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Research Article

The Impact of COVID: Case Study of an Academic English Reading Course at Qassim University

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the burgeoning field of research investigating the educational effects of COVID. A questionnaire with both open and closed questions was administered to female takers of an Academic English Reading course at a Saudi university, eliciting responses about aspects of the quality of delivery of that course before and after the onset of COVID. From this quantitative and qualitative student evaluation of traditional class teaching (TCT) versus emergency remote teaching (ERT), some findings emerged that echoed those in the few comparable studies in the West. For example, certain features like the greater autonomy of the student in ERT than TCT were liked by some students but not others, while features such as the superiority of teacher-student communication in TCT were more uniformly approved. Furthermore, predictions from the literature such as that favouring TCT would be associated with greater self-efficacy, or a greater perceived degree of transactional interaction between student and teacher were not supported in the context of this study. Analysis of suggestions for ERT improvement leads to the conclusion that, at present, it may be that students need training to exploit the existing ERT, rather than that the ERT to be altered.

Keywords: autonomy, communication, covid, emergency remote teaching, English reading, traditional classroom teaching

1. Introduction

All over the world, school and university teaching has changed, probably forever, due to the COVID pandemic. After the turmoil of those months, naturally it is vital for researchers and teachers to take stock and study and fully understand the changes, and their effects. Only then can it be detected what has changed for the better, and what might be having negative effects and be in need of further change. Some have hailed COVID as a catalyst for change in teaching and learning practices that was long overdue but not happening in normal times (Zhao, 2020). Others however see dangers in a move to totally online teaching and prefer a hybrid approach (Bashir et al., 2021).

As a consequence of this uncertainty, a great deal of work is being done studying the changes in many contexts. This paper is a small contribution to that effort, focusing on just one course in one university in one country as a case study. It is hoped that evaluating one case in some depth through the eyes of the students will provide insights that larger scale studies relying only on closed item

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questionnaires may miss.

At my Saudi Arabian university, in January 2020, semester long courses began as usual with weekly three-hour sessions in lecture rooms on campus. However, with the heightening world crisis over the Coronavirus, the decision was made by the authorities to switch to fully online distance teaching in week eight. In a short space of time, traditional classroom teaching (TCT) was replaced by what has been called emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Bashir et al., 2021). As some experts have emphasized, such a move is quite different from the orderly and well-planned move that some institutions had already made to online teaching, such as the Open University in the UK (Hodges et al., 2020).

In Saudi Arabia, every course has a comprehensive syllabus document called the Course Specification (CS), which is decided in advance by higher authorities in the university, including the Quality Unit, rather than by the course teacher, who is required to follow it. The parts of the CS that concerned objectives/outcomes, required textbooks and the list of topics to be covered week by week were not affected by the COVID-related change. However, there were radical changes to the delivery of the courses, their sources of support, and their assessment methods, and these changes had to be made in a hurry and without the sort of lead-in training or preparation time that normally precedes any radical change to methods of instruction.

In this paper we take as an example the Academic Reading course taught in the second year (level three or four) of the BA English at Qassim university (female section). Most Saudi universities teach a course similar to this. Areas of similarity and change due to COVID are summarised in Table 1. It should be noted that there was a small online element already present in what we call traditional classroom teaching (TCT) prior to the move. Furthermore, efforts were made to keep as much as possible the same with respect to the delivery and assessment of the course. For example, the exams were still conducted as supposedly closed book 50 minute only exams, despite being taken online.

