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Choice Made from No Choice: Libyan EFL Students' Perceptions about Using Google Classroom for Learning Writing during COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Educational systems have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to the closure of colleges and schools in order to restrain the spread of Covid-19. This requires continuing the teaching learning process online. Online teaching and learning entails additional applications, websites and platforms, and the ability to learn from others. One of the most commonly used platforms is Google Classroom. This study aims to investigate EFL Libyan undergraduate students' perception of the use of Google Classroom in a writing course. A mixed method approach was used through the use of questionnaires and reflection journals. The participants in this study were 35 students in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Education, Sabratha University. The findings of this research showed that students find Google Classroom beneficial in having access to the material in all times, getting feedback from the teacher and a less stressful environment. Despite these benefits, most of the participants in this research prefer the physical classroom than the virtual one.

Keywords: *EFL Students, Perception, Google Classroom, Writing, COVID-19*

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1. Introduction

The development of integrating technology in education in the last decade has had a profound effect on many schools and classrooms throughout the world. Technology can effectively contribute to the teaching and learning process during this COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has impacted education all around the world because it is likely to spread. Consequently, many governments have proposed new policies to implement online learning. In fact, multiple free opportunities have been introduced to improve teaching practices during the pandemic and maximize online learning platforms. Online learning means that 'students continue to study safely at home to break the chain of Covid-19 transmission and ensure the continuity of education', (Astuti & Indriani, 2020, p.328).

Definitely, online education is not a new method of teaching. It is popular because it is effective and accessible. Additionally, online platforms are flexible and enhance autonomous learning. The literature includes terms such as 'distance education', 'e-learning', 'virtual learning', and 'online teaching and learning. According to Zhou et al (2020), what is common among them is that they all 'refer

to the method of content dissemination and rapid learning through the application of information technology and Internet technology" (p. 502).

However, well planned online teaching and learning courses have been different from courses utilized online in response to the pandemic. William et al (2020) suggested calling such courses 'emergency remote learning'. Emergency remote teaching (ERT) refers to the "temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances", (p. 6). This quick shift might cause many challenges to both teachers and students. Students may not have access to the internet, or even smartphones. Such factors might hinder the ability to make use of the advantages of online learning.

In Libya, the context of this study, the plans of higher education institutions for the academic year 2020 maintains its uncertainty with variety of alternatives including online platforms and using social media applications. Many universities rescheduled their academic calendars and decided to continue teaching through online platforms instead of face to face teaching in order to prevent the increasing spread of

COVID-19. Thus, face to face learning and teaching turned into online learning by the end of the academic year. Students went back to colleges only for their final exams. This new online experience was utilized in emergency situations throughout the pandemic. However, the universities were not in the same situation: some did not have any experience of it, some were already using online learning, some decided to train their teachers and students about how to use technology in teaching, and others decided to wait for the safe return to college. Mostly, it was left up to teachers to decide if they could teach online or wait for the safe return. Online learning highlights the importance of interaction and collaboration between students and with the teachers. However, students' interaction was limited at most of the universities because participation was not obligatory.

Within this context, some teachers in Sabratha English department were trying to adapt to the 'new normal' and struggled to move their pedagogical practices to online environments. The idea for this study was generated by what the author of this study experienced during the online teaching experience. The author was delivering an academic writing course before the COVID-19 pandemic, and after the outbreak of the virus, she transformed the course into online teaching via Google classroom. Since this was a new experience for both the author and her students, she decided to investigate the students' perspective on this experience. According to Karata & Tuncer (2020), 'what is missing is an overview of the positive and negative aspects of activities focusing on self-perception and evaluation of online activities by various stakeholders, especially students', p.5. Although some studies investigated the participants' perspectives, they were mostly conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this research aims to address this gap.

