Investigating EFL students' preferences and beliefs about online vs. face-to-face learning at Birzeit University

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Abstract

Online learning has been internationally implemented in educational institutions due to the corona virus pandemic. This study employed quantitative and qualitative analyses to investigate English language students' preferences and beliefs about online vs face-to- face learning at Birzeit University. Radia's (2019) questionnaire was adapted and administered to the participants who experienced both types of instruction in Unlock English courses, and open-ended questions were employed to get detailed qualitative data. Quantitative findings revealed that students manifested more positive beliefs about face-to-face (Mean, 3.84) than online learning (Mean, 2.71), which was the best mode for practicing and learning language skills and interacting with teachers and peers. However, qualitative results were innovative since students expressed more comfort through online speaking with others, and online setting was the best option for 56% of the students. This might be an indication for future preferences to online learning.

Per via della pandemia da Coronavirus, l'apprendimento online è stato fortemente implementato a livello internazionale dalle istituzioni educative. Il presente studio utilizza un'analisi quali-quantitativa per investigare le preferenze e i sistemi di credenza degli studenti di inglese dell'Università di Birzeit sull'apprendimento online rispetto a quello dal vivo. Il questionario di Radia (2019) è stato adattato e sottomesso ai partecipanti che avevano fatto esperienze di entrambi i tipi di apprendimento durante il corso di Unlock English. Agli stessi sono state anche sottomesse domande aperte finalizzate al reperimento di dettagliati dati qualitativi. I risultati quantitativi dimostrano che gli studenti manifestano un atteggiamento più positivo sull'apprendimento dal vivo (Media: 3.84) rispetto all'apprendimento online (Media: 2.71). L'apprendimento face-to-face viene considerato il miglior modo di mettere in pratica le competenze di apprendimento linguistico e di interazione con gli insegnanti e i compagni. Eppure, i risultati qualitativi si sono mostrati innovativi dal momento che gli studenti hanno espresso maggior comfort nella comunicazione online con gli altri, e il setting online è stato considerato

l'opzione migliore per il 56% degli studenti. Questi risultati possono rappresentare un'indicazione per le future preferenze rispetto all'apprendimento online.

Keywords: beliefs and preferences; online learning; face-to-face learning

Parole chiave: credenze e preferenze; apprendimento online; apprendimento in presenza

1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a noteworthy change in the traditional teaching/learning methods. The technological advancement, internet connection and «communication technologies have paved the way to the growth of new methodologies in learning and teaching including blended learning, web-based learning, e-learning, and distance learning» (Eshreteh & Siaj, 2017, p. 51). Online education is not a new phenomenon. The University of London initiated the first correspondence and distance learning educational programs in the mid-1800s. This model of educational learning was dependent on the postal service but was not seen in America until the later Nineteenth century (Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

Online education has grown dramatically at higher institutions across the globe. Faidley (2018) claimed that the increasing number of people who are busy with work and family obligations start looking for more flexible ways of higher education. Therefore, higher educational institutions seek to meet these new demands by offering online distance educational opportunities, and busy people are willing to pay the added cost required for online courses. As Faidley (2018) stated that «online learning provides the opportunity for asynchronous time frames in a low distraction, 24-hour-a-day, and 7-day-a-week environment, and many students embrace this method of instruction for the convenience» (*Ivi*, p. 11). Online education is an alternative to face-to-face (F2F). It has enabled large numbers of students «with busy lives and limited flexibility» (Paul & Jefferson, 2019, p. 1), or those who are unable to attend F2F classes because of time constraints, to pursue their education and get a degree via distance or online learning. Therefore, the number of students who are opting for online classes is increasing. Many international educational institutions have started blending or even replacing the traditional pedagogical methods with modern ones using a variety of technological portals. They have also started rethinking how to deliver the course content, activities and assignments and how to evaluate the progress of students.

However, nowadays, as universities all over the world have closed campuses due to COVID-19 outbreak, they have shifted to online learning**.** Educational institutions use a variety of platforms like Moodle, Zoom, Coursera, etc. This shift has included most of the theoretical subjects and languages. Paul & Jefferson (Nov. 2019) mentioned that online and traditional education share many qualities and requirements. For example, students attend classes, learn the material, submit assignments, and complete group projects. Teachers also design curricula, provide instructional quality, answer class questions, motivate students to learn, and mark assignments. In spite of the fact that more colleges and universities are increasingly going beyond their physical frontiers to offer quality education to distant learners, there are many who are still skeptical about the quality and the outcomes of online education (Montiel-Chamorro, 2018). Here lies the importance of investigating learners' preferences and beliefs. As viewed by Plass, Chun, & Mayer (1998), the term 'learning preferences' encompasses a group of characteristics concerned with features that might influence learning, such as the setting, situation, and atmosphere, including where and when students prefer to learn (Deale, 2019). Arikpo & Grace (2015) defined the concept of learning preference as «characteristic cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment» (p. 31). They argued that the concept of learning preference plays a key role in learners' learning because they have a unique way of processing information; they also have different levels of