Table 1. The second year English Reading course before and after the move online

	Before COVID 19 7 weeks from January 18th to March 8th Traditional classroom teaching (TCT)	After onset of COVID 19 6 weeks from March 16th to April 27th Emergency remote teaching (ERT)
CS topics covered	• Unit one: previewing • Unit two: making inferences • Unit three: understanding paragraphs	• Unit four: patterns of organisation • Unit five: reading longer passages effectively • Unit six: skimming
CS assessment conducted	• Portfolio assessment • Weekly peer assessment	• Midterm exam 10 % • One quiz 5% • Final exam 20% * 4
Management	• Class announcements in lectures • Blackboard for announcements and to share materials • MyU application for communication	• Students use email to communicate • MyU application for announcements and for communications between teacher and students • Blackboard for announcements and to share materials
Synchronous classes (students and teacher together at the same time)	• On campus face to face • Three hours a week for 50 minutes each • Based around textbook • Integrated by PowerPoint slides • Some group and pair work	• Virtual (Zoom/Blackboard meetings) • Three hours a week for 50 minutes each • Based around textbook • Integrated by PowerPoint slides • Some interaction with students
Attendance at synchronous sessions	• Mandatory	• Mandatory
Asynchronous learning time expected per week outside of synchronous classes	• Homework and preparation for classes two to three hours per week	•Homework and preparation for classes two to four hours per week
Resources available/used	• Reading textbook as hard copy Book (projected for the whole class when needed) • Library hardcopy resources • Blackboard used to share information such as copies of PowerPoint slides put online	• Reading textbook distributed as eBook/ the students have their hard copy books • (Library lacks electronic online resources) • Blackboard used to share information such as copies of PowerPoint slides put online • Blackboard displays class tasks to work on • Recordings of Blackboard/ Zoom sessions for students to watch again • Recommended websites to visit
Assignments/ homework, not part of course assessment	• In class tasks with peer and teacher feedback • Self-graded homework activities • Peer and group live discussions in class	• In class tasks with teacher feedback • Self-graded homework activities • Instructor graded homework and classroom activities. • Weekly assignment and discussion on Blackboard

	Before COVID 19 7 weeks from January 18th to March 8th Traditional classroom teaching (TCT)	After onset of COVID 19 6 weeks from March 16th to April 27th Emergency remote teaching (ERT)
Assessed quizzes and mid and final exams	• Offered at one set time and administered by the teacher in a classroom on campus • 50 minutes • One-time access • Types of question: reading passage with comprehension questions; vocabulary building	• Offered at one set time and administered by the teacher via Blackboard • 50 minutes • One-time access • Types of question: reading passage with comprehension questions; vocabulary building
Student responsibilities	• Check blackboard/MyU before coming to class. • Read the classroom announcements published in Blackboard/MyU app • Attend classroom meetings • Complete classroom activities in class. • Complete homework activities online • Listen or read grade notifications • Reach out for help contacting teachers, attending office hours or contacting Tech support when having technical issues with Blackboard	• Check Blackboard/MyU daily • Read the classroom announcements published in Blackboard • Attend virtual classroom meetings • Complete assigned activities (homework and classroom activities) online • Review grade notifications • Participate in the Q/A discussion board in Blackboard • Reach out for help contacting teachers, attending online office hours or contacting Tech support when having technical issues with Blackboard
Teacher responsibilities	• Send announcements via Blackboard and MyU to help students prepare for the class if needed • Answer emails within 24 hours • Provide regular feedback • Hold office hours	• Send announcements via Blackboard/MyU to help students prepare for the class • Answer emails within 24 hours • Provide regular feedback on grading within a week • Hold online office hours

2. Literature Review

Change is of course common in education, and indeed in the wider world of business and government administration, as well as in ordinary individuals' lives. Hence there is much literature and a multitude of theories in this area, devoted to understanding the causes and effects of innovation/change and its processes and benefits/disadvantages. Some such research focuses specifically on technological innovation, although in the present instance it is clear from the start (e.g., Table 1) that the new or greatly increased use of online audio conferencing software, such as Zoom or Blackboard, that accompanied ERT around the world is far from constituting the whole story of what changed. Hence, this review is not limited to that literature.

Two major strands of relevant literature may be identified, devoted respectively to the evaluation of change and to the study of acceptance/rejection of change. In summary, the first of those targets the change (including any technological element in it) and asks whether it is good or bad and so needing improvement. Evidence for the answer often comes from those most affected by it as well as many other sources. The second, however, targets the people affected and asks whether, and why, they accept the change/new technology or not. In the latter case, it is those people who are usually seen as potentially needing 'improvement' (e.g., through training or incentives), rather than the innovation itself (Venkatesh et al., 2016; Mohamad et al., 2019). We initially adopt the former (evaluation) stance, since it is far more prominent in accounts of the educational effects of COVID, and seems desirable: in the present rather fluid state of higher education delivery, it seems plausible to suppose that the solution to any deficiency in online delivery lies in improving that delivery rather than in trying to enable students to cope with that deficiency (however, see further the Conclusion).