The studies in the literature showed some positive outcomes and also demonstrated the scarcity of such studies for EFL contexts including Libya, Zakaria (2020). Thus, being aware of the currently unsustainable circumstances that COVID-19 has caused in education, this study focused on the EFL Libyan undergraduate students' perception of learning through Google classroom.

2. Literature Review

The presence of technology in the process of teaching and learning is growing across the world. Many universities have

opted this choice and have had success with it. To adopt to the 'new normal', it became necessity to manage teaching and learning and to choose a tool that is easy to use to students. Most students these days are digital natives and they know how to deal with technology. Thus, English language teachers have a lot of variation in the applications and platforms that they can use in teaching. One of these tools is Google classroom which is provided by Google for teachers to conduct E-learning.

2.1 Google Classroom

It is a free tool introduced in Google Apps for Education in 2014. Google Classroom is an online educational platform that provides variety of application. It allows teachers to create classrooms, distribute assignments, give feedback and upload course materials for students, (Khalil, 2018). Google Classroom is free and easy to set up so that teachers can communicate with their students and provide them with guidelines and feedback. It provides teachers with a vision concerning the progress of each student, and they can send back their comments and suggestions for improvement so that students can edit their assignments and make changes to their work, (Sukmawati & Nensia, 2018).

According to Janzen (2014), "Google Classroom's design purposefully simplifies the instructional interface and options used for delivering and tracking assignments; communication with the entire course or individuals is also simplified through announcements, email, and push notifications". It is possible for the teachers to integrate Google classrooms with other Google apps, like, Docs, Slides, Drive and Spreadsheets, (Iftakhar, 2016). Northey, et al (2015) add that teachers can support their sessions with Power Point Presentations, YouTube links and videos through Google classroom. Accordingly, a Google classroom can be effective for both the learners and teachers due to its features. The students can keep their assignment organized and paperless, (Latif, 2016).

2.2 Google Classroom in EFL Context

Many researchers investigated the use of Google Classroom in EFL contexts, some showed that Google Classroom is an effective tool to help teachers manage their classroom environment and provide a more efficient way to manage their classrooms. Daud (2019) mentioned that English language teachers can implement Google classroom for teaching purposes such as uploading learning materials, making



announcements and assessing students' work. Abd Syakur et al, (2020) believe that Google classrooms are commonly used because they are less complicated and more flexible to use. That means it can be accessed anywhere and anytime. Students only need an internet connection to access it properly.

Maharsi (2018) investigated 78 EFL students' self-reflection practice and self-regulated learning using Google Classroom. Results show that the participants have positive attitudes towards Google Classroom because it is a flexible and manageable tool for students' learning reflections. This is similar to Kasim's (2021) findings which showed that the participants views of Google Classroom were very positive because it is easy to use, useful, and worth using.

The Google classroom was widely used in EFL contexts during this pandemic. Albashtawi & Al Bataineh (2020), investigated the effectiveness of Google classrooms in Jordan. The findings of their study showed that the participants were positive about the use of Google classroom and considered it an effective online platform in terms of its ease of use, usefulness and accessibility. In addition, students' reading and writing skills improved while using Google classroom. In Indonesia, Deiniatur (2020) investigated 48 students' perceptions on the use of Google Classroom in English phonology class through the use of a survey study which was conducted in a classroom setting. The results indicate that students have a positive perception of the use of Google Classroom in their phonology classroom.

However, Reinhardt et al, (2013) argued that students' attitudes towards virtual learning may differ depending on the learning contexts. Thus, while most findings report learners' positive attitudes, a few studies found contrasting results. Alim, et al (2019), investigated teacher training and education students' views of Google classroom. The findings show that students have positive views about Google classroom but they highlighted various limitations such as poor internet connection connectively and some students do not have a smartphone. Similarly, the participants in Awuah's research (2015) did not describe their experience with using Google Classroom as positive. However, it is worth mentioning that their dissatisfaction with Google classroom was due to of infrastructure

factors such as poor internet connectively rather than the use of Google classroom itself.