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motivation, attitudes, and reactions to certain instructional settings and practices. «The more thoroughly instructors understand the differences, the better chance they have of meeting the diverse learning needs of all of their students. In order to help all children learn, we need to teach as many of these preferences as possible» (*Ivi*, p. 34). Therefore, studying learners' preferences about language learning is very important. Since e-learning methods have dramatically replaced the traditional teaching methods in higher education, especially nowadays due to the corona virus pandemic, little is known about learners' preferences in online environments as compared to face-to-face instruction. Khan, Arif & Yousuf (2019) stated that college students in a learning situation differ in many aspects since they have developed their own learning preferences. Knowing what learners want and how they want to get educated can be an effective tool for educators. Research into beliefs began with Horwitz's (1987) studies using the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), which has been widely implemented in the field of foreign language (FL) education. Abid (2012) mentioned that some factors shape the learners' thinking and beliefs formation, including experience, culture, context and numerous personal factors. Bernat (2006) argued that beliefs about language learning differ depending on the contextual setting. The nature and strength of beliefs are affected by individuals' complex metacognitive structure like the number of social, cultural, contextual, cognitive, affective, and personal factors. Horwitz (1987) defined beliefs about language learning as preconceptions about the nature of the language-learning task and as «opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning» (p. 120). Hussain (2019) saw that «belief is operationalized to mean the research participants' psychologically held, personal, subjective beliefs about LCT [Learner-Centered Teaching] practices, their observations of the frequency of specific teaching practices, and their assessments of those practices» (p. 12). Abed (2015) remarked that beliefs refer to students' correct or incorrect opinions, feelings, and judgments about the language students learn, about themselves as language learners, and about the teaching/learning process. Learners' perceptions and beliefs about language learning methods might have a significant influence on learning behavior and outcomes. «Psychological studies have shown that personal beliefs about learning and environmental preferences affect learning behaviors» (Yang & Tsai, 2008, p. 1284). Horwitz (1988) maintained that teachers' awareness of such needs and preferences results in more useful teaching strategies, which will have a facilitative effect on the learning process. Therefore, it is very important to take into account learners' needs, preferences and beliefs.

Based on the previous discussion, comparing learners' preferences and beliefs about learning English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) in online and F2F environment is necessary to recognize the discrepancy between students' attitudes in both environments. As Harrison (2021) claimed, «many teachers found themselves teaching classes online for the first time and with no training» (p. 68). To explore students' attitudes and satisfaction, Harrison saw it necessary to consider face-to-face and online education in general without being limited to only EFL education. Ajzen (2005) believed that language learners' beliefs about their ability to learn a language are vital but difficult to examine. For Alhamami (2019), studying the impact of beliefs and attitudes is challenging due to the scope, variability, and nuances of human thought and factors that affect human behavior. Also, examining, analyzing, and understanding the belief systems is not easy «due to the complexity of the belief systems and the nature of understanding the belief concept» (p. 2).

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2. Literature review

This section provides an overview of the definition and advantages and disadvantages of both online and F2F instructional modalities. Previous research studies that tackled the two methods in English as foreign language classrooms will be presented to find out which method is more effective for learning language skills. Online or distance education is the kind of education in «which students may not always be physically present at a school. In other words, you learn, study, and qualify in your chosen subject online without having to attend an exam center, a college building, or university campus» (Sadeghi, 2019, p. 81). Faidley (2018) indicated that online learning requires the «use of software platforms that provide course content with videos, articles, text readings, and online homework software. No real-time seminars or conferences used unless a student requests an individual face-to-face meeting» (p. 15). However, F2F learning refers to in class real-time traditional learning through lecture and hands-on-activities, where students are «expected to attend class and attendance sheets are tallied to ensure compliance» (p. 15). According to Finney (2015), online classes have become available not only in special circumstances but also in public charter and traditional schools. Finney defined online class as the lesson instruction delivered online depending exclusively on a computer or tablet, whereas F2F instruction refers to the traditional form of lesson delivery in a regular classroom with the physical presence of both teacher and students. For Li, Qi, Wang & Wang (2014) the term e- learning widely refers to «any electronically assisted instruction, and is often associated with instruction offered via computer and the internet» (p. 49). However, traditional classrooms refer to rooms that consist of clean -colored walls with rows of desks and chairs where students attend lectures.

2.1 Advantages and disadvantages of online learning over traditional learning

Technological developments increase the interest of students enrolled in online classes (Tichavsky, 2015). The information technology motivates many students in higher education to use network technology for creating, fostering, delivering, and facilitating learning. Higher educational institutions, teachers and students have increased their dependence on e-learning and offer or perform course tasks through internet (Li, Qi, Wang & Wang, 2014). Initially, the online environment was used as a tool to enhance the traditional delivery of classroom material. Consequently, many studies demonstrated that «utilizing online material in addition to lecturing has positive benefits» (Arias & Swinton, 2018, p. 1). The main advantage of online learning is the increasing availability and affordability of information and communication technologies (ICT), which have led many college students to attend online courses (Nfor, 2015). For Nfor, «the convenience and flexibility of e-learning in an era when digital and technological advancement has made lifelong learning easier has encouraged many institutions to offer online degree programs» (*Ivi*, p. 21). Online education has grown and become a part of the strategic plan at many colleges and universities. In spite of «requiring higher levels of self-motivation, online learning offers the advantages of flexibility and convenience for many students» (Tichavsky, 2015, p. 2). Stern (2004) explored whether online classrooms were equivalent to F2F ones in terms of effectiveness. He found that students in online classes have more time to respond to discussion questions than in F2F sessions. Online classrooms have «the potential to transform the way in which learners understand the

