| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Distance learning Revisited: Students' Preferences and Attitudes in the Post-Pandemic Era

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| **ABSTRACT**

In Spring 2020, there was a sudden shift from face-to-face (F2F) to distance learning (DL) due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. A study by Al-Jarf (2020) showed that 55% of the students and instructors preferred F2F instruction and were not satisfied with DL due to unfamiliarity, lack of training, interaction, technical problems and others. In the Fall Semester 2021, Saudi universities resumed F2F instruction in combination with some online classes. In some emergencies such as weather conditions, all students study online rather than cancelling classes. This status quo has continued until now. This study explores students' preferences for DL vs F2F learning, their attitudes towards each and reasons for their preferences. Responses to a survey showed that 36% of the students in the sample prefer DL because it has become a necessity during emergencies such as pandemics and wars. They can check the lecture recording any time. They save commuting time. In addition, 40% of the respondents prefer F2F instruction because they get better grades. It is more suitable for science classes (labs, experiments, anatomy). Participation, interaction, and questions make a difference. In DL, students can leave Blackboard or Zoom, walk around, and take a nap, whereas in F2F, they focus better. Some health sciences, engineering, law, and/or business instructors talk about their experiences and views of the job market which is enriching and enjoyable for the students. Moreover, 17% have no preference and believe that the mode of learning depends on the instructors' competence, teaching techniques used, integration of technologies, and online resources, interaction, engagement, and students' participation. Participants' views and recommendations are given in detail.

1. Introduction

In March 2020, there was a sudden shift from face-to-face instruction (F2F) to distance learning (DL) in all schools and universities in Saudi Arabia (SA) due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Many instructors and students were not technically, psychologically, and instructionally prepared for this abrupt transition as some did not have devices and Internet access and lacked the necessary skills for online teaching and learning. A study by Al-Jarf (2020) found that more than 55% of the students and instructors at language and translation colleges in Saudi Arabia were not happy with DL and found it ineffective and frustrating and preferred F2F instruction due to unfamiliarity, lack of training, interaction, and technical problems. In addition, 59% of the students had difficulty understanding online lectures. Instructors used the same class material that they were using before the pandemic. No supplementary digital material or multimedia resources were made available for the students. To 58% of the students, online learning was a lot of hard work. 69% reported that they had difficulty communicating with their classmates and instructors. Some students preferred lecture recordings because they could not follow online lectures.

In the Spring Semester 2020, some students did not have devices and internet to access their online courses. 83% reported that

the internet was slow, and they had difficulty logging into the online platform such as Blackboard. No technical support was available to the instructors and students during online classes and the technical support staff did not respond to their needs and solve Blackboard and connection problems fast. The instructors received no academic support to help them prepare online teaching material, online class activities, and homework-assignments. 57% of the instructors indicated that they had no prior experience with DL, and they could not adjust to remote instruction as a new mode of teaching and learning. They did not know how to use the different tools of the DL platform, and how to adapt the course material to the new online teaching environment (Al-Jarf, 2021b).

Similarly, 64% of the instructors reported that many students were not interested in doing assignments for their online courses, refused to give oral presentations, and did not ask questions as they used to when they were studying F2F before the pandemic. They did not participate in online class discussions and did not do homework-assignments. They were disappointed, and demotivated. There was little interaction between the instructor and the students and among the students themselves in the DL environment. 74% indicated that the online course attendance was not high as in F2F classes. Most students preferred lecture recordings, which they could play without having to attend the live online lectures (Al-Jarf, 2020b).

In the Summer and Fall semesters of 2020, Saudi universities had taken numerous actions towards helping students who had no devices to gain internet access, offering support and online pedagogical training workshops for the instructors, solving platform problems, and improving internet connectivity.

In Fall 2021, Saudi universities resumed F2F instruction in combination with some online classes. In some emergencies such as bad weather conditions, all students study online rather than cancelling classes. This status quo continued until now.