We may note from the start that neither of those literatures is, in the realm of education, strong in respect of change that comes suddenly imposed by unexpected outside forces: the main focus has been on changes that are planned or chosen by researchers, teachers, administrators or a Ministry of Education. While in a discipline such as economics, unplanned changes often occur due to unavoidable factors, e.g., the world banking crisis of 2008 or the current war in Ukraine, and are often referred to as 'shocks' to the economy, such occurrences are not a commonplace of education, where the COVID shock was a complete novelty. One consequence of this is that, hitherto, many studies of educational change have obtained parallel data from participants just before and just after the planned change, in order to make a fair comparison of performance or attitude (Cohen et al.,

2007). However, due to the suddenness of pedagogical change due to COVID, we have not found any TCT-ERT studies of that sort. Reports emerging at present either focus just on the period after the change (ERT) or, like the present study, have to rely non-optimally on participants' current memory of the pre-COVID situation in order to make any comparison. With the above in mind, four informative articles are now presented from the literature that was consulted.

Pre-COVID, Gavrilis et al. (2020) investigated a distance program at university level in Greece. Its main focus was on transactional interaction, which is seen as a defining feature of distance teaching in contrast with TCT (Moore, 1993) since physical distance inevitably changes, and perhaps reduces, the kind of interpersonal interaction that can occur. From a student questionnaire, it was found that interaction with the teacher was rated as stronger than that with other students (3.8 compared with 3.3, on a 1-5 scale). Furthermore, distance teaching was found more satisfactory by students who perceived transactional distance between the student and other students, and the teacher, as low (r=-.101, -.335 respectively). The implication suggested from this was that teachers should work on improving student-student interaction on the program. However, this program was chosen by participants rather than imposed on them, was planned rather than emergency, and there was no comparison drawn with what they would have said about interaction in a corresponding TCT program. Hence it will be interesting to see if the present ERT study obtains similar findings.

Hannah et al. (2022), by contrast, undertook a COVID ERT study at university in the UK. Their focus was on evaluating different types of online learning and assessment that had been tried, given that research has shown that TCT, with traditional time limited, closed book, invigilated exam assessment, often has a negative impact on student well-being (Durning et al., 2016). From a questionnaire and focus groups they did not find a simple overall picture: "Whilst some students experienced online learning and assessment as more effortful and less rewarding, others identified beneficial flexibility, inclusivity and accessibility supporting academic self-efficacy and alleviating examination stress". Based on that, they recommended that university staff must ensure that what is expected, and when, in online study and assessment should be clearly stated and reflected in the scaffolding provided by course syllabuses, and supported by suitable resources available to all students.

Bashir et al. (2021) also conducted a COVID study in the UK, using a mixed closed and open response instrument such as the present study uses. Their participants included a number of Muslims, which makes their findings perhaps more relevant to the present study than many in the literature. Again, they focused more on ERT than previous TCT, and report the following main findings. Online assessment was a worry for some, in terms of insufficient preparation for the novel open book exams and what was regarded as too limited exam duration (12 hours). Some students felt the Zoom classes were not interactive enough; however, at the same time, some did not want to be expected to turn their cameras on. Students also found it hard to concentrate at home where they did not have a dedicated work space free from interruptions.

Finally, from the technology acceptance literature, Chen (2014) in Taiwan draws attention to the connection between self-efficacy and adoption and use of new technology: "students who showed an active interest in taking VLE <virtual learning environment> courses have higher self-efficacy in technology and course content" (p35). Self-efficacy has been defined as a person's belief in their capability to successfully perform a task (Bandura, 2000). In the context of the present study of course students had no choice but to be taught by ERT, with its reliance on audio conferencing technology, regardless of what course they take, after the onset of COVID. Nevertheless, it might be expected that an effect of self-efficacy would be seen in participants with greater English reading self-efficacy giving more favourable evaluations of ERT compared with TCT than those with lower self-efficacy.