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course material and provide a social component often missed in the traditional classroom – the willingness of and the necessity for shy or introverted students to participate in classroom discussion» (Stern, 2004, p. 198). Another advantage of e-learning is the possibility to attend remote universities without having to move to new cities or countries (Montiel-Chamorro, 2018). Many quality online courses developed by instructors and technical staff are offered to distant learners. Montiel-Chamorro (2018) added that in asynchronous courses, «students can more easily fit their learning time into their schedule. This allows more flexibility, particularly to the non-traditional students who may have family or work obligations not normally associated with the traditional undergraduate student population. More students can consume the material simultaneously without stretching classroom capacity» (Montiel-Chamorro, 2018, p. 2). Moreover, Faidley (2018) stated that several literature reviews cited the lower cost as a reason to expand online education. For Arias & Swinton (2018), online classes are a more cost-effective way to offer some courses since students and teachers do not need to physically meet in a classroom. Paul & Jefferson (2019) concluded that students find the traditional classroom modality restrictive, inflexible, and impractical. With traditional classroom study, students are forced to take courses only at universities within feasible driving distance. However, in this age of technological advancement, schools can now provide effective classroom teaching via the Web, and online education offers more program choices and grants students electronic access to multiple universities and subjects. «Therefore, students who were once limited to a few colleges within their immediate area can now access several colleges worldwide from a single convenient location» (Paul & Jefferson, 2019, p. 4). To wrap up, Sadeghi (2019) argued «distance learning might not be the best choice for every student seeking to pursue a college degree or university program» (p. 83), but the advantages represented in studying from anywhere and at any time; saving significant amount of money; no commuting; flexibility to choose; saving time; earning while learning, seem to outweigh the disadvantages.

2.2 Flaws of online learning

Although online learning offers more opportunities to attain higher education, it has some disadvantages. In contrast with the traditional instruction, the most common weakness of online learning is the absence of emotional interaction between teacher and student, as well as among students themselves (Stern, 2004). For Stern, «the absence of an emotional component in online courses is viewed by some as problematic, especially in terms of undergraduate education... because the social dimension of undergraduate education is important» (Stern, 2004, p. 198). Montiel-Chamorro (2018) remarked that «the visibility of instructors in the traditional face-to-face education is absent from online settings» (p. 17). According to Linda Murphy (2015) and her colleagues, «teacher presence is important in terms of the systemic, affective, and cognitive functions of the teacher's role, and it helps to create a constructive teacher-student relationship» (cited in Montiel-Chamorro, 2018, p. 18). Sadeghi (2019) explained that overdependence on technology is a major drawback to online learning. Since instruction is delivered over the internet, students need equipment like computer, webcam, and stable internet connection. There is also difficulty staying in touch with instructors since there is no physical contact between students and instructors. Another drawback is that online degrees are not recognized, or

accepted, by some private companies in the job markets. «They think that distance education is still not a serious form of education» (Sadeghi, 2019, p. 84).

To conclude, the following are the major shortcomings of e- learning as reported by Tamm (2019):

- online student feedback is limited;
- e-learning can cause social isolation;
- e-learning requires strong self-motivation and time management skills;
- lack of communicational skill development in online students;
- cheating prevention during online assessments is complicated;
- online instructors tend to focus on theory rather than practice;
- e-learning lacks face-to-face communication;
- e-learning is limited to certain disciplines;
- online learning is inaccessible to the computer illiterate population;
- lack of accreditation & quality assurance in online education.

3. Research methodology

To accomplish the aims of the current study, and to investigate which method of instruction is preferable, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are Birzeit University students' preferences and beliefs about F2F instruction in English language courses?
1. What are Birzeit University students' preferences and beliefs about online instruction in English language courses?
2. Which method of instruction or delivery do Birzeit University EFL students prefer in their future learning after experiencing both methods?

3.1 Hypothesis of the study

The researcher hypothesizes that "there are no statistically significant differences between students' beliefs and preferences in F2F and online settings".

3.2 Significance of the study

Several studies have focused on students' preferences and beliefs about EFL/ESL learning (Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Abed 2015; Hussain, 2019 and Suzuki, 2012). According to Dewey (1933;1938), since beliefs are experience-based and context-bound, learners' beliefs are formed and changed based on students' experiences and practices of the teaching/learning settings. Hussain (2019) asserted that «beliefs are not static but are subject to change; although we might regard our present belief as knowledge and rely on it, it may become questionable as all past knowledge undergoes change» (p. 11). Suzuki (2012) maintained that beliefs are considered one area of individual learner differences that can influence the process and outcomes of language learning. By «knowing how beliefs change and what variables change learners' beliefs, teachers can create learning experi-

ences that positively influence learners' thoughts and help them develop positive beliefs» (Suzuki, 2012, p. 277). Moreover, investigating students' preferences and beliefs in English classes has the potential to help instructors make decisions about the methods of delivery that facilitate learning. Therefore, this study contributes to the ongoing argument about the impact of students' beliefs about the mode of instruction in higher education from F2F to the online learning.

3.3 Purpose of the study

Since the beginning of online classes, «there has been debate about if online instruction is comparable to F2F instruction and if this instructional approach can take the place of a traditional teacher lead class» (Finney, 2015, p. 6). The prediction of language learners' beliefs about their ability to learn a language could help language teachers and educators to look for new interventions like producing textbooks, developing teaching methods, and designing course objectives (Alhamami, 2019). Identifying beliefs helps teachers change and develop strategies to modify learners' misleading beliefs about language learning in both contexts. The beliefs learners have about the degree of controlling the learning process and their ability to learn a language affect their motivation to attend language classes and achieve higher proficiency levels, which, in turn, improve the learning outcomes. Therefore, the study intended to determine English Language students' preferences and beliefs about face-to face (FLL) and online language learning (OLL) and explore if they affect student learning or have an impact on their success.