The abrupt change in learning and teaching styles during and after the Pandemic has been of interest to a plethora of research studies in Saudi Arabia. Studies conducted between March 2020 and 2023 focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic changed education in Saudi Arabia (Mann, Schwabe, Fraser, Fülöp & Ansah, 2020); the transition to online teaching in EFL during the COVID-19 (Albaqami & Alzahrani, 2022); the effect of COVID-19 on education and e-learning strategies (Bahanshal & Khan, 2021); acceptance and effectiveness of DL in public education in Saudi Arabia from the perspective of students, teachers and parents (Alkinani, 2021); the challenges that faced the shift to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic at Saudi universities (Aljohani, 2022; Alqahtani & Omira, 2022); the lack of devices and internet access by unprivileged students in low-income families, orphanages, and remote areas during the first semester of the pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2021g); discrepancy between language learners and teachers' concerns about emergency remote teaching (Al-Shlowiy, Al-Hoorie & Alharbi, 2021); DL and undergraduate Saudi students' agency and the problems that students and instructors hafaced in DL in the first semester of the Pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2020).

In addition, many studies examined the challenges that students and instructors faced in DL in certain <u>subject courses</u> during the pandemic in Saudi Arabia such as the attitudes and perspectives of Saudi female medical students towards online instruction in EFL (Elashhab, 2022); instructors and students' perceptions of DL in translation courses (Aldossary, 2021); EFL college students' perceptions of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bin mahboob, 2022; Mubaraki & Abdel-Magid 2022; Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020; Akhter, 2020; the challenges faced by EFL teachers and students due to the shift to online learning (Sheerah, Yadav, Fadl-Allah & Abdin, 2022); Altuwairesh, 2021; Al-Shlowiy & Layali, 2023; Algraini, 2023 Algethami, 2022; Khalil & Alharbi, 2022; Al-Samiri, 2021; college students and teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning of the four English skills before and during the COVID-19 (Alhaider, 2023); (Albatti, 2022); English language learning strategies during COVID-19 in the MiddleEast vis collaborative learning, flipped classroom, and the final is scaffolding (Khreisat, 2022); EFL speaking practice in distance learning during the pandemic in 2020-2021 (Al-Jarf, 2021d); teachers and students' perceptions of emergency online learning in an intensive English writing course (Mahyoob, 2020); Saudi university students' views of language learning via blackboard during the pandemic (Almekhlafy, 2020); Aljuaid, 2021); use of blackboard in English-speaking practice by Saudi EFL students during COVID-19 (Al-Oqaily, Salam & Na, 2022); the challenges and affordances of implementing mobile-assisted language learning as reported by EFL teachers' in Saudi Arabia during COVID-19 (Alghamdi, 2022); differential effects of the iPad on first and second language acquisition by Saudi children during the pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2021c); perceptions of blended learning environments by Saudi students at Bisha University (Anas, 2020) and others.

Few more studies investigated the challenges related to technology, pedagogy and assessment during the Pandemic as teaching ESP to Saudi female Preparatory Year students (Alvi, Bilal & Alvi, 2021); challenges and opportunities of online writing assessment during COVID-19 from the teachers' perspectives (Al-Bargi, 2022); online exams in language, linguistics and translation courses during the pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2022i); and grade inflation at Saudi universities before, during and after the pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2022f).

A variety of issues related to online teaching and learning were also the focus of some studies such as curriculum in emergency remote education at Saudi universities and whether any modifications were made in the college curricula (Al-Jarf, 2022b; Al-Jarf,

2022c; Al-Jarf, 2021b); whether pandemic crisis management programs existed or had been created at Saudi universities (Al-Jarf, 2023; Al-Jarf, 2022k); and how emergency student practicum and training were carried out during the pandemic at departments of languages, translation, computer science and education and the challenges faced and adjustments made (Al-Jarf, 2022e).

Further studies focused on the coping strategies, training needs in emergency remote teaching of foreign languages at Saudi Universities (Rahman, 2020; Abdel-Latif & Alhamad, 2023); English K-12 teachers' experiences with one KHBRAT University Program during the pandemic (Daraghmeh, Mead & Copeland, 2021); ESL teachers' professional development on Facebook during the Covid-19 pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2021e); and the status of the pandemic job market from the perspective of female languages and translation college graduates (Al-Jarf 2022o).

