



# The Quality of Online English Learning during Covid-19 pandemic: A Study on English Undergraduate Students in A Conflict Zone

Iftikhar Yusuf Abdulmoghni Saeed Al-Ariqi<sup>1</sup>, Mir Mohsin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of P.G Studies & Research in English, Kuvempu University, India

<sup>2</sup> Kuvempu University, India

Correspondence: Iftikhar Yusuf Abdulmoghni Saeed Al-Ariqi [Email: [dr.iftikhar2019@gmail.com](mailto:dr.iftikhar2019@gmail.com)]

Received: 08/04/2022

Accepted: 30/05/2022

Published: 31/05/2022

**Abstract:** This study attempts to investigate the quality of online English learning from the perceptions of the undergraduate ESL students during the lock downs due to Covid-19 pandemic in the conflict zone, Kashmir, India. It tries to examine three issues related to the quality dimensions of e-learning. Based on judgmental sampling technique, the sample responds to a five-likert survey comprising 18 questions after being taught via online mode for 3 months, followed by a structured-interview with a part of the sample selected randomly. Findings indicate that the e-learners have expressed diverse opinions with regard to course objectives matching with learning needs, effectiveness of online teaching methods and efficiency of online assessment. Findings of quantative data reveal that majority of the students may not be able to identify their learning needs or decide about the quality of e-assessment system while a great number of the students perceive online teaching methods as less effective. Findings of qualitative data show that students are not pleased with the three dimensions in the current mode of e-learning unless it goes under strict discipline and better approach and previous training. It can be concluded that e-learning cannot be an alternative to formal education in a conflict zone unless intensive efforts and regular evaluation are made keeping in mind the students' learning needs and feedback in relation to all dimensions of quality of e-learning.

**Keywords:** online learning, perceptions, lock-down, pandemic, conflict zone

## 1. Introduction

Formal education might be challengeable in conflict zones due to frequent lock downs, lack of accessibility, economic and political obstacles. As an alternative, limited practice of online learning has become more common in primary and higher education system in such zones. However, with the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic which has obstructed people from carrying on their education or jobs all around the world, online learning has gained much reputation than earlier even in conflict zones. At the tertiary level, universities and colleges have widely increased their distance education offerings through online coursework— though often with an aim to improve access and convenience for students rather than the intent to cut down costs. A large literature on the success of online learning has developed to examine the many different ways of using computer networks in online learning. The great outcome from these studies is that online learning activities are quite well-appropriate for graduate level education in rich countries. The question which is raised in this paper is whether online learning process is effectively suited for undergraduate students in conflict zones or not. In the time of a number of political, economic and socio-cultural barriers besides the crisis of corona virus, ongoing education has proved to be unachievable in conflict zones. The students in such areas encounter

recurrent hitches to keep on their education. Thus, it is significant to provide students in conflict zones with a substitute and studied way of learning, such as online courses which are safer, easier and cheaper. What is novel in this paper is the attempt to investigate the quality of online learning from the perceptions of undergraduate students in a conflict zone during Covid-19 lockdown. The information collected from the students might benefit all the stakeholders in the field of higher education from different perspectives. E-learning is suggested to play a key role in facilitating learning processes for youth in endemic and conflict zones like the valley of Kashmir in India. This study tries to find out the quality of online learning from the perceptions of the students and if online courses can be helpful for Kashmiri learners in overcoming the frequent and complete shut downs, lack of accessibility, economic and political impediments and probably trying to sort out the crisis of education in the valley of Kashmir. After the eruption of Covid-19 pandemic, the government of Kashmir has directed all universities and colleges to begin conducting distance education in order to continue learning process whatever the circumstances are.

## 2. Literature Review

The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic not only has led to a sudden and huge transition from the traditional education into distant education, but also has caused disruption across the whole education sector all over the world. Schools, universities and educational institutions were forced to shut down and face-to-face learning and assessment shifted to online set-up. Consequently, an ample of studies on online education has been conducted in order to figure out the effectiveness of the new mode of remote or digital learning during the pandemic (Khashaba et al., 2022; Almahasees et al., 2021; Amri et al., 2021, Erarslan, 2021 etc). Ismaili (2021) comments that though online learning is still in the infancy stage, students show positive attitudes to be involved in E-learning classes during and post-Covid-19 pandemic, which indicates that e-learning mode can have a potential future in higher education institutions. The sudden shift to digital learning was challenging for students who expressed that they adapted quickly if classes were only delivered in smaller groups with pre-recorded and streamed lectures with preference to written home exam over online version of previous on-campus exams (Almendingen et al., 2021). On the other hand, a number of studies found that student's performance and satisfaction with online courses are considered better in comparison to traditional formal classes with some considerations (Amri et al., 2021; Zalat et al., 2021). Furthermore, the factors that influence the success of e-learning have been examined in different research from different angles. Zalat et al. (2021) finds that the highest barriers to e-learning are unstable internet connectivity, inadequate computer labs and some other technical issues. Gender, young age and less duration of experience are major essential indicators impacting e-learning acceptance by students (Zalat et al., 2021; Aldhahi et al., 2022). Likely, Khashaba et al. (2022) argues that the students' perceptions towards the whole experience with distance education is positive and the factor 'age' is found to be correlated with online learning preference by students. The age groups significantly associated with 'independent learner' and 'performing assignments' (Khashaba et al, 2022). Amri and Alasmari (2021) state that the online blackboard platform is declared to be used instead of the formal learning in Saudi Arabi during Covid-19. There are a number of factors which have a direct or indirect relationship with the effectiveness of online learning. The use of online blackboard, technical competence and willingness to utilize technology all strongly impact the students' self-efficacy towards online education (Amri & Alasmari, 2021). In a Chinese study, Jiang et al. (2021) investigates the determinants of university students' satisfaction with online learning platforms in China. Results show that there are two major factors that impact the students' perceptions about online learning; their gadgets' efficacy, ease of use and worth of the online learning platforms.