3.4 Limitations of the study

The study was limited to the following:
- students who experienced the two modes of instruction and were enrolled in the required English language courses with the researcher in the first semester, 2020/2021;
- Radia's (2019) survey to measure students' beliefs and perception of the instructional quality, with some modifications to suit the context of the study;
- open-ended questions directed to all participants.

3.5 Context

The study was conducted on a group of students enrolled in English language classes in the Department of Languages and Translation at Birzeit University/Palestine was established in 1924 as a girls' school, but it is now a distinguished Palestinian university. It offers the Bachelor and Master degrees in various majors and a PhD degree in Social Studies and recently in Mathematics. English is considered as a major tool for learning and teaching at Birzeit University and elsewhere. English communication courses (ENGC) are required to all university students. The material in both face-to-face and online settings includes reading texts, language and grammar exercises, listening material as well as end-of-lesson quizzes. Students learn to sustain their opinions by providing relevant explanations, arguments and comments; understand the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics; interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity; produce detailed text on a

wide range of subjects; and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue, giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

3.6 Participants

To answer the study questions, a purposeful sample of two classes consisting of 60 undergraduate students enrolled in English language classes was selected in the first semester 2020/2021. Students were homogenous in some ways; they were between 18 and 20 years old and shared the same Palestinian culture and Arabic as their native language. The rationale behind selecting this sampling was that students experienced both types of learning before and after the corona virus lockdown and were taught by the researcher. The courses had a two-hour meeting per week and two units were taught as required by the syllabus.

4. Research instruments

Two instruments were utilized to identify students' preferences and beliefs. Radia's (2019) questionnaire was adapted to measure students' beliefs and perception of the instructional quality of ENGC learning in the F2F and online settings. The questionnaire consisted of 21 Likert scale items and participants were asked to express their degree of agreement or disagreement to a proposition. The items were divided into three sections: 8 items measure students' beliefs about face-to-face instruction, 8 items measure students' beliefs about online instruction, and 5 items measure students' attitude towards the impact of both types of instruction on their success. Some items were translated into Arabic to ensure students' comprehension. The second instrument consisted of four open-ended questions directed to all participants. The questions were based on the objectives of the study; they aimed at highlighting the data collected from the questionnaire. The researcher's purpose of the non-directive open-ended questions was to motivate students to freely express their opinions and responses at their convenience rather than being interviewed formally. In addition, this type of questions would encourage researchers and respondents to elaborate and express their feelings and attitudes towards both modes of learning. The questions are:

1. Why would you prefer F2F setting? What are its advantages?
2. Why would you prefer online setting? What are its advantages?
3. What are the disadvantages of both teaching/learning settings?
4. If you were to choose one setting, which one would you prefer? Why?

4.1 Validity of the questionnaire

The content validity of the questionnaire was examined against the degree to which the items reflected students' preferences and beliefs about online vs. F2F instruction. The questionnaire was submitted to six experienced specialists in the Faculty of Arts and Education, and their feedback was taken into consideration before the questionnaire was distributed to the participants.

4.2 Reliability of the questionnaire

To test the reliability of the questionnaire before the implementation, it was piloted with 10 students enrolled in both online and F2F in the previous semester. Two weeks later, the survey was repeated, and responses at the two time points were compared and showed correlation. The results revealed a high degree of internal consistency with Cronbach Alpha Coefficient value of (0.79). As a result, the questionnaire was considered valid and reliable. Upon completion of the course, the questionnaire was sent to all students online because of the lockdown. Actually, 50 surveys were received, which was considered a representative sample; it seemed the other 10 students were not interested or engaged in the study. The questions were raised to all students during the last lecture. Only eight students responded to the questions.

5. Data analysis

Statistical analysis was utilized to find out the results of the study. Descriptive data, the mean and standard deviation, were recorded for all the items classified into three major themes: students' beliefs about the benefit of F2F learning, students' beliefs about online learning, and students' attitudes towards the impact of both types of instruction. T-test was employed to find if there were any significant differences at alpha level of $\alpha=.05$ between students' preferences and beliefs in the two instructional settings. Students' responses to the open-ended questions were also reported.

6. Results

6.1 Descriptive analysis

Descriptive analyses of students' beliefs are reported through answering the research questions in accordance with the three themes: Students' beliefs about F2F instruction, beliefs about online instruction and students' attitude towards the impact of both types of instruction on their success. The researcher followed Horwitz's (1987) argument that the belief questionnaire was not designed to yield a composite score of all the items together, so frequency in terms of percentages of the results of each item had to be calculated.

6.1.1 Research question one

What are Birzeit University students' preferences and beliefs about the F2F instruction in English language courses? Students' answers on the first theme reveal positive beliefs and preferences about this mode of instruction. The mean scores (4.84; 4.12; 3.92 & 3.84) show that the majority of the students believed that F2F instruction was helpful to understand English lessons, improve language skills, and interact with teacher and peers. Results demonstrate participants' positive beliefs about their ability to learn ENGC in F2F setting, which is the best means of achieving the course objectives (Table 1).