Furthermore, Putra's research findings (2018) showed that although some students described the Google classroom as beneficial, others felt uncomfortable and didn't perceive it as a good learning platform. In accordance with these findings, Diana, et al (2021) used a mixed method approach to investigate 443 students' perceptions and challenges of learning English in a Google classroom during the Pandemic. The findings of the study showed that the students have a positive perception of learning in Google classrooms. However, they experienced problems when using the google classroom mainly in uploading files and videos.

As a matter of fact, as this online wave is a recent development, Libyan teachers and students are in the process of adapting this new standard of teaching and learning methodology. According to Khan, et al, (2021), it is important to investigate the students' opinions and inclination towards this new teaching methodology. Thus, this study aims to investigate the students' perceptions of learning during COVID-19 lockdown period in Google classroom.

2.3 Research Questions

1. What are the students' perceptions about the use of Google classroom in learning writing having used them for the very first time?
2. Do students prefer Google classroom or the face to face learning?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted in the English Department, Sabratha College of Arts and Education, Sabratha University. The participants are 35 students. Six of the students are males and 29 are females. Their age range is 21-23. They had attended face-to-face learning lectures for eight weeks before the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated the classes to be held online completely. Participants then completed eight weeks of online learning using Google Classroom.

3.2 Data Collection Instrument

An online questionnaire was sent to all the enrolled students on the fourth year of the academic year 2020 for the purpose of data collection. 35 forms were sent back out of 39. The questionnaire consists of 3 different parts. The first part aims to collect the students' demographic information. The

second part is devoted to students' use of google classroom. The third part is devoted to collect data about students' preference of traditional or virtual learning as well as their intention to continue using the platform. Students also were asked to submit reflective journals about their experience of learning by google classroom for the first time.

3.3 Procedure of Data Collection and Analysis

At the end of the academic year after students had submitted all the assignments, the researcher invited students to take part in a survey. She posted a link to the Google form and explained the purpose of the research and the questionnaire. Also, the researcher explained that the participation is voluntary.

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively by using descriptive statistics to calculate the percentage of the data distribution. Meanwhile, the data from the reflection journals were analyzed qualitatively by reading all data thoroughly, coding the data, and interpreting the responses (Creswell, 2014).

4. Findings and Discussion

1. What are the learners' attitudes towards the use of Google classroom in learning writing having used them for the very first time?

In terms of Google classroom usage, results showed that all the participants used Google classroom in their education for the first time. Additionally, findings revealed that students viewed their experience in using Google classroom as a positive and beneficial experience. They considered Google classroom a manageable and meaningful platform that allowed them to learn anywhere and at any time. 51% of the students indicated that they were motivated to use English in the Google Classroom and were also keen to do their assignments and tasks using this online platform.

Most students mentioned that they are using Google Classroom as a complementary tool for classroom learning in the midst of the pandemic. Students now use the materials and resources from both the physical classroom and the virtual as they do their assignments. These findings are in corroboration with Ridho, et al' s findings (2019) which showed that most participants accepted Google classrooms as a simple learning platform which enables students to improve their learning through being involved in online discussions. According to Latif's (2016), using Google

classrooms enhances students' motivation and participation in the discussions and tasks that go into the classroom.

One of the questions was posted to find out what the students' views of the advantages and disadvantages of Google classroom. Their answers were categorized into four categories and presented in figure 1.

