The Role of Digital Learning in Addressing Learning Loss in EFL Learning and Teaching from Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored English teachers' perspectives on the efficacy of digital learning in mitigating learning loss in EFL context. Semi-structured interviews with ten Saudi EFL teachers were thematically analyzed to examine their experiences, challenges, and best practices regarding digital language instruction. The findings revealed that digital learning platforms enhance accessibility, flexibility, engagement, and self-directed learning. However, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of digital learning in EFL education, including parental intervention, socioeconomic disparities, insufficient teacher training and professional development, increased workload, and large class size. Teachers observed that digital tools effectively support pronunciation, listening, and reading skills but struggle to replicate the interactive dynamics needed to develop speaking and writing proficiency. Despite these challenges, strategies such as flipped learning, collaborative activities, and fostering self-learning skills have proven to be effective in mitigating learning loss. This study underscores the importance of targeted training and continuous professional development in enhancing teachers' skills in integrating modern technology and employing appropriate teaching practices. It recommends enhancements to adopting effective pedagogical strategies to enhance digital learning efficacy, and digital platforms that support real-time interactions to reduce learning loss and increase proficiency in the English language in digital learning environments.

Keywords: Digital Learning, Learning Loss, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Teacher Perspectives, Online Education, Language Proficiency.

Introduction

This study explores teachers' perspectives on the use of digital learning in English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. It examines how digital learning can help reduce learning loss in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Through a thematic analysis of interviews with ten Saudi English language teachers, this study explored how teachers view the role of digital learning in addressing English learning loss. It also discusses the benefits, challenges, and best practices of online English language teaching. According to the social constructivist approach, which is the framework of the current study, social interactions and cultural practices are crucial to the learning process. Social constructivist theory holds that learners acquire language effectively when using it naturally. Technology can facilitate language learning and its associated experiences by providing a context that allows learners to apply speech and language in real-life situations. It can also enable insightful interactions through multimedia and peer-to-peer learning. Thus, this study examined Saudi English teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of digital learning in attaining social constructivist learning

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purposes. It also investigates whether digital tools are perceived as efficient channels for reducing English learning losses.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected learning, forcing institutions globally to shift to online learning to ensure academic continuity. EFL teachers faced challenges in providing quality education and supporting student progress. Before the pandemic, teachers and learners used digital learning tools only moderately; the extensive and sudden reliance on them revealed new possibilities and limitations. According to Chang and Fang (2020), several institutions needed to prepare to establish the infrastructure for large-scale digital learning. This has forced teachers to quickly learn new technologies and alter their attitudes towards online learning.

Learning loss derives from educational gaps stemming from prolonged academic program hiatuses. Language learning presents a risk for such a loss, as it requires consistent practice and interactive feedback. During the pandemic, the switch to digital learning challenged the ability of online platforms to provide the same level of engagement and interactivity as traditional classrooms (Kuhfield & Tarasawa, 2020). Adapting Saudi EFL teachers' teaching methods to a digital format posed difficult questions but provided insights into new instructional procedures.

The literature on online education has been extensive, spanning several decades, defining the best practices and core principles (Hofer et al., 2021). However, there is a difference between purposefully designed online learning and emergency remote teaching, as observed during the pandemic. The spontaneity and rapid spread of the pandemic forced policymakers to implement virtual learning haphazardly, presenting challenges to teachers attempting to translate in-class strategies into digital platforms (Pandit & Agrawal, 2022). This difference is essential to understanding how some teachers adapted well to training in applying digital learning, while others struggled.

From an academic standpoint, responses to the pandemic varied from country to country in terms of the educational system adopted. This necessitates the adoption of several digital learning approaches. According to Kamysbayeva et al. (2021), comparing digital learning success across regions exposes challenges to policies and resources. Therefore, further research is necessary to understand how digital learning has been implemented in specific cases and to identify areas for future improvement.

