Using Virtual Learning Environment as a Medium of Instruction in EFL Context: College Teachers' Attitudes

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Abstract

Virtual learning is a kind of learning that is mainly web-based e-learning platform. It needs online portfolios, learning management system, systematic use of assessment, and course content in order to provide students with regular feedback. The present study deals with Iraqi college teachers' attitudes towards using virtual learning as a medium of instruction in EFL teaching context. It attempts to see college teachers' opinions concerning exchanging the traditional face to face teaching by totally online virtual courses. To gain the aim of the study, a questionnaire of two parts that is constructed by the researcher is used. Fifty college teachers have been chosen randomly to represent the main study sample. Based on the results gained, specific conclusions and implications are put forward.

Keywords/ Virtual learning, E-learning, Higher education, College teachers' attitude.

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1. Introduction

In a general sense, virtual learning environment (VLE) can be defined as "an online site which students use to learn and interact" (Harmer, 2012, P. 286). In other words, it is a collection of teaching and learning instruments that used to develop students' learning abilities by using computers and online material in the learning process (Rouse, 2011). Harmer (2007, p.194) states that "the idea of virtual learning environment is that the course content (including written text, audio and video lecture clips) can be stored on a website which only course participants can access". He adds that "some virtual learning environments also contain blogs and have chat sites both in pre-arranged real time and on message boards where users can post their comments and read what others have to say". According to this study, virtual learning environment is the process of learning that depends totally on using computer-based environment or/and online resources in learning. This process needs curriculum mapping, electronic communication between students and teachers and a clear system of assessment in addition to online students' portfolios.

In a digital world which is full of using computer technology and mobile applications, the use of virtual learning can be justified in the educational contexts. Students and teachers used to access to some core online applications that have been found to be almost universal among today's students. These applications vary from the social media applications to other communication tools such as emails and other types of text messaging. At the beginning, they use technology to support the educational processes in addition to use face to face teaching in what is called blended learning as stated by (Al-Obaydi, 2019), then the situation is developed to seek virtual learning that is fully based on online learning.

Scrivener (2011, P.343) mentioned several features of virtual learning environment which are include; sending and reading messages, attaching and downloading documents, videos, etc., posting easily, marking the posts quickly, the use of automatic drills and exercises, and adding blogs and wikis. He adds that one can use virtual learning environment for either "stand alone distance programs where the whole course, all the interaction and content, is managed on the virtual learning environment" and/or "part of a blended course, a combination of face to face and online".

Virtual learning environment can benefit both learners and teachers. On the part of teachers, it can help in overcoming their digital literacy and develop their communication capabilities. In this context, Harmer (2007, P.194) states that "there are a number of online courses for both students and teachers of English. These range from the downright shoddy (i.e. not worth the time that users spend on them) to serious attempts to facilitate successful learning even when groups of students are not physically present in the same space". The use of virtual learning has many options for users as mentioned by Scrivener (2011, P.347) such as "virtual classrooms, virtual task-based learning, virtual field trip and virtual simulations".

In some teaching contexts, the use of virtual learning environment can facilitate the process of learning that it can give more than one opportunity for those students who missed their classes for many reasons (sickness, far distances, cost), for people with a specific interests, for those who talented in a specific field, to enhance learners' cooperation and communication, and also for self-regulated learners. In recent time, the world's circumstances put the choice of virtual learning under hand to provide learners with a chance of continuing the process of learning during the quarantine time as a result of covid 19 pandemic. So, college teachers show a degree of interest in using it to bridge the gap that occurs in their classrooms during the quarantine. The problem is how teachers and learners are accept and deal with the idea of virtual learning based on what is stated by Bennett & Lockyear (2004) that the existence of virtual learning environments in the institutions of higher education represents real challenge for both teachers and learners as their roles are totally changed. In addition, there is a problem of technological literacy that may face teachers in virtual learning. This puts heavy emphasis on teachers to be professional enough to cope with such qualitative leap in teaching. As a result, this may change their attitudes, methods, intentions, and motives. Chizmar and Williams (2001) promptly think that pedagogy leads technology. They add that students may also face a trouble if they ignore how to deal with it clarifying that "nothing frustrates students, especially technophobes, more than instructional technology that doesn't work" (p. 18). So, the process of teaching via virtual learning environment is not an easy task unless it is based on the real analysis that leads to satisfaction of both teachers and learners. This viewpoint drives this study to enquire about the degree of satisfaction that college teachers own towards using virtual learning environment in their teaching.