3. Research Questions

From a review of the literature, it can be seen that although some studies of ERT following the arrival of COVID have been conducted, they are mostly in western contexts rather than Saudi Arabia and do

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not directly compare the TCT and ERT experiences of the same individuals. Hence, in the interests of broadening our understanding of ERT and how it could be improved, the present study investigates how far some of the findings mentioned above apply in the context of a typical Saudi provincial university. Three research questions were posed with respect to the Academic Reading course level three of BA English at Qassim university (female section):

RQ1: What kinds of difference in quality do students perceive between the pre and post COVID conduct of the course? (Answered. quantitatively and qualitatively)

RQ2: Are students' perceptions of the change related to their English reading self-efficacy or to perceived transactional distance between students and teacher? (Answered quantitatively)

RQ3: What do students suggest to improve the post-COVID (ERT) delivery? (Answered qualitatively)

4. Method

4.1 Participants

Participants were 28 female undergraduates, mostly Saudi nationals, who agreed to participate, from a class of 60 students taking the Academic Reading class. The students were from levels 3 and 4, so in the second year of their English major undergraduate program. Apart from one student, they rated themselves average or above average in reading ability compared with their peers, which implies perhaps that it was the more able students who chose to respond.

4.2 Instrument

Students responded to a questionnaire in Arabic eliciting background information (including self-reported English reading ability), and, on the course related teaching/learning issues, responses to both open response questions and closed response questions (three-point response scale). The open response items elicited qualitative data to help answer RQ 1 and 3. The closed items yielded quantitative data and served RQ 1 and 2. Items effectively asked for comparisons between TCT and ERT, in respect of a range of aspects mentioned in the literature. Closed items included one item concerning which they thought overall better and twelve on specific qualities: learning benefit (2), communication and involvement (2), autonomy and motivation (2), affect (2), ease (4).

4.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data from open response items was submitted to content analysis by rereading and extracting pertinent themes. The quantitative data was processed in SPSS version 25. Since the data was on rating scales with three ordered categories, nonparametric statistics were used for significance tests, such as the binomial test to assess how far students showed a clear preference for TCT versus ERT, and the Spearman rho to test for relationships between variables.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Research Question One.

What kinds of difference in quality do students perceive between the pre and post COVID conduct of the course? (Answered quantitatively and qualitatively)

Overall, the course was rated significantly better before than after the change. The majority was 11 to 1 (binomial test p=.006) among those who expressed a preference, although the majority of students (16) reported no difference. In open responses this was reflected in the fact that a number of positive points were mentioned for both TCT and ERT. However, ERT also attracted a number of

negative points, TCT hardly any.

The 12 specific aspects that were asked about in the closed, quantitative, items fell into two groups, based on the results: five related to concomitants of learning/teaching that students claimed did not significantly differ between before and after, and seven related to things that were reported as significantly more evident in TCT before COVID (Table 2). Notably, nothing here was claimed to have been significantly more present in ERT than TCT, though two features (items 6,11) were reported non-significantly more present in ERT.

Table 2. Mean responses on the 12 attitude change items, in order from more prominent in ERT to more prominent in TCT

Item number	More true 1=before 2=no difference 3=after	Mean	Std. Deviation	Binomial p
6	I felt more in charge of my own learning of English reading	2.13	.850	.629
11	I had fewer problems using unfamiliar technology on the Reading course	2.08	.654	.754
5	There was more learner participation in the Reading course	1.83	.702	.388
8	I felt less anxious about reading in English	1.78	.801	.238
10	There were fewer malfunctions of technology on the Reading course	1.74	.656	.092
9	I felt more confident about my ability to read in English	1.67	.555	.012
7	I put more attention and effort into learning English reading	1.62	.752	.031
3	The Reading course helped me learn more successfully	1.56	.712	.013
12	Overall the Reading course was easier	1.56	.641	.004
1	Studying on the Reading course was more convenient for me to do	1.44	.507	.002
4	The Reading course allowed better communication between students and teacher	1.38	.647	.001
2	The Reading course was more suited to my learning needs	1.28	.458	<.001