	Items	N	Mean	SD
1	I believe I could understand English lessons very well through F2F instruction	50	4.84	1.92
2	The organization of F2F instruction helped me achieve my ENGC learning objectives	50	3.92	0.88
3	I believe that F2F instruction is the best method for learning ENGC skills	50	4.12	0.99
4	F2F Instruction helped me learn English effectively	50	3.44	0.88
5	I feel shy speaking English with other students in F2F learning	50	3.2	0.47
6	F2F instruction was very important and enabled me to interact confidently with teacher and peers	50	3.84	0.82
7	F2F instruction was more convenient/ effective for my learning	50	3.4	0.78
8	Learning a foreign language via F2F setting is the best option for me	50	3.92	0.78
	Average	**50**	**3.84**	**0.94**

Table 1: Students' perceptions and beliefs about F2F instruction in ENGC

The first item got the highest frequencies of "agree2 and "strongly agree" (96%), followed by items (2, 6 & 8). This clearly indicates that F2F was the preferred mode of instruction. Most of the students (72%) agreed that F2F instruction enabled them to interact confidently with teacher and peers, and was the best option for learning a language (items 6 & 8). However, 40% of students expressed neutrality in items (3 & 5). It seems they were unable to decide whether F2F was the best setting for learning language skills or it caused them to feel shy when speaking English in class. (Table 2).

	(Strongly disagree) 1		(Disagree) 2		Neutral (3)		(Agree)4		(Strongly agree) 5	
Item	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	0	0	0	0	1	4	4	8	44	88
2	0	0	2	4	12	24	28	56	8	16
3	0	0	2	4	20	40	4	8	24	48
4	0	0	4	8	8	16	28	56	4	8
5	2	4	12	24	20	40	4	8	12	24
6	0	0	0	0	12	24	24	48	12	24
7	0	0	8	16	16	32	24	48	2	4
8	0	0	2	4	12	24	24	48	12	24

Table 2: Frequencies of the first category (F2F instruction)

6.1.2 Research question two

To find out students' responses to the second question, **"What are Bireit University students' preferences and beliefs about the benefits of online instruction in English language courses?"** descriptive analysis was utilized. It sounds clear enough that students had less positive beliefs about online learning than F2F. Item (8), "Learning English in an online setting is the best option for me" got the highest mean (3.48). Then came item (5), "Feeling more comfortable when speaking online" (3.32). This indicates that this mode of instruction does not satisfy students' needs, as compared with the same items in F2F instruction (Mean 3.92 &3.44). Students

were not satisfied with the organization and content of online instruction and showed doubt of its effectiveness (Items 2 &3) (Mean 2.24, 2.52). Therefore, they expressed unwillingness for the online and preferences to F2F instruction (Table 3).

Items		N	Mean	SD
1	Online instruction was more convenient/ effective for my learning in ENCG course	50	2.36	0.35
2	The organization and content of ENGC online activities met my learning needs.	50	2.24	0.32
3	I believe that online instruction is the best method for learning ENGC skills	50	2.52	0.43
4	I believe that I could learn ENGC 1202 more effectively through online learning	50	2.68	0.52
5	I feel more comfortable when speaking English with others online	50	3.32	0.58
6	It is not important to interact with teacher and peers in online setting	50	2.48	0.24
7	It is easier and more enjoyable to interact with others when learning English online than F2F	50	2.6	0.32
8	Learning English in an online setting is the best option for me	50	3.48	0.59
	Average	**50**	2.71	0.42

Table 3: Students' perceptions and beliefs about online instruction

The frequencies and percentages of participants' answers are presented in Table (4). The highest percentage (56%) of agreement refers to considering online the best option for learning English (item 8). Next, (52%) of agreement refers to feeling more comfortable when speaking online (item 5). In contrast, 28% of students disagreed with item (5) that F2F makes them feel shy when speaking with others, whereas 40% neither agreed nor disagreed. Besides, 64% disagreed that online instruction is more important for learning English (item 1), and 56% expressed disagreement with item (2) that the organization and content of the English course online activities helped meet their learning needs. However, 56% disagreed with the negative statement of item (6), which confirmed their positive beliefs of the importance of interacting confidently with teacher and peers in online setting. However, this might be a positive indication for modifying preferences and negative beliefs about online setting.

	(Strongly disagree) 1		(Disagree) 2		Neutral (3)		(Agree)4		(Strongly agree) 5	
Item	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	8	16	24	48	12	24	4	8	2	4
2	4	8	24	48	8	16	4	8	4	8
3	8	16	16	32	20	40	4	8	2	4
4	0	0	24	48	20	40	4	8	2	4
5	4	8	8	16	12	24	20	40	6	12
6	8	16	20	40	8	16	8	16	4	8
7	12	24	12	24	12	24	12	24	2	4
8	2	4	8	16	12	24	20	40	8	16

Table 4: Frequencies of the second category (online instruction)

6.1.3 Research Question Three

The question "Which method of instruction or delivery do Birzeit University EFL students prefer in their future learning after experiencing both methods?" was also investigated through descriptive analysis. Results show that the respondents equally rated that both modes of instruction enabled them to achieve most of the learning goals (Mean, 3.96). Students achieved success in ENGC in the two modes of instruction (Items 3; Mean, 4.08**).** However, significant differences are clear in the Mean scores of both methods of instruction (items 4 & 5) for the benefit of F2F mode (Mean 4.12 &3.08) (Table 5).

