been investigated and examined differently. Most of them are related to the role of the teachers, their perception, preparation and training, and the effectiveness of each online and face-to-face learning on learning attainment, learners' perception, engagement, and motivation.

Although face-to-face and online education are two types, they are qualitatively different. The role of teachers has few similarities but many differences. Aside from a solid knowledge foundation, teachers have additional responsibilities in traditional classrooms, such as adapting, motivating, encouraging active participation, listening to students, fostering cooperation, and so on. Traditional classroom teachers also create a new community and active learning environment within the classroom to capture their students' attention, while the role of online teachers is

continuously renewed and never-ending. In online learning, content, activities, assignments, and exams are delivered without students. [4].

Janmaimool and Nunsunanon investigated the effectiveness of online learning versus face-to-face learning. They discovered that online classes are less effective than face-to-face classes and revealed that the effectiveness of online learning was influenced by learners' ability to interact with classmates during class, their ability to interact with teachers after class, the quality of online platforms, and disturbances or distractions in learners' environments [5]. Vlachopoulos, Sangrà, and Cabrera, on the other hand, stated that online learning could be effective and provide new learning environments that make learning accessible and assist students in developing competencies, skills, and attitudes [6].

Online learning presents challenges that differ from face-to-face learning and necessitate special teacher preparation and training. Tartari and Kashahu identified such challenges, stating that the lack of current pedagogical knowledge, such as teaching techniques and methods used in technology-based learning, forms of technology-based assessment, and forms of collaboration and communication that help the teacher manage online learning, are the most significant challenges that should be considered [7]. Kulal and Nayak also stated that teachers had difficulty conducting online classes due to a lack of proper training and development [8].

It is also evident that teachers' perspective toward online learning has changed. Alammary et al. found that teachers' positive attitudes toward online learning, self-efficacy, and perceived reliability positively impact behavioral intention to adopt it [9]. It was also found that COVID-19 has positively affected e-learning adoption as a type of education in the long run.

Therefore, it is recommended that the education ministry take immediate action and capitalize on the e-learning experience that academics have gained during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From this point of view, the current study examines elementary school teachers' perspectives in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia towards online learning compared to face-to-face learning and their opinions about its advantages and disadvantages. The study also explores the effectiveness of online and face-to-face learning in developing students' knowledge and social and learning skills from the point of view of elementary school teachers. The study answers two main questions:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of online learning from the point of view of elementary school teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

- What are elementary school teachers' perspectives about the effectiveness of online and face-to-face learning in increasing students' knowledge and developing their learning and social skills?
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2. Materials and Methods

The study sample consisted of 250 male and female teachers teaching at the elementary stage, specifically years 2-4, from different Saudi regions. The number of male teachers was 150(60%), while the number of female teachers was 100 (40%). The researcher has identified this category of teachers because they teach - at the time of the study - the target student group, who have spent all the years of the stage or at least two of them in online learning due to the Corona pandemic. The academic qualification of the sample ranged from master's to diploma, where 88% of the sample were bachelor's holders, 10% were master's holders, while the rest of the percentage was distributed among the various diploma holders.

As for the school year, 45% of the sample teach in the third grade (their current students have spent the first two years in online learning). 25% of the sample teach the fourth grade (which means that the students have spent two years in online learning), while 30% are teachers of the second grade of elementary school (students who started school in online learning).

The researcher used an online questionnaire to collect data, which consisted of closed and open questions on the following topics:

- Advantages and disadvantages of online learning
- The effectiveness of online learning in increasing students' knowledge.
- The effectiveness of online learning in developing students' learning skills
- The effectiveness of online learning in developing students' social competencies.
- The effectiveness of face-to-face learning in increasing students' knowledge.
- The effectiveness of face-to-face learning in developing students' learning skills.
- The effectiveness of face-to-face learning in developing students' social competencies.

The researcher used a Likert scale of 1-5, where one means "ineffective at all" and five means very effective, to measure the responses of the sample members to the previous items, with the opportunity for them to add what they see fit about the advantages and disadvantages of online learning.