The item which came closest to being voted as significantly better in ERT than TCT concerned students feeling in charge of their own learning. This increase in perceived autonomy was also indicated by a few students spontaneously in the open responses. It has been suggested by other studies as a common feature of distance learning, associated with transactional distance, especially where there is no scheduled synchronous component: the student is free to autonomously decide when she works on this or that, for how long, and in what way, provided she meets any set deadlines (Gavrilis et al., 2020). In the context of the present study in fact the scheduled online classes in Blackboard and the fixed exam times meant that in ERT freedom was far from total. Perhaps for that reason only two students cited 'being more responsible' (s11, s21) as a good feature of the post COVID arrangements. This shows that there was some recognition of the point made by experts that distance learning puts the onus more on students to take ownership of their own learning rather than rely totally on the teacher to deliver it. Clearly to the few students who mentioned it, this autonomy was a welcome feature.

However, there was also mention of the negative side of this freedom in ERT, voiced by a student who said frankly 'It is about being in the house, that makes us lazy for our lectures' (s6). We may also note here that item 7 showed attention and effort (i.e., motivational intensity) as being significantly more a feature of TCT. Students then mostly felt they needed the pressure of a teacher led regime to force them to work. Possibly this was in the mind of a student who said of ERT: 'We have to be good and focused listeners all the time' (s1). In other words, it was being on campus that made these students focus better on study: at home, the responsibility they had to take for themselves was hard to deal with.

The second highest feature that was (nonsignificantly) more prominent in ERT was lack of problems with unfamiliar technology. Possibly this was due to ERT relying largely on Blackboard that students were broadly familiar with pre-COVID, and perhaps being able to transfer some skills from their personal smartphone communication experience. It is notable that lack of problems due to

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malfunction was (nonsignificantly) rated as more a feature of TCT, perhaps because its pre-COVID use was peripheral (e.g., to access official messages or information) while it was central to ERT. As one said of ERT: 'Sometimes the site or the device got stuck so it kicked me out of the session then made me absent' (s19).

Responses to item 5 about student participation showed this was judged slightly more the case in TCT, but in fact many students judged it the same in TCT and ERT, which slightly goes against the literature (Gavrilis et al., 2020). Communication specifically with the teacher (rather than peers), which is a key part of participation, was however much more decisively rated as significantly better in TCT than ERT, which accords better with what others studies state. The qualitative data gave some clues to why this was so, although it tended to indicate TCT as better for communication with other students as well as the teacher. The key point in favour of TCT was the inherent fact that the classes were in person not virtual. This meant first that there was 'easy communication with students together also with a doctor <=lecturer>' (s19) and good participation (s5). As one said, in TCT 'We can get the idea from the teacher quickly and easily' (s1).

What seemed to be important to be able to communicate ideas more easily in TCT was 'that we can see each other ' (s3): 'face to face lectures and clarity' (s21) was valuable, especially for discussion (s10). A reason for this was given as 'when the doctor pronounce some words, very clear to see how she moved her lips' (s28). Interestingly however one said something similar of ERT: 'we can hear the reader clearly and pronounce the word better' (s22). The explanation probably lies either just in individual student preference or in the fact that the reference here is not just to understanding the teacher speaking but to the student reading aloud (see further point about affect below).

Items 8 and 9 about less anxiety and more confidence both concern affect or emotion, which is less often considered in the literature. Anxiety was judged not significantly greater in either teaching mode while confidence was greater in TCT. The qualitative data showed a number of reasons why perhaps lack of anxiety was more prominent than confidence in ERT. Predictably one concerned time: 'that we have much time to read' (s1). This presumably reflects that reading was left to be done outside the Blackboard sessions whereas pre COVID it was done within the classroom sessions, so constrained by a time limit which could generate anxiety. Others commented that 'the exam became more easier' (s3). That could have been due to the availability at home of resources not available in exam conditions on campus. Another however said 'exams were less-complicated I think' (s9) which suggests the content of the exam was also easier in ERT than TCT, due to either an intentional or inadvertent policy of the teacher setting the exams. Nevertheless, there was also evidence of some 'stress over online exams' (s21), in one case, although that could be due simply to unfamiliarity. Since students were encountering online exams for the first time, some might naturally have been afraid that they might be difficult even though they proved to be easier.

