

Kurdish EFL Students' Perceptions about the use of E-learning During the Covid-19 Lockdown

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Abstract:

The outbreak of the coronavirus (Covid-19) in December 2019 caused the total closure of educational institutions and led to stop of the face-to-face teaching for a long time. Therefore, e-learning was applied as an alternative teaching method

to continue education. However, little is known about students' perceptions on the use and acceptance of e-learning implemented during the Covid-19 lockdown, especially in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Hence, this study aims to explore the university students' perceptions about the use of e-learning during the lockdown in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. In so doing, a mixed-method approach is utilised to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from 50 Kurdish EFL students. The results of data analysis revealed that more students show positive perceptions than those who hold neutral and negative perceptions about the use of e-learning during the lockdown.

Keywords: Covid-19, E-learning, EFL Learner Perceptions, Technology Acceptance, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.

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1. Introduction:

The outbreak of Coronavirus (Covid-19) in December 2019, which was later identified as a pandemic by WHO in March 2020, has significantly affected the social life and almost all sectors in the world (Baldwin & Tomiura, 2020; Guerrieri, Lorenzoni, Straub & Werning, 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). Officials in Public health have urged social distancing to reduce the death ratio and lower the epidemic curve. As a result, education, specifically higher education, has faced serious challenges as the conventional face-to-face classes have been stopped and all educational institutions have been closed to avoid the further spread of the virus. It is shown in a report by UNESCO in 2020 that such total closure of the schools has been applied in 192 countries, which has affected almost all students in the world. Thus, educational institutions have sought to find alternatives to continue the education process.

One of the alternatives to the face-to-face teaching method is e-learning. Nowadays, the great influence and growing popularity of information technology cannot be denied. Moreover, the implementation of information technology has been recently reflected in the use of various online and e-learning tools such as learning management systems and social networking sites (Popovici & Mironov 2015; Abbasi et al., 2020). Despite some proclaimed deficiencies of e-learning, such as lack of teacher-student interaction and social isolation (Abbasi, 2020; Kwary & Fauzie, 2017), it has been currently accepted as one of the best alternatives for conventional classroom practices and a teaching method in educational institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the local level, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has also taken strict measures to respond to the current global situation during the pandemic. All schools and universities have been closed, and the students were required to continue their education online. Moreover, the government has provided technical, and training support to familiarise the students and teachers with the recent changes. For example, the KRI ministry of education launched its first education T.V channel which broadcasted the lessons recorded by the teacher. These channels reached about 1.5 million children all over the region (Khasawneh et al., 2020). In another attempt, an online learning summit was hosted by the HUAWEI company in partnership with the UNESCO Institute of Information Technology in Education and Iraqi and KRI ministries of higher education aimed to offer support for learning and teaching during the covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO online summit, 2020). However, despite all these attempts, it is not clear whether e-learning has been successful in the region and how it has been perceived by the students and teachers, especially in higher education. Therefore, there is a need to investigate this issue through practical studies and provide solid research-based evidence to the stakeholders for setting the future plans accordingly.

2. Literature Review:

In the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, e-learning has been considered as one of the best teaching methods to continue education due to some advantages. According to (Valverde -Berrocosso et al., 2020), the term e-learning, which is synonymously used with internet-based learning, online learning and computer-assisted learning, has been defined as any form of education and instruction assisted by utilizing technological tools like the internet and various digital tools and learning management systems to deliver active learning and course content (Haleman & Yamat, 2020). Moreover, e-learning has been useful during the pandemic because it has enabled the students to study anytime and anywhere without being physically present in the classrooms. Additionally, e-learning has also been found effective in promoting independent learning and language skills, being economical for the students, and engaging the students and teachers in knowledge construction and collaboration (Hošková-Mayerová & Rosická, 2015; Mutambik, 2018).