Various studies have shown that when digital learning is correctly implemented, it helps to manage learning losses, leading to improvements in educational outcomes. For example, digital learning allows students to easily access multimedia learning resources. In addition, it supports flexible and interactive learning, and encourages students to carry out independent and self-guided learning (Alhazmi, 2024; Aljanazrah et al., 2022; Groves, 2020). These benefits are especially valuable for language learners who require more time and support to improve their language capabilities. Online learning also poses challenges such as limited face-to-face interactions, lack of spontaneous communication opportunities, and problems in assessing language proficiency (Ribeiro & Eslami, 2022).

This study examines the experiences of Saudi English teachers with digital language instruction. It explores the challenges of adapting to digital learning and strategies employed to overcome learning loss. It seeks to determine how Saudi teachers employ the available digital resources in their teaching. Finally, this study investigated teachers' views on the long-term benefits and implications of digital learning in language education.

Literature Review

This section discusses the literature on the use of digital learning to mitigate learning losses in English learning and teaching. It begins by presenting the theoretical framework that underlies this study. It then examines the concept of learning loss, followed by an overview of the background of online education regarding digital learning. In addition, a review of the literature on topics relevant to EFL was presented. Moreover, this section highlights the relevance of educational strategies and practices, and discusses the limitations of the existing literature, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia.

Theoretical Framework

Social constructivist theory, the theoretical basis of this study, stems from Vygotsky's (1978) work on learning as a social affair. This view is relevant to digital learning because it focuses on interaction, collaboration, and the social context in which learning occurs (Zajda & Zajda, 2021). Peer interactions, teacher-student engagement, and social environments that promote language acquisition significantly affect learning in traditional classroom settings. Social constructivism maintains that knowledge emanates from social interactions and shared experience. It postulates that such knowledge is not a product of passive receipt or active construction in isolation, but results from collaborations within a social context (Kritt, 2018). Therefore, emphasis is placed on culture, language, and societal norms that engender human understanding. The insinuation is that learning is a social process that collectively constructs meaning. It is imperative to define how communicative competence is developed through meaningful dialogue and interaction for language learning. However, face-to-face communication and collaboration are limited in digital domains, casting doubt on how well such environments can facilitate language learning (Seoudi & Carter, 2022). Using social constructivism, the study exposes English teachers' experiences and challenges regarding online learning in Saudi Arabia. From a social constructivist viewpoint, knowledge is not considered an individual cognitive achievement, but a product of social processes (Ghavifekr, 2020).

Language acquisition, especially EFL education, is relevant to social constructivism because it requires student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-teacher interactions. The primary teaching strategy in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is aligned with social constructivism. This is because it relies on the use of language in real-world communication to develop EFL students' proficiency levels (Qasserras, 2023). CLT methods place learners in practical situations to improve their language skills through conversations, group activities, and other interactive exercises.

The move to online learning also highlights the practical challenges of social constructivism. English language acquisition must contend with the limitations of digital learning, which can inadvertently hinder nonverbal communication, spontaneous dialogue, and other key aspects of face-to-face interaction that are available in the physical classroom (Bang, 2023). Hence, as virtual environments lack some of the interactive elements of conventional classrooms, teachers should incorporate innovative instructional approaches into these environments. This theoretical model focuses on examining whether digital learning can acquire or maintain the key aspects of CLT required for teaching EFL.

Learning Loss

According to Kuhfeld et al. (2020), learning loss refers to the phenomenon of losing the knowledge and skills that students may experience when they are out of school for a long period,