In the context of online English learning, Yunus et al. (2021) also identified the most essential elements influencing the teaching of English as a second language among postgraduate students' behavioral attention towards the use of online learning during Covid-19 pandemic. The outcomes of the study reveal that all factors contribute positively in effecting the students' behavioral intention to use online learning. However, Erarslan (2021), in the same context, reviewed 69 research studies between March 2020 and February 2021 to effectiveness of the online education in first year of the pandemic. The review shows conflicting findings in which some advocate the necessity of online learning and others claim that the language and technical challenges created in e-learning like internet connection, access issues and certain language teaching approaches cannot make this new mode substitute the regular face-to-face learners, while Mahyoob (2021) notes that the English language learning issue is still challenging in online learning during the Corona-virus time.

Going through the literature related to education in conflict zones, it has been found that there is a lack of academic research on this area (Benefield and Tomlinson, 2005; Swan, 2003; Debalen & Paul, 2012) commenting that studies on formal learning in conflict and post-conflict places is still in its initial stage. Few studies, mainly reports by humanitarian organizations, which were conducted in this field, have discussed the correlation between civil conflict and education from different perspectives like gender, years of education, school enrollment, but most of these studies are qualitative only or have less reliability to data about civil conflict and surveys' results. The same can be said about online learning in conflict zones in which very little research is carried out. A recent study in the context of secondary school education, Essadi (2021) explores the role of e-learning practices in protecting secondary school education post conflict in Libya demonstrating that poor financial resources, damaged infrastructure (school buildings, transport, roads, computer labs, electricity), meagre security and safety are core obstacles to the re-opening of secondary school education in Libya which means E-learning is the only solution to the problem of how to educate in conflict situations during the recovery stage. Yet, none of the previous studies has investigated the relationship between civil conflict and the "quality" of higher education particularly, the new trend of education which is E-learning or online courses in conflict zones. The reason behind the lack of detailed research in the relationship between civil conflict and online higher education might be explained that there is an intricacy in implementing online learning in unsettled areas and lack of regular evaluation analysis to the whole context at the time of conducting online courses. In other words, there has been no systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of e-learning in most of universities in conflict zones (Lloyd, Byrne & McCoy, 2012). Yusuf et al. (2019) examines the impact of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) as an alternative to conventional learning in the conflict zone, Yemen. Results indicate that there is a considerable improvement in the performance of the students in different subjects as well as a reduction in the overall expenses of MOOCs. It is also found that MOOCs are found to have effective participation in pushing learners, particularly in the remote or unstable districts, to carry on with their education with less costs as well as coping up with the rapid technology across the globe. It is also noticed that a very few efforts have been made to measure the actual influence of online learning on higher education achievement in conflict zones before and after Covid-19 pandemic.

This paper tries to check if there is any pro by examining the students' opinions on the quality of this new mode of learning in post-secondary levels during lock-downs in conflict zones. In other words, the research gap found is lack of studies in investigating the quality of higher education in conflict zones and the role of E-education to keep the doors open for learning. This study tries to come out with a detailed explanation to which extent the students in higher education institutions are satisfied with the quality of online learning and identify the challenges they encountered with it. It also attempts to suggest possible implications as a remedy to carry on the learners' education during recurring lockdowns.

### 3. Study Objectives

The main aim of the current paper is to examine the perceptions of the undergraduate students regarding the quality of online courses during the lock-down of Covid-19 pandemic in the conflict zone, Kashmir, India. To assess this aim, three objectives are set.

1. To examine the students' perceptions regarding the level of agreement between objectives of online courses and students' needs.
2. To investigate the effectiveness of online teaching methods from the points of view of the students.
3. To scrutinize the efficiency of online assessment from the points of view of the students.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The current study is a mixed-method one that utilized quantitative-qualitative approach. The population of this study is (2681) 2349 students of Amar Singh College, Cluster University, Srinagar, and 332 from Kashmir University-South Campus, Anantnag Kashmir (JK), India. The sample consists of 300 of Kashmiri learners who are selected on the basis of judgmental sampling with a criteria based on three parameters (relevant to the objectives of the current study; that include educational level (Undergraduates), age (19-23) and educational specialization (English Language). The first tool to collect data is a structured-questionnaire administered to the sample followed by an item analysis using 5-point likert scale continuum. The second tool is a structured- interview conducted to 15 of the sample is randomly selected so that in-depth information can be collected. Table 1 shows the research population and sample size.