Based on what is stated above, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Do Iraqi college teachers agree with the total exchange of traditional face to face teaching by virtual learning environment?

2. Do Iraqi college teachers agree with making a mix of traditional face to face teaching and virtual learning environment (blended learning)?

3. Do Iraqi college teachers agree with using only the traditional face to face teaching in classes?

4. What are the attitudes of Iraqi teachers towards using virtual learning in higher education context?

2. Literature Review

Theoretically, the Technology Acceptance Model is the common theory that deals with how learners accept technology and use it. It is the most effective used theory for characterizing individual user's acceptance of online information systems (Lee et al., 2003). The theoretical model shows that user's acceptance of online information system is dependent on two major variables: perceived ease of use which

can be defined as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort" (Davis 1989), and perceived usefulness which is also defined by (Davis 1989) as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance" as shown in figure 1.
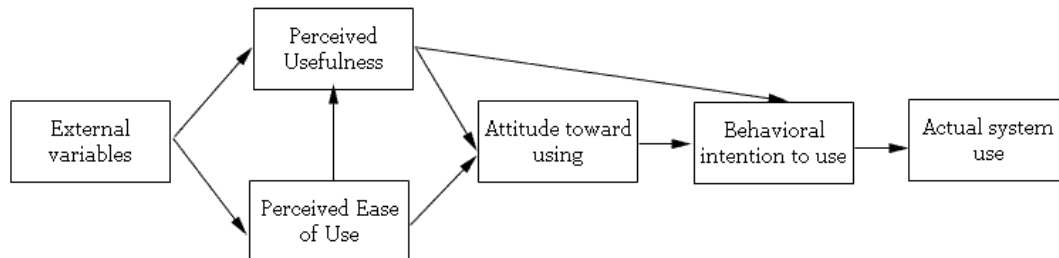

Figure 1Technology Acceptance Model from Davis, Bagozzi and Warshaw (1989)

Another theory that is related closely to virtual learning is the student-centered education. In this concern, Barker (2003) confirmed that the transition from a traditional face to face teaching in the classroom to a virtual learning environment needs to switch from teacher-centered education to learner-centered education. This shift in the instruction changes the instructional roles that makes the learner is the center and put heavy emphasis on.

Student-centered method is supported by the Constructivist where the emphasis occurs on instructors as they supposed to using materials, facilitate interaction between students, constructing projects, and learning in groups for knowledge-producing endeavor (King, 2004, p. 3). Constructivist knowledge is developed as a result of people working or studying together. Espinoza (2012) relay to another model shift as he stated that "we instead consider the need to adapt to the times for the sake of the student. I suggest we are already beyond guide on the side and our role today is that of co-learner—we are learning with" (p. 31).

Virtual learning environment are frequently used by college teachers as they upload learning materials, sharing the materials with their students, storing the resources, monitoring students' performance and provide chances for discussion and direct contact with learners. Virtual learning environment also can help in creating blogs, reviewing the material of teaching, using communication tools such as email and other activities (Black et al., 2008). Many activities can be done by learners in the virtual learning environment such as reviewing the lectures, writing notes, receiving tasks, quizzes, in addition to helping them do their examinations and tests or even do their projects on any area of study.

Among many writers who gain positive results in using technological online applications in teaching as a step toward using online virtual learning are Ibrahim (2020), Ali and Bin-Hady (2019), Ivanova & Doncheva (2018), Alves, et. al. (2017), Al-Obaydi (2017), Stošić (2015), Saeed (2015), and Liu (2013).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The population of the present study consists of the staff of English departments in three colleges in Diyala University; College of Education for Human Sciences, College of Basic Education and College of Education for Pure Sciences. The sample of study includes fifty college instructors that specialized in English language teaching from the three mentioned colleges. They asked to reply to the items of the two major parts of the questionnaire based on their experience in online teaching. The data obtained was collected and calculated by the researcher.