such as during vacations, crises, or pandemics. Learning loss can be defined as a decrease in learning outcomes, knowledge retention, skills, or competencies due to disruptions and breaks in formal learning environments. This may be because of school closures, lack of access to educational materials and resources, or socioeconomic disparities (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Hammerstein et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Learning loss may result in educational gaps, decreased knowledge retention, and poor learning achievements (Bailey et al., 2021). According to Quinn and Polikoff (2017), learning loss becomes more concerning when it involves basic skills such as reading, math, or language development. Addressing these deficits has become increasingly challenging. Learning loss has become a critical issue since the COVID-19 pandemic owing to school closures and the rapid shift to remote learning (Engzell et al., 2021). This could be more problematic in EFL contexts because it undermines consistent practices in language development and affects proficiency maintenance. Studies have shown that breaks in language learning can lead to a significant decline in vocabulary retention, pronunciation accuracy, and fluency (Martos-Gallardo, 2024). EFL students may not practice speaking in English regularly when they are not in classroom settings, which may make them less proficient in English (Al-Samiri, 2021). This becomes more evident in digital learning environments where there is inadequate face-to-face interaction

According to Kuhfeld and Tarasawa (2020), when students learn in a face-to-face setting, such as a classroom, they manage to retain almost 70% of their reading and mathematical skills. These results were not obtained specifically from EFL settings; however, they show that there is a risk of learning loss over time when learning takes place outside the classroom or when physical classes are not attended. Zaim et al. (2023) studied EFL learners, demonstrating that language learning losses occurred during the pandemic because it was difficult to create a naturally interactive language learning environment in digital environments. This becomes even more challenging for EFL education as it requires continuous interaction and exposure to a given language (Mahyoob, 2020). Language skills differ from other subjects in that they cannot be retained through memorization; they require continuous engagement and participation. This is especially true for speaking and listening skills, which are vital communication skills, but their acquisition may become difficult in virtual settings. Sukmawati et al. (2022) asserted that language development and competency of EFL learners may be compromised in virtual environments, where physical and social interaction, instant feedback, and contextualized language approaches are lacking.

Digital Learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

Digital learning, with its features of online platforms, digital resources, and virtual classrooms, can provide students with flexible and personalized education that can be accessed anytime and anywhere (Means et al., 2014). Technology-enhanced learning (TEL) supports this foundation by incorporating tablets, smartboards, virtual and augmented reality, and AI tools to simplify complex learning concepts (Bower et al., 2017). However, challenges such as the digital divide, content quality, teacher training, and privacy issues remain significant obstacles (Selwyn, 2020). Despite these limitations, the use of AI-driven models and microlearning platforms provides inclusive, adaptive, and lifelong learning for students and increases their engagement and motivation (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

The use of digital learning platforms for EFL learning purposes has both advantages and disadvantages. By offering valuable resources, these digital tools offer students a platform for practicing apart from their classrooms (Dincer, 2020). Digital learning tools can be beneficial

for students with limited opportunities to practice English outside school. In addition, they allow students to perform self-guided language learning, where they can set their learning schedules to learn at their own speed. According to Chong and Reinders (2022), self-directed learning can improve language learning by promoting students' autonomy and motivation. Therefore, these features are crucial for EFL learners. This is because of the limitation of constant interaction; thus, students should build their abilities through structured practice to develop their language skills.

However, several factors limit the use of digital tools for communication-focused language learning. Most apps today lack features that can spur conversations, group interactions, and other activities that are crucial for language development (Mihaylova et al., 2022). This is an issue for those specializing in CLT, as they may downplay the importance of technology in its implementation. Zhang (2020) posits that although TELL strategies might be practical, they lack the face-to-face interaction component of in-person learning. There is also the issue of cultural fit of digital tools. Saudi Arabian culture is essential for determining students' intentions and attitudes towards English language education (Aljuaid, 2021). The materials, methods, and interfaces of digital learning tools described in the literature have mostly been conceived in Western educational contexts. Therefore, they may not correspond to the cultural inclinations of Saudi Arabian students (Al-Abdullatif & Alsubaie, 2022). For instance, students' preferences regarding instructional strategies and practices may vary across cultures. At the same time, many of these technologies are student-centered and self-paced learning approaches. Thus, it is necessary to develop versatile digital instruments that suit the cultural values of Saudi students.