With respect to anxiety, most telling was the evidence of a student who said of ERT 'When I read a mistake, no one can look at my facial expressions' (s26). In other words, while the real classroom might be judged as better for understanding the teacher speaking, because the teacher can be seen clearly (as noted above), the online class was regarded as better for the student reading aloud, because she could not be easily seen. Thus, she felt less exposed when making mistakes so was less anxious. This is because, in Saudi Arabia, it is the norm for female teachers and students to keep their camera off in such a situation.

In the bottom five places in Table 2, where the features that were significantly judged much more prominent in TCT are located, we find two items about ease/convenience (other than technology related) and two about learning benefit.

Ease is also highlighted in the open response data: we have already mentioned ease due to seeing the teacher better in TCT and so understanding being easier. As another said, 'we can read comfortably' (s27). Interestingly however, some responses about ERT offered direct comparisons with what was said about the pre COVID TCT. For instance, some claimed that in ERT it was 'more comfortable to participate' (s9) ... 'more comfortable courses' (s25). This suggests that there may be individual differences between students in whether they find in person or online meetings more

comfortable.

Finally, learning benefit, and specifically meeting student needs, was the feature most prominently judged to be associated with TCT and not ERT. Aside from aspects already noted, TCT was regarded as superior for attention 'I can focus more than now' (s16) and interest 'the courses were more interesting' (s25). With respect to assessment, a couple also said that post COVID 'the test is not interesting like in the classroom' (s18). Possibly this is a consequence of what we saw above as regarded as an advantage by some students, that the exams were easier online. In other words, an easier text to read can be boring.

Asked about negative features of pre COVID TCT teaching, most said there was nothing bad. Just a couple noted however that 'sometimes conversations took us out the course, which has pros and cons' (s24, s25). This illustrates that there was more opportunity in face-to-face classes to elaborate and go beyond the bare requirements of the syllabus, which is in fact not necessarily a bad feature.

By contrast, ERT had its own learning benefits, as we have already noted, to which may be added making it easier not to miss a class: 'I attended on the time, I wasn't late' (s19), implying that maybe she had trouble being on time for campus classes but this was not a problem for Blackboard sessions at home. However, ERT was reported as having some harmful features. Among these we have not yet mentioned that some students surprisingly said 'The time is short for reading' (s22, s27), possibly because they had not grasped that in ERT there is an onus on students to do more on their own outside of the synchronous lessons. Otherwise, in the online class sessions alone there was indeed often too little time.

A more avoidable ERT learning issue raised by a few was 'That we didn't know what is the next step' (s3) or 'not having an obvious plan' (s24) and that may have contributed to a few saying 'Cannot understand it well' (s5). Possibly this arose due to the hurried nature of the implementation of ERT. Clearly teachers were initially to some extent 'making it up as they went along' with respect to timing of classes and tests, and that could easily come across to students as lack of a clear plan, even though the schedule of the Course Specification was still being followed.

Overall, this account clearly adds valuable detail to that in literature such as we cited above. Furthermore, it demonstrates that TCT is on average clearly preferred to ERT in the context studied, which other studies that do not make a direct comparison cannot do. It also supports the finding of Hannah et al. (2022) that some aspects that are liked by some about ERT are also disliked by others: e.g., students differed on whether TCT or ERT is more interesting, easy or comfortable, or affords more reading time. To some extent then, the evaluation of ERT or TCT as preferable is a matter of individual difference. Furthermore, there were some signs of a possible distinctively Saudi or perhaps Muslim cultural feature, with respect to reluctance to use the camera in ERT synchronous sessions (cf. Bashir et al., 2020).

