

## The Impact of Online Learning amid COVID-19 Pandemic on Student Intrinsic Motivation and English Language Improvement

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### Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of fully online learning during COVID-19 on Saudi EFL learners' intrinsic motivation and their English language improvement. It recruited 89 male and female EFL undergraduates who studied English courses at the university in the actual classroom before the pandemic and online during its outbreak. An online questionnaire was used to collect data on intrinsic motivation and English language improvement. Both the validity and reliability of the questionnaire were checked. The findings showed that the majority of the participants were highly motivated to study English online during the health crisis in question. They also reported a surge of English improvement and received the expected GPA or higher than the expected level. The finding also showed that there was a correlation between low achievement levels and non-intrinsic motivation. The study recommended using fully online learning in the future to increase EFL students' intrinsic motivation and English language improvement.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; English language improvement; intrinsic motivation; online learning.

### تأثير التعلم عن بعد في أثناء جائحة كورونا في الدافعية الداخلية للطلاب وتحسين اللغة الإنجليزية

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### ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دراسة تأثير التعلم عن بعد خلال جائحة كورونا في الدافعية الداخلية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في السعودية وفي تحسين لغتهم الإنجليزية. نُفذت الدراسة على 89 طالبًا وطالبة من الطلاب الجامعيين الذين درسوا تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة في الفصول الدراسية الفعلية قبل تفشي الوباء وكذلك عبر الإنترنت في أثناء تفشي المرض، جرى استخدام استبيان عبر الإنترنت لجمع البيانات الكمية حول الدافعية الداخلية وتحسين اللغة الإنجليزية، أظهرت النتائج أن غالبية المشاركين كانوا متحمسين للغاية لدراسة اللغة الإنجليزية عبر الإنترنت خلال أزمة كورونا، كذلك أظهرت النتائج أن هناك زيادة في تحسين اللغة الإنجليزية وحصول الطلاب والطالبات على معدل تراكمي متوقع أو أعلى من المتوقع، أظهرت النتائج أيضًا أن هناك علاقة بين مستوى الإنجاز المنخفض والدافعية المنخفضة، أوصت الدراسة باستخدام التعلم عن بعد في المستقبل لزيادة الدافعية لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وتحسين اللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات الدالة: فيروس كورونا، تحسين اللغة الإنجليزية، الدافعية الداخلية، التعلم عن بعد.

## 1. Introduction:

The unwelcome health crisis caused by the deadly Coronavirus (also called COVID-19) has marked a sharp break in all aspects of life, including education. Before this event, many researchers recommended using online English language learning. The overspread of COVID-19 made online learning obligatory to most learners all over the world. During the pandemic, numerous universities in the world adopted full online learning. To many learners and instructors, it was an obligatory shift from face-to-face to emergent distance learning without prior preparation. Driven by the urgent need, policy-makers around the world reluctantly decided to go for complete learning delivery online to let learning continue during the lockdown (Shamsan et al., 2021). Putting it in the Saudi Arabia context, face-to-face English language learning amid COVID-19 pandemic has been largely affected due to closure of the educational institutions.

The Saudi Ministry of Education closed schools and universities on March 8, 2020 and announced the start of online learning in all institutions. The University of Bisha, one of the Saudi Universities, was no exception. Transferring to online learning from the first day of the university closure took place successfully, thanks to the long experience in teaching and learning via a learning platform called *Blackboard*. The students were already using such a platform as supportive online learning, as it was compulsory for all faculty members. In addition, University of Bisha was a Quality Matters (QM) member since 2013 until 2018. Moreover, the university instructors got training by QM, and some of them were recognized master reviewers who reviewed courses from countries like USA and France. For this reason, University of Bisha did not encounter challenges, compared to some other universities around the world. Furthermore, to avoid any shortcomings in online teaching, the deanship of E-learning at the University conducted many workshops for training instructors and students since the beginning of the university closure. Many short instruction videos were recorded and sent as links to instructors and to students as emails, SMSs, and posted on all the university websites and social media networking links.