Digital Learning and Learning Loss in Saudi Arabia

A significant concern in the wake of the pandemic has been loss of learning, especially in language acquisition. The shift to online learning has compounded existing educational inequalities and has resulted in significant learning loss, especially among students in low-income settings (Aljabri & Bhutoria, 2020). Learning loss was particularly pronounced in speaking and listening, which are difficult to replicate in an online learning environment, as envisioned in Saudi Arabia (Alamry, 2024). In their study, Ying et al. (2021) found that learners faced challenges in learning the English language. According to Octaberlina and Muslimin (2020), students stated that they were unable to stay motivated while taking English courses online. Students participating in communicative activities may face difficulties because of technical issues and limited real-time communication with teachers and other students. Such students find it difficult to participate in group discussions and presentations (Altakhaineh et al., 2021). They also became less fluent in their oral communication, because of which their language skills became weaker.

Some students had to abruptly shift to distance learning, which made it difficult for them to adjust to this new approach (Ying et al., 2021). While transitioning to distance learning, some Saudi students faced challenges in terms of the socioeconomic and educational differences that surfaced during the pandemic. According to Khalil et al. (2020), a significant issue that has an impact on students' learning is the digital divide, which is more pronounced for those who come from lower-income groups. There may be a few students who do not have access to a reliable internet service, necessary devices, or other technological resources, because of which they may be at a disadvantage compared to those who are able to acquire and use these resources for online learning.

Aladsani (2023) shared a striking example of this learning gap by reporting her sister's experience. When schools reopened in March 2022, her sister, a teacher of young students aged seven to eight years, was shocked to find that only three of them could properly inscribe their names (Aladsani, 2023). She also noticed substantial gaps in both literacy and math skills.

The issue of learning loss, particularly in Saudi Arabia, is supported by the recent literature that focuses on how digital learning affects language acquisition. Studies have also shown how the Ministry of Education (MoE) works to curb relevant difficulties through digital learning. To offset the setbacks resulting from disrupted schooling, for example, difficulty continuing school and curricular activities during crises, the Saudi MoE took several initiatives to develop digital learning solutions.

The MoE in Saudi Arabia introduced an electronic learning management system, Madrasati, an Arabic word meaning "my school." Madrasati is a complete digital platform for students, teachers, and parents that allows online learning and teaching. It includes interactive lessons, virtual classrooms, assessments, and communication tools that enable seamless education, even when traditional learning is impossible (Alkinani & Alzahrani, 2021).

According to a 2022 report by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, Madrasati is one of the largest online learning platforms in the Arab world. In March 2020, Saudi Arabia expanded its distance education to include more than five million K-12 school-goers nationwide. This large-scale rollout of online learning is supported by the government's previous outlay on e-learning. Concerted efforts across different entities, rapid decision making, and a wealth of experience in educational technologies also play significant roles (UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, 2022).

However, Madrasati is not merely a learning management portal. According to UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank (2022), it is a 360-degree e-learning system with access to a connected and diverse family of services and tools needed by teachers, students, parents, and school administrations. Such tools include interactive offerings such as homework, self-assessments, learning materials, question banks, and online laboratories. They also encompass Microsoft Teams, the iEN platform of channels, and Microsoft Office 365 (UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, 2022).

Additionally, the government launched a 'Back to School' public sensitization portal alongside Madrasati; this platform unified all video training modules, user guides, as well as rules and expectations for students, parents, and teachers. Knowing that teachers needed orientation to use new virtual tools and drastically change their instructional techniques in a limited period, the government supported the professional development of instructors by sharing and communicating best practices across institutions and subject areas (UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, 2022).

Furthermore, MoE introduced the iEN TV Network and iEN Dross Channels. These channels also broadcast school curricula at all levels of education through Arabsat and YouTube platforms. Some of their offerings include various educational lessons for a vast number of students with limited Internet access (Alkinani & Alzahrani, 2021). Through these efforts, the MoE attempted to bridge the digital gap by offering curriculum content through TV and digital platforms. The end goal was to ensure continuity in students learning across the country. This strategic approach shows that the government is responsible for taking up the challenges posed by crises and has sustained learning using digital tools. Through the development of digital tools, such as

Madrasati and iEN TV, the MoE has played a critical role in addressing learning loss, catering to the educational needs of students, and ensuring their continued engagement in their studies during disruptions.