ENGC 1202 Outcomes		N	Mean	SD
1	Most of the course objectives were achieved through F2F learning	50	3.96	0.83
2	Most of the course objectives were achieved through online learning	50	3.96	0.83
3	I achieved success in both methods	50	4.08	1.09
4	In general,F2F instruction helped me get higher grades	50	4.12	0.91
5	In general, online learning helped me get higher grades	50	3.08	0.47
	Average	50	3.84	**0.83**

Table 5: Students' attitude towards the impact of both types of instruction on their success

Table (6) clarifies the percentage of students' answers. Most of the students (88%) agreed and strongly agreed that they achieved success in the course; 76% expressed agreement on achieving most of the course objectives via the two methods. 80 % believed they were able to get higher average through F2F instruction, while only 36% of the participants expressed agreement of getting high averages through online learning. However, 32% did not believe that online learning helped them get higher average. In addition, (32%) were neutral, which indicates that students were not able to decide whether getting high grades was due to online learning or to other factors (Table 6). Achieving success and accomplishing the course objectives in both settings might be a positive sign of the effectiveness of online learning.

	(Strongly disagree) 1		(Disagree) 2		Neutral (3)		(Agree)4		(Strongly agree) 5	
Item	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	0	0	4	8	8	16	24	48	14	28
2	0	0	4	8	8	16	24	48	14	28
3	0	0	2	4	4	8	32	64	12	24
4	0	0	4	8	6	12	20	40	20	40
5	8	16	8	16	16	32	8	16	10	20

Table 6: Frequencies of students' attitude towards the impact of both types of instruction

To investigate whether there was a difference in students' preferences and beliefs between the two methods of instruction, the t-test analysis was utilized. The t-test result indicates that there is a significant difference at $p < .05$ between the two modes of instruction (t-value=5.36994; the p-value=.000049). Therefore, the null

hypothesis that says, "There are no statistically significant differences between students' beliefs and preferences in F2F and online settings" is rejected. Participants showed preferences and positive beliefs about learning ENGC in F2F settings (Tables 7, 8 and 9 below).

Treatment I: Face-to Face (X)	Diff (X - M)	Sq. Diff (X - M)2
4.84	1.00	1.01
3.92	0.08	0.01
4.12	0.29	0.08
3.44	-0.40	0.16
3.2	-0.63	0.40
3.84	0.00	0.00
3.4	-0.44	0.19
3.92	0.08	0.01
M: 3.84		**SS: 1.85**

Table 7: Difference scores calculations/F2F setting

Treatment II: Online (X)	Diff (X - M)	Sq. Diff (X - M)2
2.36	-0.29	0.08
2.24	-0.41	0.17
2.52	-0.13	0.02
2.68	0.03	0.00
3.32	0.67	0.45
2.48	-0.17	0.03
2.6	-0.05	0.00
3.48	0.35	0.12
M: 2.65		**SS: 0.87**

Table 8: Difference scores calculations/online setting

Treatment 1:Face-to-Face	Treatment II: Online	T-value Calculation
N1: 8	N2: 8	$s2p = ((df1/(df1 + df2)) * s21) +$
$df1 = N - 1 = 8 - 1 = 7$	$df2 = N - 1 = 8 - 1 = 7$	$((df2/(df2 + df2)) * s22) = ((7/14) *$
M1: 3.84	M2: 2.65	$0.26) + ((7/14) * 0.12) = 0.19$
SS1: 1.85	SS2: 0.87	$s2M1 = s2p/N1 = 0.19/8 = 0.02$
$s21 = SS1/(N - 1) = 1.85/(8-1) = 0.26$	$s22 = SS2/(N - 1) = 0.87/(8-1) = 0.12$	$s2M2 = s2p/N2 = 0.19/8 = 0.02$
		$t = (M1 - M2)/\sqrt{(s2M1 + s2M2)} =$
		$1.18/\sqrt{0.05} = 5.37$

Table 9: T-value calculation

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The study indicates that participants held various beliefs as being detrimental for their own preferable mode of language learning. Students' preferences and beliefs about the positive effects of F2F learning (Mean, 3.84) were higher than those of online learning (Mean 2.71). (Table 10).

Area/Theme	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Students' beliefs about the benefits of F2F learning	50	3.84	0.94
Students' beliefs about online learning	50	2.71	0.42
Students' attitude towards the impact of both types of instruction	50	3.84	0.83

Table 10: Descriptive statistics of the three categories of the questionnaire

6.2 Analysis of the open-ended questions

Only eight students responded to the questions although it was emphasized that their answers would be for research purposes and would not affect their course score. Results of the qualitative data were qualitatively interpreted and reported below.

6.2.1 Question one

Why would you prefer F2F setting? What are its advantages?

Three students reported that F2F learning is better for learning a foreign language; the presence of the instructor in class is helpful for providing necessary feedback, vocabulary and correcting mistakes. Besides, working in groups and interacting with peers motivate shy students to participate in class discussion. Student A reported, «I hate English, but my friends gave me answers correct but in the home I don't know the answer alone». Student B said, «When we come to university, we studying together, but I in the home do not study». Student C mentioned that at home, she does not speak English with her parents, but at university, they have to do that in class, which helps them improve their language skills.

6.2.2 Question two

Why would you prefer online setting? What are its advantages?

Five students reported that it is better for them to study online rather than F2F, because they have different types of work. Student D usually works in a bakery in the afternoon, but since the start of online learning, he extended the working hours. When asked about lack of participation and interaction in class, his answer was: «I work in the machine and do not listen to your question». He meant that he could not clearly hear the teacher's questions because of the sound of machines in the factory. Student E was good at English, but he was working in ice cream manufacturing with his uncles, which was an obstacle in participating in class discussion. He said that he tried his best to participate but was embarrassed in front of the other workers. He preferred online to F2F learning since it was an opportunity for working and saving money for paying tuition fees. Student A interrupted and said, «Yes, I agree with student E. If I go to job, I will learn online». This means that online learning is advantageous in case of finding a job/work.