5.2 Research Question two

Are students' perceptions of the change related to their English reading self-efficacy or to perceived transactional distance between students and teacher? (Answered quantitatively)

There was no significant relationship between student judgment as to whether the course was overall better after or before the changes and self-efficacy (self reported English reading proficiency): rho=.096, p=.626. Hence there was no suggestion that the differences between TCT and ERT overall suited stronger students differently than weaker ones. That is a good result pedagogically, since one would not want changes of mode of course delivery to favour students of different ability unequally. The result however does not accord with literature such as Chen (2014), which suggests that individuals with higher self-efficacy handle change better than those with lower. Possibly the reason is that there are many kinds of self-efficacy of which we only considered one. For instance, we did not take into account self efficacy in the form of self-rated IT competence or self-rating of resistance to change.

Among the twelve individual features of the teaching modes that were quantified, again there were low and nonsignificant relationships with self-efficacy except for one belief, which showed a highly significant positive relationship (rho=.583, p=.003). This was the belief about change in quality of communication between students and teacher: students with greater self efficacy (claiming above average reading ability) were closer to reporting that there was no difference (rating = 2) in quality of communication between students and teacher after COVID than before (mean rating 1.78); lower self-efficacy students however saw the communication as clearly better in TCT before than in ERT after (mean 1.14). It seems then that possibly less able students may have suffered by the change in this one respect.

The reasons for this we can speculate about as follows. It is possible that in live classrooms the closeness of students to the teacher created a more intimate atmosphere in which the teacher felt it natural to relapse into Arabic when necessary, and was more able to give responses suited to individual students. Those features would of course help the less able students more than the more able ones. In the exclusively online fora after COVID, however, it was less easy to address individuals separately, and the greater distance may have prompted a more public and formal feel to the communication which meant that it was usually felt as needing to be done in English without resort to Arabic.

The other specific expectation from the literature that was tested was that illustrated in Gavrilis et al. (2020), that distance teaching was found more satisfactory by students who perceived transactional distance between the student and other students, and the teacher, as low, especially the latter. This was tested first by correlating how far TCT was preferred over ERT in general with how far it was believed to be better in student teacher communication. There was no significant relationship (rho = .107, p=.619). However, the correlation of overall preference with perceived student participation was significant (rho=.442, p=.031). Since student participation presumably includessstudent-student as well as student-teacher interaction, this suggests that Saudi students perhaps value communication with peers above communication with the teacher as a criterion of quality of course delivery. This in turn could possibly be assigned to Saudi culture being more collectivist in nature than the culture of many Western countries such as the US (which is highly individualist) where much research is conducted (Hofstede, 1991). Collectivism, versus individualism, of a culture leads to greater value being place on activity in a group.

5.3 *Research Question Three*

What do students suggest to improve the post-COVID (ERT) delivery? (Answered qualitatively)

One of the open questions given to students was 'If COVID precautions continue and the Reading course is given remotely again next semester, without meetings on campus, what would you suggest is changed about it?' There was a wide range of opinion. One said 'To attend the College even if there is COVID, or cancel the term' (s4), implying that to have no course was better than an ERT one. On the other hand, several echoed s6 who said 'Nothing, there was not a huge difference'. In between there were students who seemed to imply that something could be improved in the ERT but did not seem able to make a clear suggestion as to what, e.g. 'I don't know, but I hope we can make it more useful and enjoyable' (s22). A few echoed s25 who gave detailed suggestions 'Use slides, learn details, mention the advanced level vocab'. The teacher was in fact already using slides more extensively in ERT than TCT because there seemed to be fewer technical problems with slides in Blackboard than when projected in a live class. This comment then seems to be a call for even more use of slides in order to understand the details of the text more fully and help learn the difficult vocabulary.

However, when it came to the question 'Ideally would you like the course to eventually return to how it was before COVID? Why/Why not?', the students were far more decisive and there were fewer missing responses. There was almost complete agreement that it should revert to TCT. Together with the answer to RQ1, this seems to indicate that the students think that the

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university/teacher implemented ERT pretty much as well as it could be done, but that ERT has inherent disadvantages that are impossible to overcome, due to its nature. Hence it will always be inferior to TCT.