Several global educational organizations have praised the pioneering e-learning model of Saudi Arabia and its significant contributions to the development of high-quality e-learning solutions (The Unified National Platform, 2021). UNESCO selected Madrasati as one of the top four e-learning models worldwide, alongside those employed in Finland, South Korea, and China (The Unified National Platform, 2021).

Research Gap

This study found a distinctive research gap regarding English teachers' perceptions of digital learning and learning loss in teaching and learning English. Much effort has been made to investigate how students in particular classes experience and are affected by digital learning. However, more effort needs to be made to understand how English teachers experience and face challenges when teaching online in the Saudi educational context. Teachers' views on the ability of digital learning to address learning loss are yet to be thoroughly investigated. Available research has focused on populations from other nations, particularly the United States and Europe. Therefore, it may not adequately match the circumstances in the Middle Eastern context in Saudi Arabia. Findings from other studies conducted in different nations cannot be easily applied to the Saudi educational context, especially in the context of cultural and social differences. Thus, this study attempts to fill a major gap in the academic literature regarding the use of digital learning to address learning loss in the Saudi context.

The literature review established that mainstream offline ELT models are challenging to transfer online, especially when institutions, teachers, and learners are yet to anticipate this move (Choi & Chung, 2021). Several issues have arisen, notably the need for adequate preparation for online teaching and learning, and the challenges involved in continuing to foster communication and interactivity. All of these factors are crucial for reducing learning loss in ELT settings. However, it is surprising that there is relatively little qualitative insight into this phenomenon in Saudi Arabia. This is particularly true regarding English teachers' views on how these adversities affect their ability to mitigate learning loss.

Teachers' perceptions can impact their behavior in online learning environments. Therefore, investigating teachers' perceptions of the role of digital learning in addressing learning loss in the Saudi context is important. As highlighted earlier, this research fills this gap by exploring teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness of the technologies used in backing up CLT. It also probes how these technologies favor or hamper language learning in an online setting. However, little is known about how technology-based learning affects teachers and their practices. Personal and professional experiences regarding workload, work-life balance, and satisfaction with online teaching and learning are of particular interest.

Closing this research gap is essential for enhancing the understanding of how digital learning approaches can be better exploited to reduce learning loss in ELT. Thus, using the perspectives of English teachers, this qualitative research sought to contribute to observations that would enable further approaches to digital learning. These findings are vital for enhancing the quality and efficacy of online language learning and teaching.

Research Questions

Recognizing the need for more research that focuses on English teachers' practical experiences to reduce learning loss in the Saudi context, it is necessary to formulate research questions to fill this gap. Accordingly, the following research questions were developed to explore the role of digital learning in addressing or reducing learning loss in English learning and teaching from the Saudi English teachers' perspectives:

- How do Saudi English teachers define and perceive learning loss in the context of teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language?

- What are the leading causes of learning loss in English language teaching, and to what extent do Saudi teachers believe it impacts student learning outcomes?

- How do Saudi English teachers believe that digital learning platforms such as Madrasati and iEN can address or reduce learning loss in English language education?

- What challenges do Saudi English teachers face when implementing digital learning to reduce learning loss, and how has this impacted them professionally and personally?

- What do Saudi English teachers consider as effective practices to mitigate learning loss?

Methodology

This section outlines the study's methodology and presents the theoretical and practical foundations of the research design. This section explains the selected methods of data collection and analysis, addresses ethical considerations, and evaluates the reliability and validity of the study. Subsequently, it elaborates on the data collection and analysis procedures.