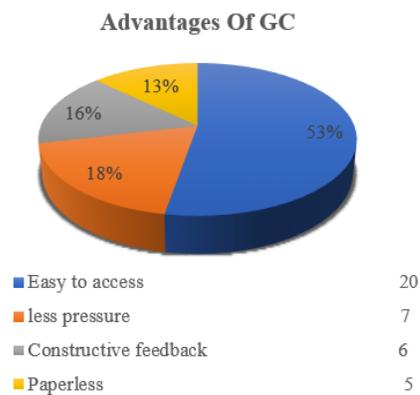


Figure: 1

As can be seen from Figure 1, the students' responses were divided into four categories: easy to access, less pressure in the classroom, getting feedback and free of paper work. 53 % of the students liked the Google classroom because it was easy to use and access. Similarly 18 % of them liked Google classroom because they work from home with more time available. 16 % prefer Google classroom because it improves their writing skills by writing regularly and getting constructive feedback from the teacher. Paperless communication was another benefit of the Google classroom that 13% of students mentioned. It is cost effective because the assignments are submitted in the classroom with no existing hard copies or printouts. S28' *submission of writing tasks in Google classroom saves money, papers and time. Also, it is less stressful than writing in the classroom because I have more time available*'. This is in line with the findings of previous research (Shaharane, et al., 2016), (Heggart & Yoo, 2018) and (Al-Marroof & Al-Emran, 2018). S6: *"I can easily access to google classroom materials and go back to it whenever I need, whether I am at home or at anywhere else"*.

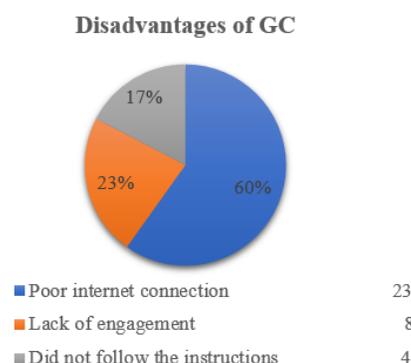


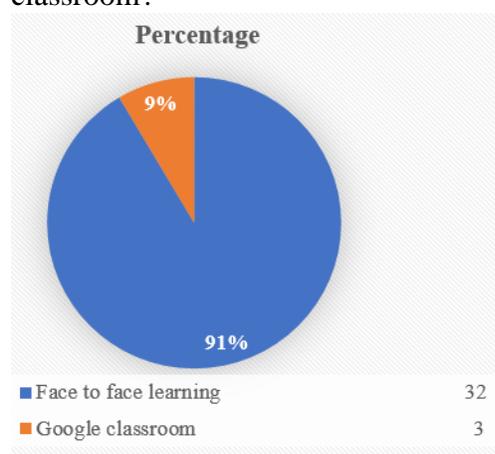


Figure : 2

It can be seen from figure 2 that 60% of students identified a poor internet connection as the main problem they faced when using Google Classroom. A Google classroom cannot be accessed offline; it requires a good internet connection. Most students mentioned in their reflection journals that they face challenges in accessing a Google classroom due to poor connections or no internet coverage in their areas. 22.8 % of them mentioned their lack of sense of engagement in the Google classroom as one of the challenges that they faced. S1 added '*the traditional classroom for sure is much better because we interact with each other and with the teacher. It is more rewarding than setting at home and sharing ideas behind screens*'. 17.4% of students reported that they did not understand the instructions clearly and could not access to the resources in Google classroom. Some students mentioned in the reflection journal that they felt left out without the teachers' guidance, making it difficult to follow the instructions, especially at the beginning of the course. Three students mentioned that they should be given adequate training about how to access the Google classroom.

According to Zakaria et al (2020), some learners find it difficult to comprehend because there is a lack of verbal communication with the teacher. The results corroborate the findings of Bhuvanewari and Padmanaban's study (2012) who found that students did not perceive virtual learning positively because physical face-to-face communication between teachers and students was inattentive. Similarly, (Mislinawati & Nurmasyitah, (2018) stated that some of the participants in their research could not keep track of the assignments from Google classroom.