Despite the reported advantages of e-learning, its acceptance by the students has been continuously investigated. Although many frameworks have been used to understand the acceptance of the integration of technology in the social science context, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis in 1986, has been one of the most widely used models utilized for this purpose (Teo et al., 2018), specifically during the Covid-19 lockdown (Al-Okaily et al., 2020; Haleman & Yamat, 2020; Sukendro et al., 2020). According to the model, the perceived usefulness and ease of use lead to a user's behavioral intention and attitude, whether positive or negative, toward adoption or acceptance of a technological system (Davis, 1989). More specifically, both perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are defined as the degree to which a particular technological system is free of effort and enhances the user's job performance, respectively, which both affect the user's attitude toward using the system and have positive correlation with his or her acceptance and use of the system (Davis, 1989). Although later studies have added more factors to the model, specifically in the integration of e-learning (Mohammadi, 2015; Ramir-ez-Correa et al., 2019), affecting users' attitudes toward accepting and using a particular system (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008), in this study, the original version of TAM was considered because it seems more straightforward for investigating the e-learning system used in the research context.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, many studies have been conducted around the world to explore the learners' attitudes toward using e-learning systems; the results of these studies vary. For instance, Malkawi, Bawanesh and Bawa'anesh (2020) carried out a study in the United Arab Emirates to investigate undergraduate students' level of acceptance toward e-learning and virtual classes during Covid-19. The results showed that the students have high satisfaction level about the e-learning system. Moreover, Putika (2020) did a study in Indonesia to find out 60 English pre-service teachers' perceptions about the acceptance of e-learning system during the lockdown. The results of the quantitative data showed that the respondents had positive attitude toward using the e-learning system during the lockdown and found it beneficial for their learning process. Additionally, Haleman and Yamat (2021) conducted a study in Malaysia to investigate the ESL learners' perceptions on and level of acceptance about the use of e-learning during the Covid-19 crisis. The results produced that their perceptions about e-learning were positive and their level of acceptance was high.

On the other hand, studies have shown that perceptions on and acceptance of the use of e-learning were not always positive. Mahyoob (2020) conducted a study in Saudi Arabia to understand EFL learners' attitudes toward e-learning during the pandemic. The results revealed that most participants were not satisfied with e-learning as it did not improve their language learning performance. Similarly, Sakkir, Dollah and Ahmad (2021) revealed in their study that most of EFL learners showed negative perception about the use of e-learning in the learning process during the Covid-19 lockdown. Moreover, Shdaifat, Shdaifat and Khateeb's (2020) study produced similar results when they investigated the perceptions of Jordanian teachers about the use of e-learning as the study showed that most of them had negative attitude towards using e-learning during Covid-19 crisis and they faced many challenges with the use of it.

It can be concluded from these studies that the users of e-learning are taking the two poles: one with positive attitude and the other with negative perceptions on the use of e-learning. In educational environments where necessary facilities, prior technological experience, and sufficient budget are provided, e-learning has been accepted and seen as an advantage. However, in educational contexts where the users face economic problems, do not have prior technological experience, and suffer from inadequate provision of facilities, e-learning is mostly rejected and not positively embraced (Biswas & Debnath, 2020).

In Kurdistan region and Iraq, as the research context, some studies have been conducted to investigate the use of e-learning in the time of Covid-19. For example, Hussain et al. (2020) carried out a study in Kurdistan region of Iraq to explore medical students’ perceptions about the challenges they have faced while using e-learning. The study concluded that e-learning is still in the stage of infancy in the region due to the existence of some challenges like lack of required infrastructures, necessary gadgets and adequate practical training. Additionally, Abdulla and Abdulla (2021), another study conducted in Kurdistan region, confirmed that the region is facing many challenges such as lack of facilities and internet access, with the use of e-learning. Although other studies (e.g. Jameel, Abdalla & Karem, 2020; Montazer & Al-Rikabi, 2021) have been done in the research context, more studies need to be conducted to have a deeper understanding about the higher education learners’ level of acceptance of and attitude toward the use of e-learning as the previous studies have mostly focused on the challenges of using e-learning rather than the users’ perceptions about and acceptance of e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. The Procedure

3.1 Research framework

In this study, the adapted version of Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) is used. The model (see Fig. 1) is divided into three main categories, which are *perceived ease of use (PEU)*, *perceived usefulness (PU)*, and *behavioral intention to use (BIU)* and considered the major factors of the user acceptance of the e-learning system.

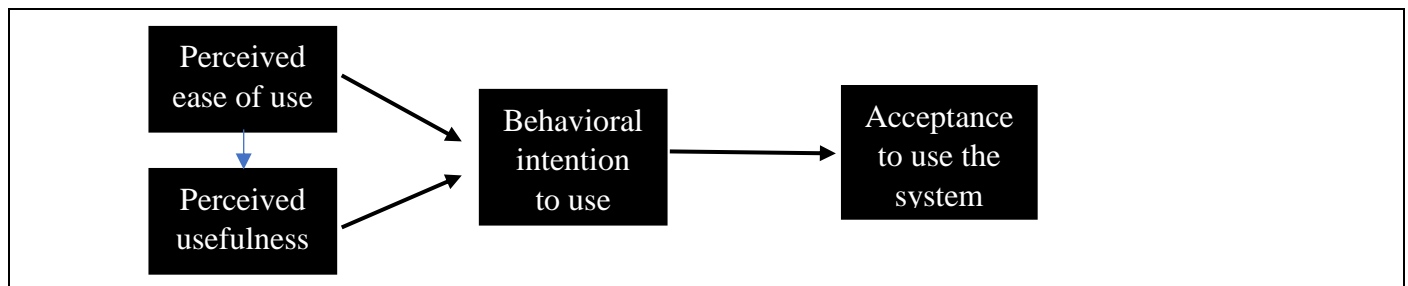


Figure 1: The adapted version of TAM (Davis, 1989)