Design Philosophy

This study is based on the social constructivism theory developed by Vygotsky (1978), a philosophical theory of learning that emphasizes meaning within the social context. Social constructivism is used in education to investigate how people use context to shape their learning (Mohammed & Kınyo, 2020). In other words, the ontology of social constructivism rests on the premise that reality is socially constructed through meanings co-produced by culture. The heritage and qualitative synthesis of Gergen and Gergen (2007) and Witkin (2012) argue that individual practices are constructed in institutional socio-communicative relations within contexts, such as educational institutions. This framework favors a qualitative research orientation, making it possible to understand Saudi teachers' perceptions of digital learning environments based on their social practices and Saudi culture.

This study employed an exploratory research design aligned with its qualitative nature. A qualitative approach is necessary to support cost-effective and convenient data collection and to acquire rich perspectives on the subject matter. An exploratory research design was suitable because the study aimed to gain more insight into and define the titular phenomena more accurately.

On epistemological grounds, social constructivism presupposes that people's perceptions are unique; thus, an individual must examine how meanings are constructed from such interactions when studying how teachers integrate and interpret technologies. Leeds-Hurwitz (2009) stressed that this makes the process subjective, and an interpretive paradigm is necessary to reflect what participants think. Thus, this study explores the use of digital learning tools among Saudi English

teachers, focusing on how they interpret the tools, why they adopt particular practices, and how their choices relate to the culture and values within their institutions.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary source of data to obtain accurate and comprehensive information about the participants' viewpoints. Although surveys can generalize information from a more extensive set of participants, they are also limited. Unlike interviews, for instance, they cannot investigate profound and contextually bound aspects of teachers' digital learning experiences (Peters & Halcomb, 2015). Thus, surveys were considered a less productive means of obtaining the individualized responses needed for this study. The consideration of interviews shows their accommodation of participants' experiences and the realism of allowing them to elaborate on phenomena beyond the measured options.

Individual interviews were chosen rather than focus groups to decrease the group's influence and increase people's confidence in answering questions. Potential limitations include the fact that some participants may have provided biased information. This is unlike focus groups since people tend to conform to the general opinions held within their group (Fastenrath & Marx, 2024). However, definite one-to-one interviews minimized peer pressure, and participants were free to express their opinions. Bergen and Labonté (2020) advocated the use of one-on-one interviews, stating that participants tended to be more elaborate when responding in this setting.

The semi-structured interview questions allowed the participants to share their views openly, but the researcher had the opportunity to ask further questions about specific issues. According to Kircher and Zipp (2022), open-ended questions provide directions that require the respondents to provide elaborate responses. This was in addition to steering respondents in the direction of any specific answer format. Semi-structured interviews are a cross between having a format to follow during the conversational aspect and providing room for additional information that may emerge during interviews. This flexibility is necessary in studies such as this one, because participants' perceptions of digital learning may differ.

Sampling

The sample involved 10 Saudi EFL teachers, all with at least five years of experience in teaching ESL and prior use of technology for teaching. This experience threshold was set to ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to traditional and digital teaching and learning approaches. They can also reflect on their practices and provide informed perspectives on online learning and learning loss. Six male and four female teachers took part in the study, which ensured the experiences and opinions of both genders were obtained, offering rational and mixed perspectives. The study sample size adhered to qualitative research guidelines, particularly those that employed thematic analysis (Fugard & Potts, 2014; Hennink et al., 2017; Vasileiou et al., 2018). This sample size was appropriate, as it helped determine patterns and offered different views of Saudi teachers' experiences with digital learning platforms.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach is used extensively in qualitative studies because it helps identify and analyze patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis is appropriate for this study, as it enables a structured analysis of teachers' perspectives and provides reasons for why they hold such views (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis

occurs in six stages: becoming familiar with the data, coding, determining themes, examining themes, describing and naming themes, and formulating a final report.