The reasons they gave for preferring TCT support this, since they are for the most part features that ERT by its nature cannot be altered to deliver, at least with today's technology. They largely echo the responses cited in coverage of RQ1 above. One aspect was the clarity of face-to-face meeting 'when we see the doctor in front of us, we feel what she want or what she satisfy exactly from her facial expressions' (s19); '...better to learn in that way <TCT>, clear and comfortable' (s11).

Another said honestly that in 'the online learning I can play with my phone and I do everything without anybody knowing about it, but in college I would feel shy due to the teacher if I did this...' (s6). She admits to the fact that certain bad practices that are visible in TCT are inevitably not visible in ERT. Another said 'because I can't continue studying well, a lot of things are distracting me from that, so I want our lives before <COVID>' (s26).

Additionally, affective reasons were given. It was suggested that greater interest was generated by classmates in person: 'I'm bored of online studying' (s4); in TCT 'I feel like I'm really study without any nervousness or forgetting my homework or the lectures' (s16).

Thus, on the one hand, our data provides a richer list of things that students see as deficient in ERT than that for example in Hannah et al. (2022). However, on the other hand, most of them are features that cannot be changed (at present). For instance, they depend on the students and teacher being all physically present in the same room, which of course does not exist in ERT.

6. Implications and Conclusion

This study has shown that, while many Saudi students see little difference in merit between TCT and ERT in their English reading class, those that do, on average, prefer TCT. That preference is largely unrelated to their self-rated English reading ability but it is related to the value they place on participation. TCT is also seen as providing greater ease and learning benefit than ERT. Improvements in ERT that they would like to see involve some details of the teaching content, but mostly aspects that would make it more like TCT, but which it is difficult to change because of the inherent nature of ERT (i.e., at a distance).

The implication for researchers is perhaps that asking students to compare ERT with TCT is a plausible research method that produces credible results and could be more widely used in post-shock educational studies. Further studies are however need to extend the findings of this Saudi study to other contexts around the world to establish more fully what attitudes to post-COVID ERT are in fact universal.

The practical implications for teachers, students and universities, however, are less clear. Superficially, the study suggests that, in the Saudi context at least, they should revert as soon as possible to full TCT. Nevertheless, there were some advantages found, perceived by some students at least, in ERT, so an alternative, which is in fact being widely adopted, is to return to a 'hybird' solution, where some TCT is reinstated but an ERT element also continues. In that way also the individual preferences of students can be better served.

The reason for ERT being less preferred was found to be due not to it having no perceived benefits compared with ERT, but to it having more negative aspects than TCT. Therefore, we also need to think how to tackle those negative points. Some of them were features that did not depend on its nature and so should be easy to improve. In this study they included some aspects of how the subject matter (in our case English reading) was taught, and some understandable confusion over details of course arrangements and timing after the onset of COVID. Many of them however related to the fact that, by its nature, ERT does not operate with students and teacher all physically together. That was felt to have consequences for teacher-student and student-student interaction, visibility of what the teacher was trying to communicate, and the like. We may think of two possible solutions to that. First, a technological one which is probably already possible but far too expensive and disruptive

to implement, is to use virtual or augmented reality, exploiting maybe avatars or holographic figures to create a much more lifelike experience for each student or teacher in their own home, so that they experience sitting in their sitting room as exactly like sitting or standing in their usual place in the TCT classroom with students / teacher around them and all able to see each other life-size in three dimensions and speak to each other. This can potentially be done using either wall-sized screens or virtual reality headsets in the home. Getting closer to the real-life experience of being in a room with other people like that, i.e., making ERT more like TCT, would surely remove many of the shortcomings of today's TCT limited to what Zoom or Blackboard displays on a small screen.

The other solution, which is easier to implement immediately, is that of not attempting to improve the innovation but to improve the users (students and teachers). In other words, we follow what work in the acceptance model often suggests, that users simply have to be trained or incentivised to exploit the innovation successfully. This would mean sessions familiarising students fully with the relevant software so they do not experience difficulties, and in a wider way alerting them to the benefits of taking charge of their own learning and guiding them in how to do it. In the context of the present study, the university had in fact made available online extensive training materials for using Blackboard and other recourses. However, students had not been required to make use of them.

7. Acknowledgments

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