Many studies have been conducted on online learning and teaching (Alfadda & Mahdi, 2021; Alkhudiry & Alahdal, 2021). Some focused on the effect of online learning on students' motivation (Alfadda & Mahdi, 2021; Alkhudiry & Alahdal, 2021). There is still a need to examine such effects on students' abilities with regard to the four language skills, particularly when it comes to learning online under the influence of the ongoing worldwide health crisis. Many applications have been used for delivering online learning, such as *Blackboard*, *Moodle*, *Microsoft Team*, *Zoom*, *Edu book* and social media such as *Telegram*, *WhatsApp*. The sudden transfer to fully online learning was assumingly associated with fear of the fatal disease and uncertainty about readiness of online learning. Despite this dilemma, policy-makers, curriculum developers, teachers, and students found online learning engaging, joyful, and motivating. Alfadda and Mahdi (2021) found that students were ready and motivated to study English online. Taking such a claim in mind, the current study aims to move the stagnant waters and check the extent to which online learning boosts Saudi EFL students' abilities in English learning and their intrinsic motivation to learn through the newly adopted medium. The study set off to address the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of online classes on Saudi EFL students' intrinsic motivation?
2. To what extent do online classes affect their English language improvement?
3. To what extent does intrinsic motivation affect EFL students' improvement during the time of COVID-19 online learning?

## 2. Review of Literature

The review touches on online learning and intrinsic motivation. It also examines the relationship between online learning and EFL students' improvement.

### 2.1 Online Learning and Students' motivation

Being intrinsically motivated to learn means having the enjoyment and interest to learn. It ultimately leads to energy, eagerness and passion for learning for the sake of learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Arguably, intrinsic motivation has a strong association with well-being, high-quality learning and students' performance and achievements (Alqurashi, 2019; Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Taylor et al., 2014). Likely, online learning

during COVID-19 is expected to create a higher level of students' engagement and participation in different learning tasks (Altalhi, 2020; Alfares, 2020; Alkhudiry & Alahdal, 2021; Bailey et al., 2020; Pavel, 2020). Moreover, students' engagement ultimately enhances autonomous motivation (Oga-Baldwin, et al., 2017).

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19, many studies were conducted on the effects of technology on students' motivation and achievement (Abbasova & Mammadova, 2019; Ali, 2017; Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019). Abbasova and Mammadova (2019) studied the role of technology in language teaching and learning from the viewpoint of six English instructors at Khazar University, Azerbaijan. The participants stated that technology is essential in second language acquisition as it supports the students' engagement in education. Likewise, Ali (2017) examined the role of using Blackboard in motivating Saudi EFL learners. The study found that Blackboard motivates Saudi EFL students to study English language. Ali and Bin-Hady (2019) explored the effects of WhatsApp on students' attitudes, motivation, and anxiety. They found that EFL students have positive attitudes towards the App when used as a learning tool. It reportedly reduced their anxiety while studying English. Blended learning was investigated to explore its role in motivating English language students and it was found a good motivator for English language students. It improved EFL students' motivation to study English according to Hijazi and AlNatour (2020) and Sari, et al. (2018).

The effect of online learning during COVID-19 pandemic was also undertaken by other researchers. For instance, Rahardjo and Pertiwi (2020) reported that students' motivation was increased during the pandemic. The authors found that 72.6% of students gained higher motivation to study English online during the health crisis and 25.0% gained moderate motivation. They also found that only 2.4% of their respondents were demotivated to study English online. However, findings showed that students got poor grades during the pandemic. Moreover, EFL students at Qasim University were also found to be intrinsically motivated which in turn enhanced their learning of English during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alkhudiry & Alahdal, 2021).

## **2.2 Online Learning and Students' Improvement**

Previous studies showed that technology participates in developing EFL students' ability in the four language skills. For example, it improves EFL students' performance in listening skills. This result was found before the outbreak of COVID-19 as well as during the pandemic period, when learning was fully online (Anwas et al., 2020; Dirjal, et al., 2020; Saona-Vallejos et al., 2020). Furthermore, technology was also found to motivate EFL students to speak English during online classes, which helps in improving EFL students' speaking skills (Al Ghazali, 2020; Alfahaid, 2018; Bailey et al., 2020; Huang, et al., 2020; Ja'ashan, 2015; Juniardi, et al, 2020; Yeşilbağ & Korkmaz, 2020). It was also found that technology played an essential role in developing EFL students writing skills (Al-Maini, 2020; A. F. T. Alfahaid, 2017; AlRouji, 2020; Anwas et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Ta'amneh, 2020). EFL students have positive attitudes towards using technology for learning vocabulary, too . They also have a positive attitude towards learning grammar via technology (A. Alfahaid, 2018; Alharbi, 2019; Kariyawasam, 2020). Moreover, Bin-Hady and Hazaea (2021) also found that technology boosted EFL Yemeni students' achievement in pronunciation. Likewise, Tavakoli, et al. (2019) studied the effects of integrating computer-assisted language learning (CALL) into task-based language teaching (TBLT) on non-English major students. They found that CALL-mediated TBLT enhanced EFL students' reading motivation.