Table 1. Sample size

University	Population	Sample	Remarks
Cluster University (Amar Singh College)	2349	246	Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate (PG) in Regular & Integrated Programs
Kashmir University (South Campus)	332	54	PG only
Total	2681	300	

#### 3.2 Research Instruments

##### 3.2.1 Research Survey

The study implements a quantitative-qualitative method. Data was collected using a Likert scale questionnaire and close-ended questions. A structured questionnaire composed of (18) questions was developed using google forms. Thereafter, it was administered to English undergraduate students of Cluster University and Kashmir University. The questionnaire is emailed to the students' group at one time. Subsequently, the data was collected, and then analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and thematic analysis.

### 3.2.2 Survey Validity and Reliability

To check reliability and validity of the items used in questionnaire analyzed on a five point scale continuum, a pilot study, first, was carried out on 42 students selected from the same sample. A reliability test was conducted in order to ensure the reliability and internal consistency of the scale. The initial Cronbach alpha value was found to be 0.74 for 21 items. Three items were removed based on a formidable variation in standard deviation. Finally, 18 items were considered for analysis for which the revised Cronbach alpha was computed as 0.85. Second, the tool was refined depending on the results of the item analysis done. Third, the statements were reviewed by some linguists and specialists to make sure they are all related to the area of the study and each one independently focuses on what it claims to measure. Since reliability is a necessary condition of validity and based on the result of piloting the tool, the reliability or measurement of the internal consistency of the test items showed that it was reliable as Cronbach alpha was computed as 0.85. Finally, the validators' comments were taken into account while finalizing the tool for administration.

### 3.2.3 Structure Interviews

In this method, 15 students from the sample were selected for interview. Every third name out of ten in the students' attendance list was ticked. A call was made to each student which lasted from 12 to 15 minutes. The sample was given three questions related to the objectives of the study to be discussed in a way of conversation. It was basically an exchange between the one interviewer and one respondent. This method was selected to collect data by a part of the sample after responding to the questionnaire in order to collect information-rich data and to explore the underlying predispositions, needs, desires, feelings, and emotions of the respondents toward their experience with e-learning use during Covid-19 pandemic. Notes and recordings were taken after taking the participants' permission for further review for the sake of research. Fifteen participants were asked directly and indirectly questions in order to make them continually motivated to take an active role in discussions.

## 4. Results

In order to assess the quality of online classes from the perceptions of the students, a survey consisting of 18 items is developed and divided into three categories. Under each category, there is a number of statements. Alongside each statement, five alternative responses namely, strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree are scored 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 respectively. Frequency distribution (F) and percentage (%) are the statistical tools to analyze the options (5-1) from SA to SD. The three subscales with the statements are set in the following tables:

**4.1 The First Objective:** to examine the students' perceptions regarding the level of agreement between online courses and students' needs.

Table (1) shows that 0 (0%), 3 (1%), 156 (52%), 140 (47%), 1 (0%) of the students strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree respectively. The highest value 156 (52%) of the students indicate that 52% of them neither agree or disagree that online courses have met with their learning needs, on the contrary the lowest value 0 (0%) means that none of the students totally agree that objectives of online classes match with their learning needs. Going through each statement in the table, the statistical data shows that 49% have lack of motivation (item1), 59% are unsatisfied with the nature of e-learning (items2), 62% agree about the fear of failure in online exams (item3), 43% think that their opinions regarding online learning are not considered (item4), 58% disagree that e-learning mode saves their time (item5), 63% don't think online classes are less costly & economical (item6).

<b>Table No. 1 : Frequency Distribution and Percentages of the Overall agreement among students' regarding Online Course Objectives matching students' needs</b>									
No.	Statement	F%	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total	
1.	I'm motivated and feel more confident to learn English online.	F	15	85	53	121	26	300	
		%	5	28.3	17.7	40.3	8.7	100	
2	I'm satisfied with the quality of online classes which I attended.	F	9	80	35	146	30	300	
		%	3	26	12	49	10	100	
3	I think I am not able to pass online assessments held at the end of each semester for this year.	F	22	165	85	18	10	300	
		%	7	55	28	6	4	100	
4	I think our opinions regarding online classes, academic and extra-academic matters are not considered.	F	8	121	40	80	51	300	
		%	3	40	13	27	17	100	
5	Online classes help me to save time in order to study well and perform better in assignments.	F	30	69	26	141	34	300	
		%	10	23	9	47	11	100	
6	Online classes are cost effective and economical	F	18	82	12	159	29	300	
		%	6	27	4	53	10	100	
7	Online learning is the best solution for the shut downs that occur on account of prevailing political instability and prevalent military operations in the valley.	F	63	119	41	40	37	300	
		%	21	40	14	13	12	100	
8	I prefer to continue my education through online courses than regular as they are flexible i.e. without time and financial constraints.	F	3	31	23	133	110	300	
		%	1	10	8	44	37	100	
Overall Level of Agreement among students' regarding Online Course Objectives matching students' needs based on Percentage		<b>F%</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Total</b>	
		F	0	3	156	140	1	300	
		%	0	1	52	47	0	100	
Overall Level of Agreement Based on Quartile Deviation (Scale reduced to 3 points)		<b>Frequency/ Percentage</b>	<b>High</b>		<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Low</b>		<b>Total</b>	
			F	83		142	75		300
			%	28		47	25		100

Despite the fact that 61% of the students perceive e-learning as a good alternative to formal learning due to the conflict context they have grown up in where security is lacked (item7), 81% of them give more preference to formal education (item8). In order to compute the overall level of agreement among students' perceptions regarding the matching of the objectives of online classes with their needs, a three point scale continuum is developed based on quartile deviation (the absolute measure of dispersion). On the basis of descriptive statistics and the three point scale continuum, it can be concluded that the overall level of agreement among students' perceptions regarding the matching of the objectives of online classes with their needs is 83 (28%), 142 (47%) & 75 (25%) of the students fall in first, second, third quartiles, that is high, moderate, low respectively as illustrated in figure 1(a and b).