3.2 The Instrument

The main instrument of this study is the questionnaire that is constructed by the researcher in order to answer the questions of the study. It consists of two main parts; the first one includes three general questions that postulates to college teachers to know their degree of agreement towards using virtual learning in higher education contexts instead of face to face traditional teaching. The second part is a Likert scale questionnaire which is constructed to know college teachers' attitudes towards virtual learning. It consists of ten items each of which supposed to measure teachers' attitude towards using virtual learning environment in Iraqi higher education contexts. The instrument with its two parts was exposed to jury of experts specialized in language teaching and learning to ensure its face validity. All of them were agree on its suitability to be used in this study. As it is highly recommended to run a pilot administration before applying the questionnaire on the participants, the researcher apply it on ten participants before some time to check the clarity of the items and the suitability of the time allotted.

4. Results

The results of the two parts of the questionnaire are as follows:

1. The results of the three questions of the first part of the questionnaire can be clarified in the following:

a. Do you agree with total exchanging of the traditional face to face teaching by totally online virtual courses?

The result of this question shows that only 10% of the sample agrees on the total exchange of the traditional face to face teaching by totally online virtual courses as figure 2 below.
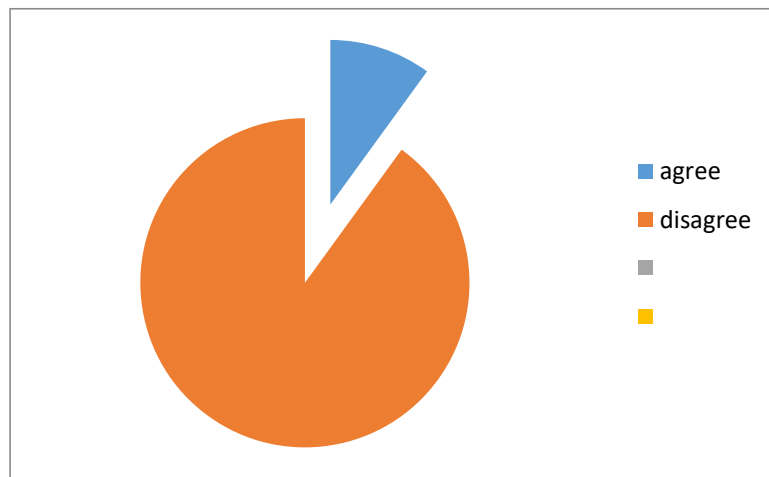

Figure 2 the result of the first question

b. Do you agree with mixing the traditional face to face teaching with online virtual courses (blended)?

The result of question number two shows that 80% of the sample agrees on using a mix of the traditional face to face teaching with online virtual learning, as figure 3 below.

Figure 3 the result of the second question

c. Do you agree with using only the traditional face to face teaching in classes?

   The result of this question shows that only 5% of the total sample agrees on using the traditional face to face teaching only without any online virtual learning and other 95% disagree with using it, as figure 4 below.
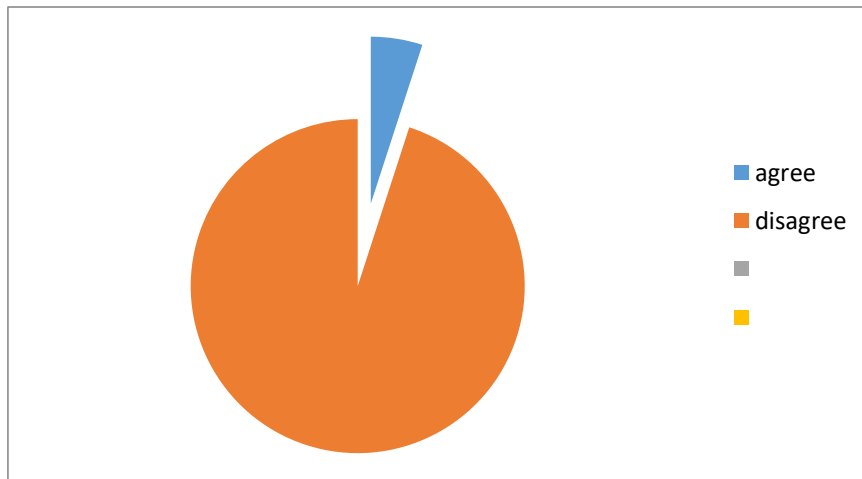

Figure 4

the result of the third question

2. The results of the second part of the questionnaire can be stated in table 1 below. The mean score of each item of the questionnaire with the standard deviation are clearly stated.