The status and quality of interaction, engagement and motivation in DL were explored by numerous studies such as interaction in online teaching of English as foreign language by native-English teachers based on e-classroom discourse analysis (Al-Khotaba, 2022); the impact of virtual classes on second language interaction in the Saudi context (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020); students' engagement and motivation in online courses from the teachers' perspective (Oraif & Elyas, 2021; Aldossari & Altalhab, 2022); how EFL, linguistics and translation instructors engaged students in DL during the Covid-19 second wave (Al-Jarf, 2022g; Al-Jarf, 2022h; Al-Jarf, 2021f); the impact of online teaching on students' engagement in writing during the pandemic (Aldaghri & Oraif, 2022); and attendance of children's online classes from the perspective of parents and teachers (Al-Jarf, 2022l).

Some research studies during the pandemic in Saudi Arabia gave suggestions for improving the quality of DL such as online vocabulary tasks for engaging and motivating EFL college students in DL (Al-Jarf, 2022j); YouTube videos as a resource for self-regulated pronunciation practice in EFL DL environments (Al-Jarf, 2022p); strategies for effective DL in foreign language, linguistics and translation college courses (Al-Jarf, 2022n); blogging about the Covid-19 pandemic in EFL writing courses (Al-Jarf, 2022a); how periscope can be used for live academic lectures during the Covid-19 pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2021h); positive psychology in emergency distance education during the pandemic and beyond (Al-Jarf, 2022m); how hate and racism speech on social media during can be combatted and how tolerance can be taught to students (Al-Jarf, 2021a); and how students in low-income families, orphanages, and remote areas were enabled to access DL courses during the second semester of the Covid-19 pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2021g).

Comparison of the advantages and challenges of DL before, during and/or after the COVID-19 pandemic were made by some studies as teaching and learning the four English language skills before and during the COVID-19 as perceived by EFL faculty and students (Alhaider & Nisa, 2023); Saudi EFL students' use and perceptions of blackboard before and during online learning (Alsuhaibani, 2021); synchronous and asynchronous English writing classes (Bin Dahmash, 2021); Saudi students' views of teaching English speaking online versus F2F during COVID-19 (Alzamil, 2021); distance education in higher education in Saudi Arabia in the post-COVID-19 Era (Alghamdi, El-Hassan, Al-Ahdal & Hassan, 2021); and educated Arabs' reading interests and preferences before, during and after the pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2022d). The literature review revealed lack of studies that probed students and teachers' attitudes towards DL four years after the emergency shift from F2F to DL that took place back in March 2020. Therefore, the current study seeks to explore Saudi college students' views of DL vs F2F instruction. Which mode of learning they prefer and what are the reasons for their preferences. It also seeks to find out whether students' preferences and reasons after the Pandemic differ from those during the pandemic; whether there are differences between male and female students, graduate and undergraduate students and students in the different colleges majors.

Although, a lot of improvements have been made to DL during the past 4 years, this study will reveal the advantages and disadvantages of F2F and DL, the situations which mandate the use of each, students' views on how to make DL and F2F more effective and which aspects of DL and F2F need improvement.

2. Methodology
2.1 Subjects
A total of 278 students participated in the study. 31% were males and 69% were females. The students were from a variety of departments and colleges particularly translation, linguistics, English, education, business, computer science, science, engineering, law and Islamic Studies at seven Saudi universities and one private university. 87% of the students are undergraduate and 13% are graduate. All the participants are native speakers of Arabic.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis
A survey questionnaire was posted on the X platform (formerly Twitter) which stated, *"One face to face class is better than 5 online classes"*. The question required open-ended questions with reasons for the participants' preferences. The participants yielded a total of 432 responses which were subjected to further analysis. The responses were analyzed qualitatively as what matters is how the students view both modes of learning and the reasons they give for their preferences.

3. Results
Data analysis showed that 40% of the students prefer F2F instruction, 36% prefer distance learning (DL), i.e., online classes, and 24% have no preference and indicated that preferring one mode of learning to another depends on certain factors. No significant differences in preferences were found between male and female students, between graduate and undergraduate students, nor among the students of different majors. The detailed results are reported in the sections below.