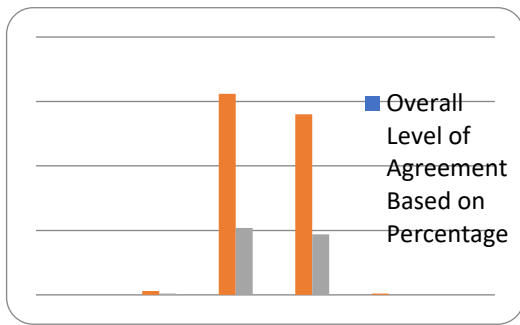


Figure 1.a: The distribution of frequency & percentage of overall agreement among the students regarding online course objectives matching their needs

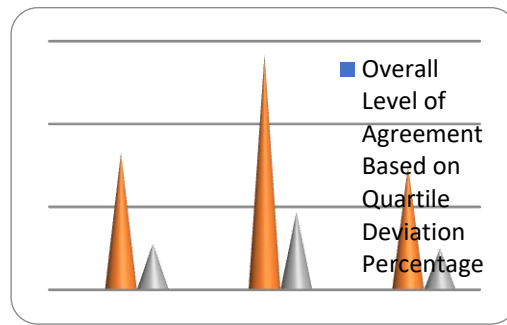


Figure 1.b: The graphical representation of different levels of overall agreement among the students based on quartile deviation regarding online course objectives matching their needs

Figure 1. Frequency Distribution and Percentages of the Overall Agreement among Students’ regarding Online Course Objectives Matching Students’ Needs

**4.2 The Second Objective:** To investigate the effectiveness of online teaching methods from the points of view of the students.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution and Percentages of the level of Students’ Perceptions towards the Effectiveness of Online Teaching Methods

No.	Statement	F%	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
9	I like the teaching methods used by our English teachers in online classes as they are interactive, interesting and dynamic.	F	15	34	25	168	58	300
		%	5	11	8	56	20	100
10	The online courses use a variety of instructional methods to accomplish the course objectives.	F	3	55	67	163	12	300
		%	1	18	22	55	4	100
11	I am satisfied with the feedback and guidance I get during online classes.	F	15	28	63	164	30	300
		%	5	9	21	55	10	100
Overall Level of Effectiveness of online Teaching Methods Based on Percentage		Frequency/ Percentage	Perfectly Effective	Effective	Neutral	Ineffective	Totally Ineffective	Total
		F	3	15	58	166	58	300
		%	1	5	19	56	19	100
Overall Level of Effectiveness of online Teaching Methods Based on Quartile Deviation (Scale reduced to 3 points)		F%	Low	Moderate	High	Total		
		F	76	166	58	300		
		%	25	56	19	100		

According to the descriptive statistics in table (2), the overall level of students’ perceptions towards the effectiveness of online teaching based on percentage is 3 (1%), 15 (5%), 58 (19%), **166 (56%)**, 58(19%) perfectly effective, effective, neutral, ineffective and totally ineffective respectively. The

highest value 166 (56%) indicates that majority of the Kashmiri students think that the teaching methods presented by teachers in online classes are ineffective. Going through each statement in the table (2), the statistical data shows that 76% of the students are not pleased with the teaching methods presented in online classes (item9), 59% do not think that a variety of instructional methods are used in online classes (item10), and 65% are not satisfied with the feedback and guidance they get in e-classes (item11). In order to assess and simplify the overall level of the students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of online teaching methods based on Quartile Deviation, the scale is reduced to 3 levels (high, moderate & low). From the descriptive statistics shown in table (2), it can be concluded that 76 (25%), 166 (56%) & 58 (19%) of the students fall in first, second, third quartiles, that is high, moderate and low respectively. The descriptive statistics indicate that majority of the students fall under the moderate level as illustrated in figure 2.

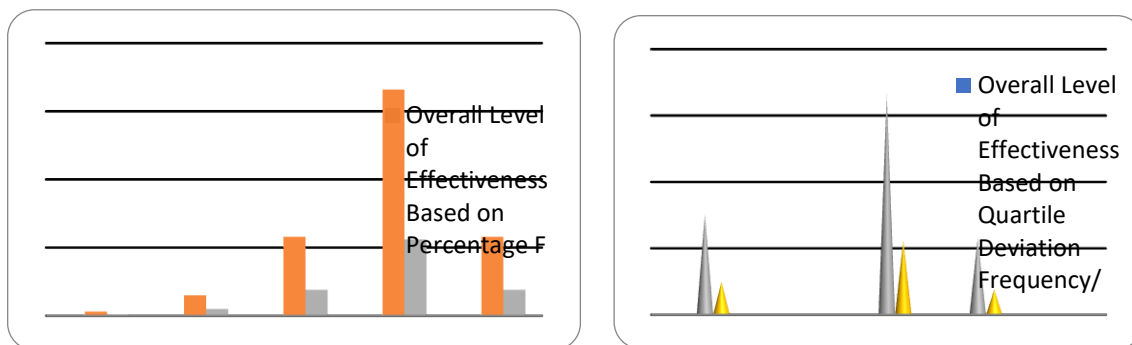


Figure 2.a: The frequency distribution and percentages of the overall level of satisfaction among students towards the effectiveness of online teaching methods