When asked about achieving the learning objectives of the course and improving their language skills, the researcher was surprised that all students unanimously answered positively. In addition, they believed that doing online assignments was better since there were no time constraints and had more time to think in a non-threatening atmosphere. Student F stated: «I made mistakes online, students do not laugh at me, but I feel do not like to answer questions in the class». Feeling more comfortable when participating in class discussion is an advantage of online learning. Students G and H reported a shocking answer: «We answer questions together». The researcher and other colleagues noticed a high level of cheating in online assignments and tests. Student F said that in online learning, «I can learn when I sleep in bed or watch TV or do anything, but F2F I come to university». However, all eight students agreed that one of the main advantages of online learning is saving money and time. They do not spend money on transport and can study and do homework instead of wasting time going to and from university.

6.2.3 Question Three

What are the disadvantages of both teaching/learning settings?

Most of the students mentioned that each mode had its own drawbacks.

F2F forces students to attend and participate in class; they feel shy when they are not sure of the answers. They need money for transporting, buying sandwiches at university «and buy new clothes as my friends», student H added. Online also has its shortcomings. Most of the students reported that in spite of preferring online learning, they like to come to university and meet teachers and students. One student told the researcher, «Dr. I like to see you in the university; I only see you on Zoom». Another student said that if they needed any help, they would not find peers since they had never met. The only means of assistance and interaction was through group messenger, or 'Ritaj', the university administrative and academic electronic portal gate. Some agreed that the presence of instructors in F2F setting helped them better understand the material than online, which depended on self-learning and students' own efforts. Lack of space at homes, shortage of electronic devices for many siblings studying at schools or universities, and poor or lack of internet connection were obstacles that obliged some students to withdraw from university courses.

6.2.4 Question four

If you were to choose one setting, which one would you prefer? Why?

This question was an incentive for most of the students in class to raise hands. Even the students who did not respond to the research questions took part in this discussion. The researcher was surprised to find that more than half of the students (37/60) expressed preferences to online learning. They expressed fear of catching the coronavirus, felt more comfort and spent more time studying at home at their convenience, and had no trouble with transportation.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

To wrap up, the results of this study demonstrate that the participants have more positive preferences and beliefs about learning ENGC courses via F2F than online settings. The main reason refers to understanding Eng-

lish lessons through F2F (Mean 4.84) better than online instruction (Mean 2.36). The second reason is that F2F is more convenient and the best way for learning language skills (Mean 4.12), compared to online instruction (Mean 2.52). Besides, F2F instruction is very important to interact confidently with teacher and peers (Mean, 3.84) in contrast with online interaction (Mean 2.52), i.e., Item 6 is in the negative form (Mean, 2.48). In general, students show that learning a foreign language via F2F setting is the best option for them (Mean 3.92) when compared with online learning mode (Table 3).

However, the open-ended questions reveal students' acceptance of online learning, especially after experiencing it for almost a year due to the corona virus pandemic. The researcher came to the decision that students felt helpless at the beginning of online learning since it was a new experience, and many students and instructors were not equipped with the technological skills. Then they got used and started accepting the idea and adjusting themselves to the current reality. Students confirmed that the learning objectives were achieved, which was a positive indication of the effectiveness of the online course. In general, psychological learning preferences were clear from students' answers. The researcher concluded that online learning mode might be a ray of hope for future learning, although she admitted that cheating via online is inevitable if measures are not well controlled.

In total, the results of this study confirm the findings from existing literature on students' beliefs and preferences to the mode of delivery. The results are in line with Alhamami's (2019) study, which demonstrated that participants had positive preferences and beliefs about their ability to attend and learn foreign languages in F2F settings. Participants saw they could interact and ask their classmates for help when attending face-to-face classes. However, they believed that online interaction was more difficult for lacking the use of body language and facial expressions. Qualitative data showed that the participants were not strongly familiar with learning languages fully online Alhamami (2019) reported that learners' negative beliefs about online learning languages would affect their self-efficacy and learning outcomes.

The findings of the current study are consistent with the results revealed by Nfor's (2015) comparative study of learning outcomes between online versus F2F nutrition courses at a community college. Some factors had contributed to the comparative analysis of online and face-to-face learning models, such as increasing rates of student dissatisfaction with online learning models, a high withdrawal rate, and inadequate student-learning outcomes. The study confirmed a statistically significant difference in the overall student perception of the nutrition course taught between the face-to-face and online modes. Students also overwhelmingly had a better impression of the F2F compared to the online class, and students in an online class were more likely to withdraw from the course than those in the face-to-face class. «This result reinforced the assumptions that F2F nutrition classes were preferred to the online classes at this particular college» (Nfor, 2015, p. 61).

The findings of the current study concur with Kemp and Grieve's (2014) results that showed students' overall preference for studying topics face-to-face rather than online. The study examined the performance and perceptions of 67 Australian undergraduates enrolled in traditional F2F units, combined with some online components. All participants spoke English and participated as part of their course requirements. The study focused on several activities like written exercises, class discussion, and a short test. A five-point preference scale was used to rate participants' preferences for both modes of instruction. Students' academic performance and

their qualitative comments on their learning experience were also compared. Analysis confirmed that more students preferred to complete the tasks activities in class than online, specifically when discussion of academic topics was required. However, there were no significant differences or consistent relationship between the overall academic performances in online vs. in-class learning. Moreover, students preferred to do written activities online but favored to participate in face-to-face discussions.