Table 1 the results of the questionnaire

Items	S.D	mean
1. VLE is suitable to Iraqi context of education.	0.90	3.90
2. I think that my students will welcome the idea of applying VLE.	0.97	3.95
3. My skills and abilities, as a teacher, are appropriate to use VLE.	1.11	3.27
4. My students' level of understanding will be affected positively by using VLE.	0.98	3.95
5. Time, efforts and facilities in my institution are qualified to use VLE.	1.21	3.30
6. The use of VLE can help to promote autonomy among students.	1.05	4.08
7. The use of VLE can enhance students' experience of learning by opening new horizons to them.	1.20	3.40
8. Using VLE in teaching can provide a good compensation to the face-to-face teaching environment.	1.15	3.34
9. The use of VLE can create favorable atmosphere of learning for students.	0.98	3.97
10. The use of VLE can keep the students-teachers rapport strong.	0.90	2.01

5. Discussion

As the results of this study demonstrate, most college teachers in question (a) disagree to replace the current system of colleges by totally virtual environment. Most teachers, as stated by the results of question (b), agree on mixing both virtual learning and traditional face to face teaching as in blended form of learning. In question (c) 95 % of teachers disagree with using only traditional face to face teaching. These results revel that college teachers do not against using e-learning but to use it moderately according to the available possibilities in addition to use traditional face to face teaching.

The above results of the questionnaire clarified that Iraqi college teachers cannot accept to apply virtual learning in their institutions as a total version of learning. This may be due to many factors such as lacking of suitable updated equipment, teachers' experience and training, time, and facilities in colleges, the use of such system suits specific class of students, in addition to students' attitudes that may be hesitant to accept this kind of learning. The rapid decision of applying virtual learning in colleges show that many weaknesses needs to be dealt with urgently to gain the satisfaction for both teachers and students.

The statistical results of the second part show that item number (6) which states that (The use of virtual learning environment can help to promote autonomy among students) gains higher mean score (4.08) and standard deviation (1.05) and the item number (10) which states that (The use of virtual learning environment can keep the students-teachers' rapport strong) gains the least mean (2.01) and standard deviation (0.90). These results clarify that students can show high degree of autonomy and independence in their e-learning and that the relationship of teachers and students was stronger in traditional teaching than in online virtual teaching.

6. Conclusions and Implications

The main conclusion remarks of this study are focused on one essential point that Iraqi college teachers prefer using learning environment that mix between traditional face to face teaching and e-learning (the blended learning), and they do not encourage using only virtual learning environment or totally face to face teaching.

It is worth mentioning that most Iraqi college teachers think that the use of virtual learning can enhance students' autonomy in learning but it may effects negatively on their relationship with their teachers.

The difficulty of applying such innovative way of learning may be due to many factors such as the lack of facilities in the educational foundations and the lack of trained staff. As a result, it is recommended widely to use blended learning which represent a mix of the better of the two systems, the traditional and the virtual. It is also recommended that teachers must gain periodical training courses about the online platforms and its applications in teaching and in assessment. Teachers' and student-teachers 'capabilities needs to be developed periodically beginning from the practicum time which is the starting point of each teacher as stated by Al-Bahadli (2014).

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Appendix (1)

VLEQ (Virtual Learning Environment Questionnaire)

Teachers' Questionnaire

1. Mention please:

a. Do you agree or disagree with total exchanging of the traditional face to face teaching by totally online virtual courses.

Agree		Disagree	

b. Do you agree or disagree with mixing the traditional face to face teaching with online virtual courses.

Agree		Disagree	

c. Do you agree or disagree with using only the traditional face to face teaching in classes.

Agree		Disagree	

2. Select one of the following choices, please:

Items	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
1. VLE is suitable to Iraqi context of education.			
2. I think that my students will welcome the idea of applying VLE.			
3. My skills and abilities, as a teacher, are appropriate to use VLE.			
4. My students' level of understanding will be affected positively by using VLE.			
5. Time, efforts and facilities in my institution are qualified to use VLE.			
6. The use of VLE can help to promote autonomy among students.			
7. The use of VLE can enhance students' experience of learning by opening new horizons to them.			
8. Using VLE in teaching can provide a good compensation to the face-to-face teaching environment.			

9. The use of VLE can create favorable atmosphere of learning for students.			
10. The use of VLE can keep the students-teachers rapport strong.			