On the contrary, online learning was found as a demotivating factor for Saudi EFL students. This is because of common challenges that students face while studying online during the pandemic including problems of internet disconnection, teachers' or students' lack of experience in online teaching/learning and testing, designing online courses, and the like (Al-Nofaie, 2020; Almekhlafy, 2020; Hazaea et al., 2021; Mahyooob, 2020). The current study intends to investigate EFL students' intrinsic motivation and improvement in the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) along with grammar and vocabulary.

## **3. Methods**

This section introduces the methodology that the researcher followed to collect and analyze the relevant data. The study took place at English Department, College of Arts, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. It investigates the effect of online

English learning during COVID-19 outbreak on Saudi EFL students' intrinsic motivation and on their English language improvement.

### 3.1 Participants

The respondents of this study were English-major students (45 male and 44 female students). They have studied English face-to-face before the COVID-19 outbreak and have been studying fully online amid the pandemic. They are linguistically homogeneous (year II, III and IV students). Twenty-three of them were from year 2, 24 are from year 3 and 42 from year 4. Students of Year 1 were not investigated as they studied online since they joined the university in August 2020 and they did not have experience studying at the university traditionally. Recruiting them in the present investigation might not bring reliable responses as they might attribute the problems or opportunities to online learning. They were assumingly unable to decide whether problems or opportunities were created because of the shift from school to university or online learning. However, students with prior experience in traditional study at the university, before COVID-19 and online at the time of COVID-19 were in a position to report whether their motivation and learning English was impacted. There are two questions which cannot be answered by year 1 students: the questions about the increase and decrease of motivation and grades during the pandemic. Students of the first year could not answer these questions as the research question intended to compare studying English traditionally, before and during the COVID-19. There was clear information in the questionnaire's instruction that the questionnaire was for students in Year 2 and above. Therefore, the researcher believes that Year 1 students could be investigated separately in a future study.

### 3.2 Instrument

A questionnaire was adopted to collect the required data. It consists of two main sections: the first one relates to students' background - their level/year of study, genders and grades. The second section was divided into two sub-sections: a six-item subsection for intrinsic motivation to study online during COVID-19 pandemic was adapted from (Bailey et al., 2020). The other sub-section includes six items on the effect of online learning in improving Saudi EFL students' abilities in English language learning, in the four language skills, and language systems grammar and vocabulary. To avoid students' misunderstanding of the items and for validity purposes, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic by expert translators in the English Department. The researcher's colleagues refereed the questionnaire from the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia and Sana'a University, Yemen. Cronbach's alpha was found to be .95, which indicates the questionnaire items are reliable.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire items were built on Google Form and the link was used for distributing the questionnaire. The researcher obtained permission for distributing the questionnaire from the dean of the college. Then, the chairman sent the link to instructors at the department, requesting them to distribute the questionnaire to English major students who were in Year 2 and above. After the data were collected, the researcher downloaded the responses in Microsoft Excel (xlsx) format. Then the data were inserted into the SPSS 21 version to analyze the data and obtain numeric results. Descriptive and inferential analyses were used to answer the research questions. The analysis includes mean, standard deviation, ANOVA t-test, kurtosis and skew.

## 4. Results

This section presents the data of EFL students' intrinsic motivation and its effects on English language improvement and students' GPAs.

### 4.1 Preliminary Screening Procedures

#### 4.1.1 Checking for Normality

A variable is normally distributed if the absolute value of its skewness index is less than three and the absolute value of its kurtosis is less than 10 (Kline, 2011). As shown in Table 1, the dependent variables (intrinsic motivation and language learning) were normally distributed. The dependent measures represent the responses' averages (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) to each questionnaire's six items.