3.1 *Why Students Prefer Face to Face*
Participants who prefer F2F teaching and learning indicated that they get better grades in the F2F mode than in the DL mode. F2F is more suitable for science classes (labs, experiments, anatomy). There is more participation, interaction, and questions on the part of the students, which makes a difference. The students can communicate with their classmates, discuss, and tutor each other before exams which are absent in DL. The relationship, communication and interaction among the learners especially if they are experts in their fields as in the case of graduate students from different majors taking the same course, there will be more questions and discussions and more exchange of experiences and knowledge. In some areas of specialty as health sciences, engineering, law, or business, the students benefit from the instructors' chats about their experience and their views of the job market. This is an important advantage that some students miss in DL where the instructors give their lecture and leave. Leaving home to go to class is fun and good physically, mentally, and psychologically. Although F2F is more exhausting than DL, you waste time commuting back and forth, you are busier and you spend more time in it. It is better, more fun and more beneficial than DL. In F2F, you cannot leave class as in online learning in which the students can leave the platform, browse apps, go out, walk around, take a nap, play, have coffee, respond to WhatsApp messages, or browse social media. In F2F, the students are forced to listen. Some students wrote:
  o *What matters is the relationships between the learners, especially if they are experts and ask questions. This increases the number of questions asked in the F2F class, while this is non-existent in DL.*
  o *In F2F classes, my brain focuses better, everything is closer to my eyes.*
  o *I prefer F2F, unless the instructor just reads from the slides.*
  o *In F2F classes one feels that he/she is in a real class. In DL, one would log into the platform and fall sleep.*
  o *DL negatively affected me. My achievement level went down.*
  o *Participation, interaction and asking and discussing questions make a big difference.*
  o *I still remember the material that I have studied F2F.*
  o *Coming to class by itself is energizing.*
  o *When I review what I have studies with students taking the same course but online, I find out that they have learnt about 30% of what I have learnt.*
  o *In my opinion one F2F class is better than 10 DL classes especially in science courses.*
  o *In DL, I am bothered by indifferent students who unmute their microphone and disturb the class session. It takes some effort to have them unmute their mics and be quite. This does not happen in F2F classes.*

3.2 *Why Students Prefer DL*
Participants who prefer DL indicated that in the age of technology and artificial intelligence (AI), DL has become a necessity, not a transient experience imposed by global changes, such as pandemics and wars. They can attend classes during emergencies such as bad weather conditions. In DL, lectures are recorded. If a student misses a class, he/she can check lecture recording anytime, anywhere and as many times as he/she wishes. By listening to the lecture recording several times, they can take good, clear and well-organized notes. In DL, the students do not need to leave home. Thus, they save commuting time. There are no distractions, no noise, and no interruptions. In DL, students have the advantages of escaping incompetent lecturer's classes and attending classes of competent instructors' or the instructors they prefer and feel comfortable with. Distance classes differ from F2F classes in learning style and learning strategies because technology has made many things easier, as more learning aids are available. There are more resources and more means of learning than books. Resources related to the course material are already uploaded on the DL platform. The students develop self-learning skills. They can ask questions freely and without feeling nervous or intimidated as it is the case for some student in F2F classes in which they hesitate to ask questions. For graduate students, DL is better, especially if they are working and have other commitments. Some participants believe that F2F classes are of no value for graduate students, unlike undergraduate studies, which aim to develop students' communication and cognitive skills in their area of specialization. Other students pointed out that most training courses are held online. DL is better if the student really has a passion for learning. The ability to concentrate and understand is better because there are no distractions, and they can listen the lecture content sometimes more than once. Some participants said:
  o *There are cases that force you to study remotely, if the student is living far away, if the area of specialization is new, or if there is lack of time.*
  o *DL is an exceptional mode of learning, i.e., used in special circumstances, and it must remain an exception.*
  o *I took 5 years of F2F classes and did not benefit as much from them, whereas in two years of DL classes in more than one country and more than one sub-specialty in my field, and in general fields, I felt a big difference.*