3. Results

The results of the study showed that online learning has many advantages that elementary school teachers favored, as follows:

- Quick access to educational materials 74%
- Flexible learning according to personal abilities 53%
- Staying at home while learning 51%
- Possibility to record lessons 46%
- Comfortable learning environment 44%
- Online interaction during class 40%

The study sample also added many other advantages such as parental supervision, ease of communication, saving time and effort, low economic cost, and new learning environments. As for the disadvantages of online learning from the point of view of elementary school teachers, they were as follows:

- Technical problems 69%
- Weakness of the home's potential to support learning 65%
- Less interaction with the teacher 50%
- Lack of interaction between students during the lesson 48%
- Weak self-discipline 50%
- Social isolation 32%
- Dependence on parents 15%
- Sitting in front of electronic screens for long periods of 5%

As for the study sample's evaluation of the effectiveness of online learning in increasing students' knowledge, 44% of them do not know precisely about it (neutral), 20% believe that online learning is effective, 12% believe that it is very effective, 12% consider online learning ineffective and 11% consider it ineffective at all in increasing students' knowledge.

As for the effectiveness of online learning in developing students' learning skills, 46% of the study sample do not know precisely about it, only 8% see it as very effective, 20% see it as effective, while 16% see it as ineffective and 10% see it as ineffective at all in the development of learning skills of the student.

Concerning the effectiveness of online learning in developing the student's social competencies, 36% of the study sample do not know precisely about it, only 8% see online learning as very effective, and 19% see it as effective. In contrast, 24% consider it ineffective and 13% not effective at all in developing the student's social competencies.

When the study sample was asked about the effectiveness of face-to-face learning in increasing students' knowledge, 17% of them did not know precisely about it, 30% believed that face-to-face learning is effective, 42% believed that it is very effective, 7% see face-to-face learning as ineffective, and only 4% see it as ineffective at all in increasing students' knowledge.

As for the effectiveness of face-to-face learning in developing students' learning skills, 22% of the study sample do not know precisely about it, 45% see it as very effective, 22% see it as effective, while 8% see face-to-face learning as ineffective and only 3% see it as "ineffective at all" in developing students' learning skills.

Concerning the effectiveness of face-to-face learning in developing students' social skills, 19% of the study sample "do not know" about it, while 40% consider face-to-face learning very effective, and 30% consider it effective. While 8% see it as ineffective, only 3% see it as entirely ineffective in developing the student's social competencies.

4. Discussion

By looking at the results of the current study, it is clear that elementary school teachers in Saudi Arabia are fully aware of the advantages and disadvantages of online learning through their responses to the first two questions. Easy access to the educational materials came as the most important feature, followed by the flexible learning environment and the possibility of recording lessons. These are the essential features of online learning, according to the literature in this field [9] [10]. Teachers also mentioned other advantages of online learning, perhaps because of its connection due to the concern for the safety and health of students during the pandemic, such as staying at home and a comfortable learning environment.

As for the defects of online learning, the results showed technical problems as their most prominent. This is expected, as the transition to online learning was surprising without technical preparations, whether in school or at home. In addition, weak home support (weak internet, parents' digital skills, students' digital skills, etc.) was one of the main disadvantages of online learning. On the other hand, the study sample found that the interaction between the student and the teacher and among students in online learning is relatively weak. In addition to the problem of student discipline during online learning lessons, which is represented in their lack of full commitment to participation, continuous attendance of recorded lessons, and the dependence of some on others in solving homework and digital tests [11]. Finally, the results showed that one of the disadvantages of online learning is social isolation, as the students spent nearly two academic years in online learning,

and some of them started their school life for two years in this educational system, which weakened their social skills in communication and interaction with others.

The study's results related to the opinions of male and female teachers about the effectiveness of online learning on some student skills showed that teachers prefer face-to-face learning to online learning. This is evident from their answers to the question of the effectiveness of face-to-face learning in increasing students' knowledge compared to online learning. In addition, their responses about the effectiveness of face-to-face learning in developing students' learning and social skills indicate their preference for face-to-face learning over online learning in these themes.

It is also clear from the sample responses about the effectiveness of online learning in developing knowledge, learning skills, and social skills that large percentages of them "do not know" about the effectiveness or are completely "unsure" and cannot answer! This is something that puzzled the researcher! It may be attributed, though, to the lack of studies that dealt with this topic in the Saudi context and that teachers in the elementary stage did not feel the impact of online learning yet, which requires them to carefully observe and conduct some action research on different samples of students.

5. Conclusion

Online learning during the Corona pandemic was a reality that the world experienced, including elementary school teachers in Saudi Arabia. Since the elementary stage is of great importance in establishing and supporting students during the beginning of their school life, this study was conducted to explore teachers' perspectives about online learning and its effectiveness on some students' skills. This study showed a great perception and awareness among male and female teachers about the advantages and disadvantages of online learning and their preference for face-to-face learning because it is the most stable and avoids many of the disadvantages mentioned for online learning. From this point of view, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating the two types of learning and directing teachers' professional development practices towards enhancing and developing their digital skills.

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