2. Do students prefer Google classroom or the traditional face to face classroom?



Despite the positive perceptions that the students held towards Google Classroom, physical learning was still favored over virtual learning by most students. As shown in Table 3, 91.4% preferred studying in the physical classroom. Likewise, most students felt more engaged with their teacher and classmates in the classroom 8.5%, stated that they prefer to study at Google classroom. S7: '*the traditional lecture is more beneficial for me because I learn more from the interaction and discussion with my group members*'. S5 added: '*I would like to say that I missed having the usual classes. For me, the best online course can't replace the personal contact with the teacher, or the friendly atmosphere in the classroom. So, physical classes should not be replaced with online learning*'. This contradicts Kassim's (2021) findings which showed that the participants in his study were satisfied with using Google classroom and preferred it to face to face learning.

5. Discussion and Implications

Because almost all educational institutes are increasingly using online learning today depending, they depend on digital platforms to broaden their knowledge and structure their learning. So the role of online platforms such as Google Classroom in education today is very important, and it helps students at all levels from junior schools to universities. In the future Google classrooms and other effective platforms should be used to support the teaching and learning process especially now that the pandemic is still ongoing.

Based on the results, it can be stated that students have positive perceptions about the Google classroom because it is accessible, less stressful, provides more opportunities for students to improve their writing skills through getting feedback from the teacher and completing tasks on time and it is paperless. The results of this study are in line with the previous research which was conducted to investigate students' perception of the use of education platforms such as Google classrooms in ELT/EFL contexts, Ridho, et al' (2019, Zakaria et al (2020). In addition, through the teaching experience of the researcher in the writing course, it was noted that this platform contributes to the development of students' autonomy when learning, because it makes students work on their own through the assignments given and the tasks assigned and the extra practice given.

However, the students' face difficulties due to a poor internet connection. Some students also mentioned that they learn better from the classroom interactions and discussions and that are missing in the Google classroom. According to Abu Bakar & Noordin, (2018) students feel more engaged in face to face teaching rather than in the virtual environment.

EFL students in the 21st century need to explore and adopt the technology offered by Google Classroom as an alternative to ease their language learning. Teachers, on the other hand, should be skilled in integrating the technology in their teaching practices and helping their students become autonomous learners. Additionally, this will transform the quality of teaching and learning. Applying new technologies in teaching will not fundamentally change the role of teachers, but will have a major impact on how various teaching approaches can be applied in different technological and organizational environments. Due to many reasons such as students' needs and abilities, teacher-centered classrooms are no longer suitable. Instead, students-centered classrooms are more appropriate, (Viridi. 2017). Finally, the current study confirms that the use of Google Classroom during this pandemic is very effective and useful to improve students' language skill.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to investigate Libyan undergraduate English language students' perceptions of learning to write in a google classroom. The findings of the study showed that most of the participants perceived Google classroom positively in terms of it is ease of use, accessibility and more comfortable environments. Basically the reflection journals supported students' views about the use of Google classrooms. Most students agreed that the Google classroom is an effective platform that can be accessed anytime and anywhere.

However, there are also some disadvantages to using Google classroom such as a poor internet connection, lack of engagement and difficulty in understanding the instructions. An internet connection was the main factor that most students mentioned.

Finally, although the study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings showed that face to face teaching should not be substituted with virtual learning because students feel more engaged in the physical classroom, regardless of their higher perceptions of Google Classroom.

Based on the findings of this research, I recommend the following:

1. Educational technology must be incorporated into future curriculum and educational policies.
2. The results also provide implications to the policy makers to provide training for both learners and educators with regards to integrating platforms such as Google classroom.
3. Language teachers should make use of the online features in sharing materials, assessing students and giving feedback.
4. Language teachers should offer their students innovative opportunities to control their learning and be more autonomous learners.

6.1 Implications for Future Research

Google Classroom is a relatively new teaching platform in Libya, and there has not been much research into its applications in English language teaching and learning. This research, therefore, lays a foundation for further investigations into this field. There are still exist certain limits to this research such as the small sample size.

Thus, future research could be conducted with a larger number of participants in different educational contexts. Future research could also investigate the effects of Google Classroom on not just university students, but a wider range of learners such as primary and secondary students.

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