- o *I took two courses remotely during my doctoral studies due to the Corona virus, and I benefited the most from them. The sources were uploaded and ready to read, and the lectures were recorded. I could check the lectures any time. I focused better. I refer to them at my own convenience. In fact, it was better than the 10 subjects that I took F2F.*
- o *If the instructor reads what is on the slides, without explanation or understanding (in F2F classes), it is better to stay at home and study online.*
- o *In DL, before the professor starts the lecture, we ask him/her to turn the recording on.*
- o *F2F classes are tiring. DL is better in terms of information and fairness in grading.*
- o *I focus more in DL than F2F instruction, and I absorb the information faster.*
- o *Frankly, the F2F classes that I have attended did not add anything to me. But when I relied on self-study and DL, I achieved my target which is 80%+.*
- o *It depends on the course to the subject because education has become more flexible nowadays.*

3.3 *No Preference .. It Depends*

Participants who have no preference indicated that both DL and F2F have pros and cons. Both modes of learning depend on the instructors' competence, the nature of the course, the curriculum, the teaching techniques used, interaction, engagement and student participation in the learning process, teacher's ability to communicate, grab the students' attention, and create interaction in the DL class. There are individual differences, different learning style and different needs and circumstances among the students. Some students prefer DL and others prefer F2F. It also depends on the learner's motivation and desire to learn. If the students are studying theoretical stuff as in some engineering courses, it does not matter if the students study online or F2F. They added that both F2F and DL are good and if you focus, you will learn in both cases. If the student is hard working, he/she will benefit from F2F and DL class on equal footing. DL has many advantages such as saving commuting time, effort, money, self-learning, electronic resources, and supplementary educational videos and F2F has the advantages or communicating and interacting with the instructor and classmates. Some students explained:

- o *It depends on the instructor's ability and skill in conveying information through modern media. Some instructors can create interaction in a remote lecture, and some even read from the slides in the classroom.*
- o *Whether it is DL or F2F, it depends on the quality of the instructor's lecture and the student's ability to concentrate.*
- o *What matters is the student's will power. Nothing works in the absence of motivation.*
- o *Sometimes we benefit from F2F classes. In other cases, DL is more suitable. It depends on the students' need. Some students do not understand much in F2F, others understand better in DL.*
- o *Both DL and F2F require hard work on the part of the student.*

On the other hand, some participants mentioned some shortcomings of both DL and F2F *instruction:*

- o *If some F2F classes, some students give you a hard time as they think they know it all and start talking and interrupting the lecturer. You do not know whether to listen to those students or to the instructor.*
- o *In F2F classes, we go out in some bad weather conditions, spend money on gas and clothes to attend one class only.*
- o *In terms of concentration and discipline, F2F instruction is better. But when you control yourself, get into the mood, and give the online lecture its due, there is no difference between DL and F2F classes. In DL, you will invest your time better.*
- o *What matters is the desire to learn. One DL class with the desire to learn is better than 5 F2F classes, if the student is asleep.*
- o *Most instructors record the lecture in DL, but not all.*
- o *In some cases, whether F2F or DL, the instructor uses the same instructional technique which is lecturing. He/she just talks from the beginning of the lecture to the end and the students are just listeners and receivers of the information and have a passive role in the learning process.*

3.4 *Other Views*

Some participants emphasized that sometimes a YouTube video related to the material under study covers more than what an instructor covers in F2F or online instruction. Some YouTube classes provide a good learning atmosphere and help the students focus. Therefore, the assignment of some relevant YouTube videos as a supplement to the lecture is beneficial. They save the students a lot of time and effort. Some recommended having a F2F class every 4-5 DL classes to assess students' understanding and to clarify difficult points in the material that has been studied. They suggested that instructors who teach F2F and DL classes record their lectures and upload them to Telegram to enable the students to check them when they miss classes or if they are distracted in class. DL will be better if the professor turns the chat on and answers the students' questions. Whether online of F2F, the instructor should use a variety of teaching techniques with discussions and providing situations for applying information. They emphasized that learning begins with the recipient (learner), whether he/she is really willing to learn or not, whether in DL and F2F situations. Whoever pays attention to the lecture will often understand. What matters is understanding. The presence of the body and the absence of the mind do not help. Both are effective as long as the instructors communicate you. Since DL and F2F have advantages and disadvantages, blended learning is the solution.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored Saudi college students' preference for online vs F2F teaching and learning. Despite, the many improvements and enhancements that have been made in the past four years in the platforms used in DL, internet connectivity, students' ownership and access to devices, online teaching skill on the part of the instructors, and online learning skills on the part of the students, in online engagement, interaction, participation and assessment, still more students prefer the F2F mode of teaching and learning to DL with a quarter of the students in the sample having no preference. The students' responses to the surveys reveal more acceptance, no grumbling about and criticisms of the use of DL. Most of the students seem to be more aware of the advantages and disadvantages of both DL and F2F and the conditions for making them more effective. Many recognize the benefits of DL even though they prefer F2F instruction. The students seem to be more aware of their main role in the learning process and that they should be in control of their learning.