Figure 2.b: The graphical representation of different levels of the overall level of satisfaction among students towards the effectiveness of online teaching methods

Figure 2 (a and b). Diagrammatic depiction of frequency distribution and percentages of the overall level of satisfaction among students towards the effectiveness of online teaching methods

**4.3 The Third Objective:** To scrutinize the efficiency of online assessments from the points of view of the students.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution and Percentages of the Level of Students' Perceptions towards Efficiency of Online Assessments

No.	Item Statement	F%	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
12	I am satisfied with the quality of online assessments after each semester.	F	18	160	68	40	14	300
		%	6	53	23	13	5	100
13	Different types of tests such as quizzes, assignments, term papers, presentations, essay writing are processed and evaluated via online classes and Google classroom swiftly.	F	10	193	34	40	23	300
		%	3	64	12	13	8	100
14	The grading criterion for online course is elucidated amicably.	F	7	125	124	29	15	300
		%	2	42	41	10	5	100
Overall Level of Online Assessment Efficiency Based on Percentage		Frequency/ Percentage	Perfectly efficient	efficient	Neutral	Inefficient	Totally inefficient	Total
		F	3	55	212	28	3	300
		%	1	18	71	9	1	100



Overall Level of Online Assessment Efficiency Based on Quartile Deviation (Scale reduced to 3 points)		Low	Moderate	High	Total
	%	30	4	266	300
	%	10	1	89	100

Table (3) reveals the overall level of the students' perceptions regarding the efficiency of online assessment based on frequency and percentage. It shows that 3 (1%), 55 (18%), 212 (71%), 28 (9%), 3 (1) perfectly efficient, efficient, neutral, inefficient and totally inefficient respectively. The highest value 212 (71%) indicate that majority of the Kashmiri students cannot decide about that the online assessment system whether it is efficient or not. Going through each statement in table (3), the descriptive statistics indicate that 58% of the students are not content with online assessment system post each semester (item12), 72% do not think that a variety of tests are provided to evaluate their performance (item13) and 47% of them are unhappy with the grading criteria (item14). Based on Quartile Deviation, the same table shows the overall level of the students' perceptions regarding the efficiency of online assessments in which 30 (10%), 4 (1%) & 266 (89%) of the students fall in first, second, third quartiles, that is low, moderate and high respectively as illustrated in figure 3.

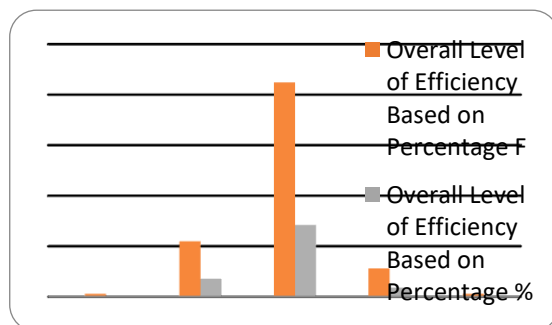


Figure 3.a: The Frequency Distribution and Percentages of the Overall Level of Satisfaction among Students towards the efficiency of online assessments

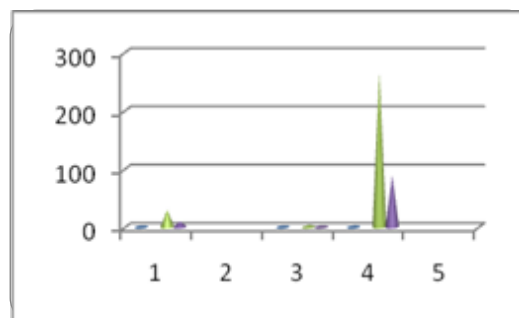


Figure 3.b: The graphical representation of different levels of the overall level of Satisfaction among students towards the efficiency of online assessments

Figure 3(a and b): Diagrammatic depiction of frequency distribution and percentages of the overall level of satisfaction among students towards efficiency of online assessments

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study are similar to the results of some previous studies (Mahyoob, 2020; Aldhahi, 2022; Barrot, 2021 & Chiu et al., 2021). The students encounter a number of challenges to conduct their education through online classes. The overall level of their satisfaction might be low not due to the online mode itself but to the sudden shift to it as well as the quality of it. Objectives of online courses have to be evaluated to be fit with the actual learning needs of the students. Results show that (52%) based on percentage and (47%) based on quartile deviation fall under the moderate level which can be inferred that majority of the Kashmiri learners may not be able to identify their learning needs or do not think that the objectives of online courses are harmonized with their study requirements. Online learners may not be able to identify their learning needs, concerns and other academic issues (Larsen et al., 2002). This can be explained for several reasons, first, the concept of online learning is still new; second, students are not equipped to deal with it; third, some of them think that their learning needs and suggestions are not taken into account. The interview results with 15 students have confirmed the findings above. First, 12 of them confirm that they are not satisfied with