3.2 Setting and participants:

The current study is conducted at the University of Raparin, a public university located in Kurdistan region of Iraq. Concerning the participants, 50 students (33 females and 17 males) participate in the study whose age range is between 19 and 24 years and they are studying in the English department. It is worth noting that students from the First year to Fourth year are asked to participate so as to have a deeper and more generalizable understanding about their acceptance of the online learning process implemented during the pandemic.

3.3 Data collection:

Both quantitative and qualitative data are collected from an online questionnaire and open-ended questions, respectively. The questionnaire consists of 16 items and is adapted from some previous related studies (e.g. Chou, 2014; Kisanga & Ireson, 2016; Pilli, 2014). Before administering the questionnaire, it is piloted on a group of students and its reliability is checked through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 20. The results produce the Cronbach’s Alpha score of 0.97, which shows high reliability. As for the qualitative data, 10 students are randomly selected and asked two open-ended questions

like “what do think about the use of e-learning in the learning process?” and “what problems did you face while using the e-learning process?” which have to be answered online in a paragraph format. The reason for asking such questions is to have a deeper understanding about their perceptions on the use of e-learning process during the pandemic.

3.4 Data analysis:

The quantitative data are analyzed utilizing the means of descriptive statistics (i.e., mean, frequencies, and standard deviation), which are components of the SPSS program, Version 20. Concerning the qualitative data, the participants’ responses are collected and checked for identifying, analyzing and reporting the emerging themes relating to the answers to the open-ended questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Results

4.1 Results of quantitative data

Quantitative data is analyzed to see the degree of the students’ perceptions about their acceptance of the e-learning system used during the Covid-19 lockdown. Concerning the total average scores obtained from the analysis of the quantitative data (see Table 1), the higher percentage of the students show positive perceptions about the ease of use of the e-learning system (% = 40, M = 3.1, SD = 1.15).

Table 1: The perceived ease of use of the e-learning system

items	SDi+Di %	N %	SA+A %	M	SD
1. I found e-learning easy to use.	28	34	38	3.1	1.10
2. I believed it is a good idea to use the e-learning system for my coursework.	38	28	34	2.8	1.19
3. I liked the idea of using the e-learning system.	43	13	44	3.2	1.27
4. It was easy for me to find information at e-learning	20	22	58	3.8	1.11
5. The e-learning system was flexible to interact with.	26	50	24	3.0	1.09
Total average scores	31	29	40	3.1	1.15

Note: *SDi* = Strongly Disagree; *Di* = Disagree; *N* = Neutral; *SA* = Strongly Agree; *A* = Agree; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation

More specifically, as shown in (Table 1), more students like the idea of using the e-learning system (% = 44, M = 3.2, SD = 1.27), perceive that finding information on the e-learning system is easy (% = 58, M = 3.8, SD

= 1.11), and find the system easy to use (% = 38, M = 3.1, SD = 1.10). It is worth noting that 31% and 29% of the students show negative and neutral perceptions, respectively, about the ease of use of the e-learning system.

As for the results of the second factor, the total average scores (see Table 2) show that higher percentage of the students have positive perception about the usefulness of the e-learning system (% = 39, M = 3.1, SD = 1.15).

Table 2: The perceived usefulness of the e-learning system

items	SDi+Di %	N %	SA+A %	M	SD
1. Using e-learning would enhance my effectiveness in learning.	20	28	52	3.7	1.20
2. Using e-learning would improve my course performance.	34	24	42	3.6	1.25
3. Using e-learning would increase my productivity in my coursework.	32	42	26	2.8	1.06
4. I believe e-learning is a useful learning tool.	34	26	40	3.0	1.24
5. I believe learning is faster with the e-learning system.	30	28	42	3.0	1.13
6. It is easier to learn with the use of the e-learning system.	46	24	30	2.7	1.16
Total average scores	33	28	39	3.1	1.17

Note: *SDi* = Strongly Disagree; *Di* = Disagree; *N* = Neutral; *SA* = Strongly Agree; *A* = Agree; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation

According to Table 2, higher percentage of the students perceive that e-learning is a useful learning tool (% = 40, M = 3.0, SD = 1.24), and using e-learning will enhance their effectiveness in learning (% = 52, M = 3.7, SD = 1.2) and make learning faster (% = 42, M = 3.0, SD = 1.13). However, 46% of the students believe that it is not easier to learn with the use of the e-learning system (M = 2.7, SD = 1.16).