The fact that more students in the current study prefer F2F teaching and learning might be attributed to habit and the long tradition of using the F2F mode in all stages of education. The DL mode is relatively novel.

To make the best use of the teaching-learning process whether F2F or online, and in addition to the recommendations given by the students herein for making teaching and learning more effective, some researchers recommended the use of collaborative learning (i.e., breakout classes, cloud-based collaboration), the flipped classroom strategy, and the scaffolding (Khreisat , 2022); mobile-assisted language learning (Alghamdi, 2022) and a variety of platforms can be used for enhancing the quality such as Google Classroom is the most effective e-learning platform, followed by Blackboard then Zoom as revealed by Alharbi & Khalil's (2022) study.

In addition, the following teaching and learning strategies can be used for making DL and online classes effective, interactive, engaging and fun. Those strategies are: supplying devices and good infrastructure to both students and instructors, using some free platforms, practicing using the new platforms, supplementing the platform with one or more technologies, orientation, and support, telling the students about online class logistics, selecting online course material and resources, integrating global topics and participation goals in the class material, practicing and applying a variety of skills with online videos, blogs, mobile apps and others, using effective teaching techniques, assignments, and activities, giving feedback, motivating and engaging the students, online communication and interaction, nurturing the online classroom community, preparing and following effective and reliable online testing procedures, evaluating the students' and faculty DL experience, and providing professional development and support for teachers (Al-Jarf, 2022n).

Moreover, for effective DL classes, the course material should be adapted to the online learning environment by using activities such searching for key terms and concepts in the course, problem-solving questions, online debates, summarizing a research paper in the students' area of study, attending a thesis defense, inviting guest speakers to the online class, project-based assignments, collecting and analyzing translation errors, translating Wikipedia articles, contests, analysing videos related to the course material, student-created podcasts and digital content related to the course material, dynamic online activities, and integrating technology such as Slido and Padlet (Al-Jarf, 2022g; al-Jarf, 2022h; Al-Jarf, 2022j).

To increase students' agency in DL and maintain a positive psychology, this study recommends helping the students choose their direction, and set their own goals, initiate action through voice, choice, free will, and self-initiation. Students can select strategies for meeting their goals and creating learning environments that optimize motivation and engagement in the course activities; creating a culture of inquiry and creativity; encouraging independent learning; giving the students opportunities to make choices in how they want to share their learning; providing them with opportunities for externalizing their thinking and internalizing their self-efficacy by associating them with their belief in their ability to succeed. Effective learning environments can be achieved by encouraging synchronous class lecture attendance; promoting interactivity and engagement and building a sense of community by focusing on student-centered learning activities such as task-based and opinion-sharing tasks, using a mix of instructor-led and student-led teaching strategies such as team-based, and problem-based learning; connecting students' personal interests to the course content, work-related learning and real-world experiences that impact their careers. Telecollaboration with other students taking similar courses can be applied. Cognitive engagement prompts with emotional engagement and motivation can be integrated. Interactive student presentations and demonstrations, video-based and text-based discussions, chatting off-topic, and making communication personal are helpful as well (Al-Jarf, 2020).

Finally, this study recommends that the assessment of all modes of learning at Saudi schools and universities and in the different disciplines, including DL be continued in the future.

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