this particular mode of education and that they do not wish to continue their university education through it *“I definitely prefer face-to-face learning as Networking resources do not support e-learning in the valley; the main issue is the frequent network disconnection and slowness of network speed”* one of the participant’s explains while another two add *“Our mental health gets affected negatively all time as we have not sufficient time for activities, assignments or studying”*, *“Most of us are not equipped with this new technology”*. Majority of the students assert their preference to face-to-face classes due to several reasons, first the weakness and slowness of internet network in their state; second the severe psychological pressure caused to them due to either network slowness or its frequent interruptions; third, the intensity of lectures in one day, where they have to attend 6 lectures per day without stopping except at lunch hour. The results of this study is in agreement with (Mahyoob, 2020; Zalat et al., 2021 & Almendingen, 2021) who demonstrate that learners confronted some difficulties accessing online lessons and exams links, materials downloading, online exams conducting on their mobile phones and other technical problems.

Referring to online teaching methods, findings indicate that (75%) based on percentage and (56%) based on quartile deviation fall under the moderate category which means that majority of Kashmiri learners perceive online teaching methods as less effective. According to the interviews’ results, 13 out of 15 of the participants confirm that methods are conventional and very few online activities might be used but not really supporting e-learning settings or encouraging participation or communication skills while curricula activities are not really enhanced. Comparing these results to previous studies, it is found that students require more encouragement and motivation to interact in online class as in (Tri et al., 2021; Barrot, 2021 & Chiu et al, 2021). Furthermore, majority of the students do not believe that e-learning has met their educational needs or developed their communicative skills in English. That is what was assured by half of the participants in interview who confirm that the educational process is incomplete with no practical exposure to learning. *“Teachers should guide us what and how to prepare for next class”*, *“Teachers focus on completing the syllabus without thinking about our sufferings”*, two of the participants confirm. The other half of the respondents comment that e-learning constitutes mental pressure on them from different perspectives such as; the rush to join zoom classes or get reconnected on and off, keep pace with lectures, work on assignments, prepare for midterm and final exams or even afford for recharging their phones, *“Our life style has changed to an unpleasant degree as we do not practice our social life as we get used to due to nonstop e-classes, assignments and exams we have to work on”*. Under such pressure, information density and network interruption or slow connectivity, students believe that this type of education is not really helpful unless it gets disciplined and facilitated to be able to meet their learning needs. Inquiring the participants about the best tools in online learning, 9 of them replied that different activities can be motivating if used for instance; quiz sheets, video lessons, hosting a native speaker with less demands of assignments and homework. On the contrary, Akhter and Mahmoud (2019) assert in their study that the absence of interaction in online classes allows students to depend on themselves as they become self-motivated towards their studies, while a considerable percent of e-learners are satisfied with the courses of online classes and their content (Almendingen et al., 2021; Yunus et al., 2021 & Mahyoob, 2021).

Regarding the efficiency of online assessment, results indicate that (71%) are neutral based on percentage and (89%) fall under the high level based on quartile deviation. It can be induced that majority of Kashmiri students cannot decided about the quality of the e-assessment or are less satisfied with the quality or diversity of online exams. The findings of the interview in this study show that 12 of the students express that the only two kinds of online exams (MCQs & Audio Vivas) permit a big opportunity of copying from notes or reading answers from materials. *“Online assessment is pretty unfair as it creates more opportunities for cheating”* one of the interviewee’s states. While conducting e-assessment, students might follow different strategies to contact their fellows to get the right answer

either by calling, searching on Google or dictating each other. Furthermore, eight of the participants highlight that online assessment is quite unjust as they attend daily and study hard throughout the whole term but those who do not do so score similarly at the end. *“Grading system seems unmerited especially when absent students score equal or higher sometimes than regular ones”* two of them complain. The rest of them explain that viva voce is conducted orally which creates chaos or chances for students to open their notes and read the answers. They also comment on multiple choice questions that they usually enhance guessing and more cheating. Likewise, Elango et al. (2008) in their study found out that the e-learners were also dissatisfied with the testing instruments and the delay in awarding grades while Wavle and Ozogul (2019) argue that online learning can play a critical role in conducting assessment and supporting degree completion to undergraduate students.

The point that all of the participants agree with is the frequent and serious hitches they encounter while conducting online classes. *“Network problem is the main obstacle we face on daily basis and affordability issue seems to be neglected”* a participant asserts. E-learners find themselves face to face with a number of technical challenges, for example, internet speed particularly when it is 2G internet speed in the valley. In a world that conducts 5G test trials, Kashmir, till the year of 2021, is still lacking behind, not because of limited technology, but the ban of barring high-speed cellular data. The learners’ greatest challenge is linked to their learning environment at home, while their least challenge was technological literacy and competency (Barrot et al., 2021).