Regarding the third factor affecting the e-learning acceptance, the results (see Table 3) produce that more students have a negative perception about the behavioral intention to use the e-learning system (% = 40, M = 2.8, SD = 1.14).

Table 3: Behavioral intention to use the e-learning system

items	SDi+Di %	N %	SA+A %	M	SD
1. I will adopt the use of the e-learning system in the next semesters.	40	26	34	2.7	1.26
2. I will use the e-learning system in all my courses.	52	20	28	2.6	1.26
3. I intend to visit E-learning frequently for my course work.	38	38	24	2.7	1.03
4. I intend to use e-learning to assist my learning in future.	34	36	30	2.9	1.09

5. I intend to use e-learning as an autonomous learning tool.	32	28	40	3.0	1.10
Total average scores	40	29	31	2.8	1.14

Note: *SDi* = Strongly Disagree; *Di* = Disagree; *N* = Neutral; *SA* = Strongly Agree; *A* = Agree; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation

To be more specific, higher percentage of the students show that they do not intend to use the e-learning system for all their courses (% = 52, *M* = 2.6, *SD* = 1.26), will not adopt the use of the system in the next semesters (% = 40, *M* = 2.7, *SD* = 1.26), and do not intend to visit the e-learning system frequently (% = 38, *M* = 2.7, *SD* = 1.03). However, more students perceive that they will use the e-learning system as an autonomous learning tool, not as a compulsory one, in the future (% = 40, *M* = 3.0, *SD* = 1.10).

Table 4: Students’ perceptions about the acceptance of e-learning

Affective factors	<i>SDi+Di</i> %	<i>N</i> %	<i>SA+A</i> %	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Perceived usefulness	31	29	40	3.1	1.17
2. Perceived ease of use	33	28	39	3.1	1.17
3. Behavioral intention of use	40	29	31	2.8	1.14
Total average scores	34	29	37	3.0	1.16

According to the results shown in (Table 4), it can be inferred that more students accept the use of the e-learning system (% = 37, *M* = 3.0, *SD* = 1.16). However, these results are very close to the ones obtained for those students who hold negative (% = 34) and neutral (% = 29) perceptions about the acceptance of the system.

4.2 Results of qualitative data:

Qualitative data is collected from two main interview questions, namely, “*what do think about the use of e-learning in the learning process?*” and “*what problems did you face while using the e-learning process?*”. Concerning the results of the analysis of data achieved from the first interview question, the students show both positive and negative feelings about the use of e-learning. Many students believe that e-learning is necessary especially in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, one student (shown as “S” hereafter) writes as:

In my opinion, e-learning is good and it is a good alternative during Covid-19 pandemic. I think in this specific time, it is a good way for learning. (S6)

Moreover, some others perceive that using e-learning is useful and helps students to get information about the courses in an easier way and encourages the learning process. For instance, one student expresses feelings as:

e-learning helps me to get information easier, saves time, encourages the process of learning, and makes learning faster. That is why I think it is necessary for the recent global situation. (S3)

In addition, another student acknowledges the usefulness of the e-learning system as:

e-learning helps us to learn outside the classroom boundaries; this means that we can learn about our courses anytime and anywhere. It also helps to improve more skills about technology. (S9)

It can be inferred from this expression that e-learning provides more freedom to the students and creates more chances for learning outside the classroom. Moreover, e-learning can also help the students to develop their technological skills as it familiarizes the students with different learning management tools.

Despite having positive perceptions about the use of e-learning, it is not favored by some students. For example, one of the students writes as:

I don't think that e-learning is good because we do not have experience about using it. This is a new way of learning for us. (S1)

As shown above, the student rejects the e-learning system because he does not have prior experience about the use of e-learning and it is a new way for him. This reason for the negative attitude towards the use of e-learning is also mentioned by the other students who disliked the use of e-learning system.