The current results are in line with those reported by Ferdian (2020). The study explored students' beliefs and preferences towards F2F vs. online corrective feedback. A questionnaire was distributed to 50 university students enrolled in English for Specific Purposes at a Polytechnic University in Indonesia. Analysis revealed that students preferred teachers' use of F2F corrective feedback. The focus group justified their beliefs and preferences saying that teachers should use students' learning preferences to guide their learning and encourage them to learn English. The researcher argued that taking students' beliefs and preferences into consideration could help students increase their confidence in learning English.

The findings of the current study are somehow in accord with Cedar's (2013) study results. A questionnaire was distributed to measure Thai university nursing students' perception and attitudes towards online/Moodle versus traditional classroom learning. A pre/posttest was performed to explore the effectiveness of both methods. Results showed that learning perceptions by students in both groups were controversial. Students in the traditional classroom showed satisfaction with time flexibility and convenience (91.25%); they believed that classroom learning was interesting (90%) and felt that English should be studied in class (88.75%). Only (38.75%) the students did not want to study English via the internet. However, (93.33%) of the nursing students found online learning to be convenient for their study-time management. Many found online learning interesting, easy and convenient for repetitive reviews (86.67%), while (34.67%) of students did not want online learning as they found it boring. However, quantitative results revealed a statistically significant difference between students' pre/post scores in the classroom and the online group.

Paul & Jefferson (2019) investigated students' preferences to which teaching method proved more effective over the 8-year period. They compared learning via F2F vs. online learning modalities in teaching an environmental science in Fort Valley State University/USA. It was found that students preferred online learning depending on course topic and online course technology platform. However, students preferred F2F learning in courses taught twice or three times a day in late morning or early afternoon. Students showed significant preferences for online learning in all undergraduate course subjects like the American history and government, humanities, natural sciences, social, and behavioral sciences, diversity, and international dimension, except English composition and oral communication. The results were innovative since there were no significant differences between online and F2F performance. This could tell that the traditional teaching style that emphasizes interpersonal classroom dynamics might be replaced by online instruction.

Yang & Tsai (2008) results somehow showed indirect preferences to traditional classroom instruction. They developed two questionnaires to assess university students' web-based learning environmental preferences (WLEP) and beliefs about web-based learning (BWL). The results proved that the individual learning dominated the collaborative learning and students preferred the web-based instruction to be structured and concept-based. Students also thought they would experience knowledge assimilation through web-based learning

and interaction with teachers or experts rather than peers. The researchers justified that those students were used to a more structured, teacher- centered and hierarchical approach of prior traditional classroom instruction. They noted that «putting students with traditional teacher-centered learning experiences in the constructivist-oriented learning environments is bound to cause problems, and it takes adjustment for learners to adopt a different frame. In this situation, instructors or designers should offer some help and support, and may need to adjust to different expectations» (p. 1301). The researchers explained that some students' conservative preferences toward the web-based learning environment were due to participants' general beliefs that the web-based learning could not be unconditionally applied. However, other participants believed that online courses would be successful only if they incorporated appropriate topics with the participation of active students.

However, the findings of this study do not parallel the work of Finney (2015), which explored whether online classes were better or comparable to traditional classes. It also investigated how online classes influenced "at risk" tenth grade students' academic learning and performance when compared to F2F classes. At risk students referred to those who dropped out of high school or failed required courses. Participants were enrolled in two online and two F2F classes. Online classes consisted of English and other subjects participants needed that school year. A survey was developed by the researcher and included questions about students' opinion about online and F2F classes. Grades were calculated to determine students' achievement in online and F2F courses. «The findings showed the participants preferred to take a combination of online and face-to-face courses, or only online courses, and fewer of the students favored only traditional face-to-face courses» (Finney, 2015, p. 34). Many students preferred online classes for their flexibility and students' ability to repeat lessons at their own pace. However, some students argued that some subjects like science and math courses were difficult to comprehend online without the presence of a teacher to explain the concepts.

A quite different result was revealed by Fortune, Spielman & Pangelinan (2011). Students asserted that the online environment made it easier for them to communicate with their instructor and felt more comfortable when responding to questions by email than face-to-face. They preferred to take a course online than taking it F2F since the instructor understood the online environment and facilitated it to support their ability to learn. «However, they were significantly split on whether it was easier or harder to work with their team online because of the online environment» (Fortune, Spielman & Pangelinan, 2011, p. 4).

8. Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested for future research:

- It is recommended that higher educational institutions use blended learning in normal situations and try to expand it gradually to be accepted by all students. This might encourage the students with negative beliefs about online learning to use this method and not depend completely on F2F when learning a foreign language.
- Instructors are recommended to utilize available means and resources to motivate and facilitate students' online language learning environment and develop interest and acceptance to online learning. They can take advantage of chat bars, forums, blogs and online rooms to increase peer interaction.

- It is recommended to examine different characteristics or variables that might affect students' positive or negative beliefs and success or failure in online environments. For example, gender, major, previous experience of using technology, availability of technological devices and internet connection.
- Studying students' preferences and beliefs between the two modes in other fields or subjects is highly recommended.
- Further quantitative and qualitative research could be carried out with a larger sample size and different disciplines in order to achieve a systematic assessment of the F2F qualities as compared to online learning.
- Replicating this study using additional qualitative research method such as conducting interviews with a focus group is recommended.
- Conducting a study on the performance of students in the two modes of instruction is recommended.

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