Many online conferencing environments like Google Meet, Skype but Zoom app served in this case as a short-term rescuer. There is an increasing trend towards practice of online meeting applications in figuring out learning problems in the future (Pratama et al., 2021). However, in Kashmir valley, with 2G speed, Zoom meetings come to the rescue. The scenario of students joining their virtual classes start at 10 a.m to 5 p.m. Sitting in one place all day, students become lazy and many of them start sleeping during e-classes. The participants in interview confess that the common notion among all was *“record it, will listen later”* either because they are feeling sleepy or getting busy. Another unexpected action the students begin to do is multitasking like doing other tasks side by side while listening to lectures or perhaps taking meals. Not only that, but some teachers and students got exhausted and may be sick sometimes which is contradictory to Paratama et al. (2021) who state that the use of meeting applications is very helpful in the teaching and learning process between teachers and students. Headaches, eye strains and lethargy have become common. *“I had to buy UV spectacles to protect my eyes from headache and strains which are caused as a result of prolonged exposure to gadgets”*, one of the participants explains. Students agree that they prefer face-to-face education and their performance is much better than in e-education. Most EFL students faced some common interruptions like external noises, unsteady internet connections, the risky effects on their health due to long time spent in front of screen (Pham et al., 2022), on the contrary, Rajab (2018) highlights, in his study on the impact of e-learning in war zones, that there is no big differences between online and face-to-face learning with respect to student performance.

Other challenges come under hardware requirements which made it almost impossible for some students to attend the e-lectures. As a result, students’ attendance in online classes swung between 70% and 80%, and sometimes to 30%, adding to that the unwillingness of some students to use cameras or video calls. All e-classes have been conducted with audio calls. Audio lectures with Zoom’s screen sharing and in-meeting chatroom options have made it difficult for students to concentrate or participate which makes the e-lesson less interactive. In addition, administering exams via Zoom is impractical; instead Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs) and essay-questions in Google forms have been administered. Furthermore, e-teachers have intensive concern to complete the syllabi; they have not been able to listen to the students’ grievance. However, English learners follow their own strategies

to overcome the obstacles they encounter while attending online classes. The most frequently strategies used by the learners are resource management and utilization, learning environment control, technical skill enhancement, help-seeking and time management (Barrot et al., 2021; Khashaba et al., 2022; Almahasees et al., 2021).

To sum up, conducting online courses might be challenging in a conflict zone like Kashmir Valley due to other uncontrolled causes like; poor internet connectivity, frequent cut of electricity, frequent lock downs, political, economic and pedagogical factors, yet it is worth the effort to adapt and use them officially. As Covid-19 pandemic has greatly augmented the importance of online learning without sufficiently pre-prepared pedagogical designs in three aspects motivation, socialization, and self-directedness (Chiu et al., 2021), hence, the students' capacities in these areas have to be built, otherwise online learning will nearly break up to a complete stop. The point to be highlighted here is that to motivate students to enroll and join online courses which are organized authoritatively by colleges and universities, students in troubling areas should be able to access appropriate e-learning platforms through their cell phones, if not computers, by getting sufficient training and guidance. Online classes can provide the learners enjoyable and flexible learning approaches to motivate them to be creative and carry on their education despite the different impediments such as strikes, shutdowns or pandemics. What is required is to advance the effectiveness of online courses by taking into account all the reasons mentioned above. The advantages of conducting e-learning might be well-known to all but the right approach of promoting the quality of e-learning has to be effectively and rapidly worked on.

## **6. Limitations of the Study**

Due to the pandemic nature of COVID-19, the current study followed a convenient sampling strategy to collect data via emails, google forms and phone calls. Therefore, future studies with face-to-face interview participants in a bigger number could be conducted to get a thorough understanding of the challenges of e-learning that the students encounter in a time of worldwide university closures. A further limitation of this study was that it did not investigate teachers' experiences of participating in e-learning systems. Combining the two stakeholders' (teachers and students) experiences would give another, more comprehensive, view of the phenomenon. Other elements of good quality of higher education can be measured in further research for instance, online activities, e-content of syllabi and regulations of institutions in different universities in the valley. The impact of other variables on the nature of e-learning can be examined such as gender, age and previous training.

## **7. Recommendations**

Based on the findings and discussion above, it is suggested that universities should make intensive efforts to start effective online courses achieving high quality of education supervised by prioritizing usability and student experience and plan for the long term. Online higher education has to be more accessible, efficient and sustainable and the transition into it has to be done smoothly. Students can be encouraged to enroll in the new system of learning when the government authorizes its institutions to transfer the credits of the students joined a MOOC-based program into a degree from a recognized college or university anywhere in the state. It is suggested to have better distance learning environment or first-class online classrooms with pre-training program on how to use technology, attend e-educational platforms and build clear communication channels so that it enhances learners' motivation and confidence. Students will be motivated to join online classes provided that it is to be upgraded and performed systematically. Regular evaluation and timely disbursement of funds by the government of the state is recommended on account of all modes of distance education. Moreover, policy makers of education need to start a serious step in reshaping the higher education at the postsecondary level and

plan for MOOCs in order to create learning opportunities to overcome the difficulties of education in the time of encounters or lockdowns occurred frequently in the valley. In the classroom context, students need to overcome their fear of taking online courses or be trained to cope up with teachers and use of e-classes, need to be engaged in icebreaker activities and share their knowledge and experiences and lack of active learning opportunities to dynamically participate during the class session.

## 8. Conclusion

This study confirms that the quality of online courses has to be evaluated regularly based on the analysis of students' learning needs as this mode of learning is essential in the meanwhile to overcome the current crisis of Covid-19 and the constant shutdowns of educational institutes in a conflict zone like Kashmir, India. It can be summarized that e-learning might replace the formal learning for making education reachable for people in conflict zones putting in mind the students' experience and learning needs. To sum up, the gap of education in the unsafe regions has to be bridged by supporting online courses financially, technically and academically with regular evaluation through cooperation among four parties; government, universities, families and students.