**Table 1: Normality Check for the Dependent Variables**

	Intrinsic Motivation	Language Learning
<b>Mean</b>	4.05	4.12
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	.106	.099
<b>Kurtosis</b>	1.46	1.57
<b>Skew</b>	-1.34	-1.30
<b>N</b>	89	89

#### 4.1.2 Screening for Outliers

The dependent variable was standardized; cases whose standardized values exceeded the absolute value of 3.29 are deemed to be outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). None of the cases met this criterion.

#### 4.2 Descriptive Statistics

##### 4.2. 1 Description of the Sample

Of the 89 participants included in this study, 23 were at educational level 3 or 4, 24 were at level 5 or 6, and 42 were at level 7 or 8; 45 were female and 44 were male; 4 received GPAs during COVID-19 much lower than expected, 5 received GPAs lower than expected, 51 received GPAs just as expected, 19 received GPAs higher than was expected, and 10 received GPAs much higher than expected.

#### 4.3 Cronbach's Alpha for the Dependent Variables

A scale is considered acceptable if the Cronbach alpha is .70 or higher. The Cronbach's alpha for the Intrinsic Motivation scale was .919 and Cronbach's alpha for the Language Learning scale was .917. Both figures are well above the minimum for an acceptable scale.

**Table 2: Number and Percentage of Respondents in the Various Categories of Intrinsic Motivation, Language Learning Improvement, and Expected GPA**

Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
<b>Moderate Motivation</b>	9	10.11%
<b>High Motivation</b>	71	79.78%
<b>Low Learning</b>	7	7.87%
<b>Moderate Learning</b>	13	14.61%
<b>High Learning</b>	69	77.53%
<b>Lower GPA</b>	9	10.11%
<b>As expected GPA</b>	51	57.30%
<b>Higher GPA</b>	29	32.58%

Table 2 displays the number and percentage of participants who fell into each of the various categories of *intrinsic motivation*, *language learning*, and *actual versus expected GPA*. For tabulation, intrinsic motivation and language l were categorized as follows: 1-2.50 =low, 2.51-3.5 =moderate, 3.51–5= high. For *actual* versus expected GPA, *lower* and *much lower* were combined as lower and higher and much higher were combined as higher. It should be noted that the vast majority of participants reported being highly motivated and having a High level of English language improvement. A majority (57.30%) of the participants reported receiving the expected GPA and only a small minority (10.11%) reported receiving a lower GPA than expected.

#### 4.4 Means and Standard Deviations on Individual Items

As seen in Table 3, item means (measured on a scale of: (1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree) range from 3.74 to 4.76. The participants tended to rate both their Intrinsic motivation and language learning very high. In looking at the raw

data, it appears that only 9 of the 89 participants rated themselves as not intrinsically motivated (score less than 3.0) and 8 of the 89 rated their language learning at less than 3.0. Seven participants rated themselves below 3.0 on both scales.

**Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations for the Individual Items (N=89)**

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Intrinsic Motivation Items</b>		
1. I am motivated to study English online during COVID19	4.22	1.22
2. Studying online motivated me better than studying face-to-face	4.18	1.28
3. I enjoy participating in an online class	4.14	0.91
4. I enjoy practicing language skills via Blackboard	4.11	1.14
5. I enjoy discussing with my classmates via Blackboard	3.90	1.19
6. I enjoy discussing with my teachers via Blackboard	3.74	1.32
Average of the six items	4.05	1.00
<b>Language Learning Items</b>		
1. My speaking skills were improved via studying online during COVID19	3.94	1.29
2. My reading skills were improved via studying online during COVID19	4.08	1.21
3. My writing skills were improved via studying online during COVID19	3.93	1.20
4. My listening skills were improved via studying online during COVID19	4.46	0.81
5. My grammar was improved via studying online during COVID19	3.98	1.12
6. My vocabulary was improved via studying online during COVID19	4.30	0.95
Average of the six items	4.17	0.93

A series of ANOVAs based on respondents' answers to various demographic questions as predictors of intrinsic motivation is reported in Table 4. The only significant difference in intrinsic motivation is based on demographics was the difference between expected and actual GPA. Those who had lower or much lower GPAs than expected also reported lower intrinsic motivation than those who received the GPA they expected, higher GPA than expected, or much higher GPA than expected. Note that *lower* and *much lower* were combined for the ANOVA because so few respondents fell into those categories. For symmetry in the analysis, *higher* and *much higher* were also combined.