Regarding the answer to the second interview question, which is “*what problems did you face while using the e-learning process?*”, the results of the obtained data reveal that students face one major problem: poor internet network. It is found in most of the responses that the students' internet access is not of good quality, which makes them stay disconnected during the e-learning sessions and cannot benefit the uploaded instructional materials. For example, one of the students writes as:

The biggest problem I had during e-learning was bad internet network. I could not watch the videos, stay online during online classes because my internet was going and coming. My friends had also the same problem. (S5)

The above statement shows that poor internet access is the main problem which prevented the students to benefit the teaching materials like videos and documents. In addition, sometimes the students miss important sessions of the online classes due to the disconnection of the internet. Such problem is also frequently reoccurred in many other students' responses to the open-ended question.

5. Discussion and Conclusion:

The aim of this study is to uncover Kurdish EFL students' perceptions about the use of e-learning during the Covid-19 lockdown at the University of Raparin in Kurdistan region of Iraq. The results of quantitative and qualitative data analysis reveal that more students show positive perception about the use of e-learning during the lockdown. Such positive perception can be related to the e-learning features such as easier access to information, flexibility in time and place, and virtual communication and collaboration between the students and teachers. This finding is also confirmed in the previous related studies (e.g. Haleman & Yamat, 2021; Malkawi, Bawanesh & Bawa'anesh, 2020; Putika, 2020) which show that students accept the use of e-learning system during the lockdown.

On the other hand, the results of this present study also produce that many students show neutral perception about the use of the e-learning system. The reason for such perception can be related to the practice and application of such learning system are relatively new in the university, in particular, and the region, in general. Most students have not been exposed to this learning method in their previous academic years and

have not had prior training experience about the use of the system. Therefore, many students may have been uncertain whether such learning method helps them to learn better.

Some other students in this study also perceive that the e-learning system is not useful and thus do not accept the use of it during the lockdown. This is also confirmed in the studies (e.g. Abdulla & Abdulla, 2021; Hussain et al., 2020) which are conducted in the region to show that the students have negative attitude towards the use of e-learning. Such perception is most likely due to the challenges and contextual constraints such as economic problems, no prior technological experience, and inadequate provision of facilities, and weak internet access.

The researchers believe that e-learning, despite being a good alternative to face-to-face teaching during the Covid-19 crisis, has been seen as a challenge in many countries and regions like Iraq and Kurdistan region of Iraq. Many contextual problems like insufficient facilities and inadequate internet access have had a negative influence on the users' acceptance of and attitude towards using e-learning. In this respect, e-learning is still in the stage of infancy in many public universities in the region. Therefore, government officials and the ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research should take necessary actions towards providing sufficient e-learning facilities in public universities so that the students have better access to the online platforms.

بۆچونی خوێندکاری کورد سەبارەت بە بەکارهێنانی خوێندنی ئەلیکترۆنی لە کاتی کۆفید-۱۹

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پوختە:

دەرکەوتن و بلاوبونەوهی کۆفید-۱۹ لە کۆتاییەکانی ساڵی ۲۰۱۹ بوو هۆی داخستنی تەواوی ناوەندەکانی خوێندن. وە لە هەمان کاتدا خوێندنی ناو پۆل یان روبەرپوو وەستا. خوێندنی ئەلیکترۆنی وەکو رینگای وانە و تنەوهی جیگرهوه بەکارهات بە مەبەستی بەردەوامی دان بە پرۆسەی پەرۆردە و فێرکردن. لەبەر ئەوهی زانیاری کەم بەردەسته سەبارەت بە بۆچونی خوێندکاران لەسەر بەکارهێنان و قبۆلکردن خوێندنی ئەلیکترۆنی لە کاتی کۆفید-۱۹ دا، بە تاییبەت لە هەریمی کوردستان-عێراق، هەر لەبەر ئەمە ئەو توێژینەوهیە ئامانجیەتی کە بۆچونی خوێندکارانی زانکۆ وەرگریت سەبارەت بە قبۆلکردن و بەکارهێنانی خوێندنی ئەلیکترۆنی. بۆ ئەو مەبەسته میتۆدی تیکهال (چەندیتی و چۆنیەتی) بەکارهات لەسەر پەنجا (۵۰) فێرخوازی کورد. ئەنجامەکان ئەوه دەردهخەن کە ژمارەیی ئەو خوێندکارانەیی کە دید و بۆچونی ئەرینیان هەبوو سەبارەت بە قبۆلکردن و بەکارهێنانی خوێندنی ئەلیکترۆنی لە کاتی قەدەغەیی هاتووچۆ زیاترە لەوانەیی کە دیدو بۆچونی ئەرینیان هەبوو یان بی لایەن بوون.

کلیله وشەکان: کۆفید-۱۹، فێرکردنی ئەلیکترۆنی، EFL، بۆچونەکانی فێرخوازی، پەسەندکردنی تەکنۆلۆژیا، هەریمی کوردستانی عێراق.

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