## References

- Akhter, H., & Mahmood, M. (2019). Study of the Impact of Online Education on Students' Learning at University Level in Pakistan. *ERIC Online Submission*, 3(2).
- Al-Ariqi, I., Amani Ali, Jagannath Dange & Mir Mohsin (2019). MOOCs in Conflict Zones: A Study on MOOCs as an Alternative to Conventional Learning in Selected Yemeni Public Universities. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 21, 21-26.
- Aldhahi, M. I., Alqahtani, A. S., Baattaiah, B. A., & Al-Mohammed, H. I. (2022). Exploring the relationship between students' learning satisfaction and self-efficacy during the emergency transition to remote learning amid the coronavirus pandemic: A cross-sectional study. *Education and Information Technologies*, 27(1), 1323-1340.
- Almahasees, Z., Mohsen, K., & Amin, M. O. (2021). Faculty's and students' perceptions of online learning during COVID-19. *Front. Educ*, 6, 638470.
- Almendingen, K., Morseth, M. S., Gjølstad, E., Brevik, A., & Tørris, C. (2021). Student's experiences with online teaching following COVID-19 lockdown: A mixed methods explorative study. *PLoS one*, 16(8), e0250378.
- Amri, Z., & Alasmari, N. (2021). Self-Efficacy of Saudi English Majors after the Emergent Transition to Online Learning and Online Assessment during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 10(3), 127-137.
- Barrot, J. S., Llenares, I. I., & Del Rosario, L. S. (2021). Students' online learning challenges during the pandemic and how they cope with them: The case of the Philippines. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26(6), 7321-7338.
- Chiu, T. K., Lin, T. J., & Lonka, K. (2021). Motivating online learning: The challenges of COVID-19 and beyond. *The Asia-pacific education researcher*, 30(3), 187-190.

- Dabalen, A. L., & Paul, S. (2012). Estimating the causal effects of conflict on education in Cote d'Ivoire.
- Elango, R. Vijaya K. G., and Selvam, M. (2008). Quality of e-Learning: An Analysis Based on e-Learners' Perception of e-Learning. *Electronic Journal e-Learning*, 6(1), 31-44.
- Erarslan, A. (2021). English language teaching and learning during Covid-19: A global perspective on the first year. *Journal of Educational Technology and Online Learning*, 4(2), 349-367.
- Essadi, H.u (2021). *Exploring the role of E-learning practices in protecting secondary school education after violent conflict: case study-secondary school education in Libya* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Salford).
- Ismaili, Y. (2021). Evaluation of students' attitude toward distance learning during the pandemic (Covid-19): a case study of ELTE university. *On the Horizon*.
- Jiang, H., Islam, A. Y. M., Gu, X., & Spector, J. M. (2021). Online learning satisfaction in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic: A regional comparison between Eastern and Western Chinese universities. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26(6), 6747-6769.
- Khashaba, A. S., Albreiket, A., Elghazali, A., Alkhouja, A., & Baghareeb, S. (2022). Students' Perceptions towards the Experience, Quality, Challenges and Effectiveness of Online Teaching-Learning during Covid-19 Pandemic in Riyadh Elm University, Saudi Arabia. *Mymensingh Med J*, 31(1), 242-251.
- Lloyd, S. A., Byrne, M. M., & McCoy, T. S. (2012). Faculty-perceived barriers of online education. *Journal of online learning and teaching*, 8(1).
- Mahyoob, M. (2020). Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by EFL Learners. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 11(4).
- Md Yunus, M., Ang, W. S., & Hashim, H. (2021). Factors affecting teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) postgraduate students' behavioural intention for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sustainability*, 13(6), 3524.
- Pham, M. T., Luu, T. T. U., Mai, T. H. U., Thai, T. T. T., & Ngo, T. C. T. (2022). EFL Students' Challenges of Online Courses at Van Lang University during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of TESOL & Education*, 2(2), 1-26.
- Pratama, H., Azman, M. N. A., Kassymova, G. K., & Duisenbayeva, S. S. (2020). The Trend in using online meeting applications for learning during the period of pandemic COVID-19: A literature review. *Journal of Innovation in Educational and Cultural Research*, 1(2), 58-68.
- Rajab, K. D. (2018). The effectiveness and potential of E-learning in war zones: An empirical comparison of face-to-face and online education in Saudi Arabia. *IEEE Access*, 6, 6783-6794.
- Swan, K. (2003). Learning effectiveness online: What the research tells us. *Elements of quality online education, practice and direction*, 4(1), 13-47.

---

Tomlinson, K., & Benefield, P. (2005). *Education and Conflict: Research and Research Possibilities*. National Foundation for Educational Research. The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire, SL1 2DQ, UK.

Wavle, S., & Ozogul, G. (2019). Investigating the impact of online classes on undergraduate degree completion. *Online Learning*, 23(4), 281-295. doi:10.24059/olj.v23i4.1558

Yamani, H. A. (2014). *E-learning and Digital Games: The Potential Contribution to Mathematics Education in Saudi Arabia* (Doctoral dissertation, La Trobe University).

Zalat, M. M., Hamed, M. S., & Bolbol, S. A. (2021). The experiences, challenges, and acceptance of e-learning as a tool for teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic among university medical staff. *PLoS One*, 16(3), e0248758.