**Table 4: Differences in Intrinsic Motivation based on Demographics (ANOVA, N=89)**

Variable		N	Mean	F	p
<b>Gender</b>	Female	44	4.08	0.07	.789
	Male	45	4.02		
<b>Education Level</b>	3-4	23	4.07	0.45	.637
	5-6	24	4.20		
	7-8	42	4.23		
<b>GPA versus expectation</b>	Lower or much Lower as	9	2.59	13.71	<.0001
	Expected	51	4.21		
	Higher or much Higher	29	4.21		

The second series of ANOVAs are based on respondent's answers to various demographic questions as predictors on *language learning* are reported in Table 5. The results for language learning paralleled those for intrinsic motivation. The only significant difference in language learning based on demographics was for the difference between expected and actual

GPA. Those who had lower or much lower GPAs than expected also reported *lower language learning* than those who received the GPA they expected, higher GPA than expected, or much higher GPA than expected. Note that *Lower* and *Much Lower* were combined for the ANOVA because so few respondents fell into those categories. For symmetry in the analysis, *higher* and *much higher* were also combined.

**Table 5: Differences in Language Learning based on Demographics (ANOVA, N=89)**

Variable		N	Mean	F	p
<b>Gender</b>	Female	44	4.17	0.34	.562
	Male	45	4.06		
<b>Education Level</b>	3-4	23	3.97	0.67	.512
	5-6	24	4.05		
	7-8	42	4.34		
<b>GPA versus expectation</b>	Lower or Much Lower As Expected	9	2.57	18.81	<.0001
	Higher or much Higher	51	4.34		
		29	4.13		

#### *Correlation between Intrinsic Motivation and Language Learning*

Intrinsic motivation and language learning were highly correlated ( $r=.814$ , NM- 89,  $p<.0001$ ). The higher intrinsic motivation, the higher the Language Learning, as perceived by the participants. Intrinsic motivation accounts for 66% of the variance in language learning ( $r^2=.66$ ).

## **5. Discussion**

The current study set three queries and tried to answer them. Regarding the first research question, the effect of online learning on Saudi EFL students' intrinsic motivation and their English language improvement at the time of COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the students (80 out of 89) stated that their intrinsic motivation to study English increased during COVID-19. Only nine students stated that they were not motivated to study English online. This finding is in line with Alkhudiry and Alahdal's (2021) findings in which they reported that online learning during COVID-19 increased students' motivation to learn English. With reference to the second research question, most of the students (82) stated that their English language ability was improved during the pandemic. Only 7 students showed that their English had not been got any improvement while studying online. As for the third question, eighty students stated that their grades had been achieved during COVID-19 higher than what they had expected, whereas only nine students stated that their grades were less than they had expected. These findings are in line with many recent studies (Khafaga, 2021; Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020). Such studies proved that online learning is valuable and provides better learning outcomes and improved English language learning.

It is to be noted that the results evince a strong correlation between students' intrinsic motivation and their achievements. Students who are highly intrinsically motivated got higher grades above their expectations, which students who are not intrinsically motivated where scored lower than their average. Such improvement in the Saudi EFL students' scores may be attributed to the long experience in using Blackboard at University of Bisha as the English Department was a branch in King Khalid University and it started teaching via Blackboard in 2008 (Al Zumor, et al., 2013). This finding shows that online learning leads to students' satisfaction as most students achieved the grades they expected.

## **6. Conclusion**

The current study indicated that intrinsic motivation is closely related to English language improvement and GPA. The results also showed that the correlation was driven by the fact that those few participants who were not motivated, got lower

GPA than was expected as well as lower English language improvement. Likewise, those who achieved lower GPAs than expected reported lower intrinsic motivation and lower language learning. The study found that most students were intrinsically motivated to study online during COVID-19, their English was improved and their grades were as expected or even higher. It could be concluded that online learning is valuable and beneficial for teaching EFL students. The researcher recommends that future research should study the actual grades because that would be much more convincing than self-reported expectations. It is also recommended that online English language learning should continue even after the COVID-19 era to boost EFL students' intrinsic motivation. The study, like many other studies, has some limitations. It only checked Saudi EFL students' perceptions. For more reliable and generable results, it would be better for similar experimental studies to be conducted. The current study used the questionnaire as a data collection tool; it would be more viable if more than one tool were used to ensure triangulation of data collection.

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