Inductive coding was the first procedure carried out, in which the codes were labeled directly from the data instead of using predefined categories. The reason for adopting this approach was to ensure that the new themes were not influenced by predetermined assumptions but were indicative of the actual views of the participants. Inductive coding helps determine themes and patterns that may not have been identified otherwise, which is why it plays a significant role in exploratory research (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Compared to deductive coding, this approach takes more time, but its advantage is that it presents an accurate view of the participants' experiences. The reliability of thematic analysis can be improved by conducting a consistent comparison technique across all stages of coding. In this coding process, new data were continuously compared with the codes and themes identified earlier. This would ensure the coherence and rigor of the themes (Thomas, 2013). In addition, it ensures that the themes accurately represent the data obtained.

Ethics

To ensure the reliability of the research outcomes, ethical responsibility is significant in ensuring that participants' rights and well-being are secured (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Wallen & Fraenkel, 2013), and no harm is caused to participants (Punch, 2014). Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study. This included obtaining consent from all participants and respecting their rights, autonomy, and privacy (Punch, 2014). The participants were clearly explained the aims of the study, their rights, the confidentiality of the data gathered, and the steps taken to protect the data to ensure transparency and conformance to ethical standards (Bryman, 2016; Oliver, 2010). The participants then provided verbal consent to take part in the study, confirming that they understood that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point they wished.

The names and details of the participants were removed while transcribing their data and their coded names were used in successive analyses. This was done to ensure the anonymity of the participants. In addition, the data were stored on password-protected devices that were only accessible to the researcher. The reason why so much importance was given to maintaining the anonymity of participants was to create an environment where they felt safe in providing their honest opinions without having any fear of stigmatization (Saunders et al., 2015). In addition to protecting participant confidentiality, this approach also encouraged participants to give honest responses, which improved the reliability and robustness of the data collected (Babbie, 2015; Wiles et al., 2008).

Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of qualitative research, a few critical factors need to be taken into account, including the generalizability and replicability of the results, the methods utilized, and the credibility of the researcher (Rose & Johnson, 2020). According to the authors, the method used to ensure the reliability and validity of a study should be consistent with the study requirements. In qualitative research, validity refers to ensuring that the results are accurate, whereas reliability refers to the consistency of research methods across distinct studies and researchers (Ross & Johnson, 2020). Researchers can determine the reliability of their study by examining the consistency of their techniques and outcomes, making sure that they continue to be rational and reproducible, irrespective of the time, technique, or people involved in the

research. Reliability is improved when the analytical methods used are well explained. On the other hand, to ensure validity, researchers need to determine the accuracy of the outcomes as viewed by the participants, researchers, or those reviewing the study. Together, the aspects of reliability and validity ensure that a study is trustworthy (Ross & Johnson, 2020).

Because the sample size of this study is small, it may not be appropriate to generalize the findings of this study to other teachers at similar positions or other contexts. Using qualitative data, however, provides a comprehensive view of human experience. Thus, this research relied on obtaining extensive views of the experiences and perceptions of teachers instead of trying to achieve broader generalizability, confirming that qualitative approaches are more appropriate for this purpose (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012). However, the contextualized results may be useful in similar contexts.

The reliability and validity of qualitative research are affected by researcher bias (Cypress, 2017). This threat was reduced by using semi-structured questions rather than structured or close-ended questions so that participants could present their views openly. This approach allows for more impulsive and genuine responses as it minimizes interviewer influence (Bergen & Labonté, 2020; Clark et al., 2019; Kircher & Zipp, 2022; Rapley, 2001).

Credibility was also improved by documenting research processes and decisions. In addition, transcripts and summaries of the interviews were given to the participants so that they could verify them and provide any explanations, if needed. During coding, comparisons were constantly conducted so that themes could be systematically determined across datasets (Thomas, 2013).

Overall, qualitative approaches were used in this study to comprehensively examine the experiences and viewpoints of teachers. This is a suitable approach for this research, as it helps to obtain in-depth information about the unique details that are specific to the Saudi Arabian context. Even though there are limitations in terms of generalizability and reliability, the approach and measures were used to ensure obtaining rigorous and meaningful outcomes.

Processes

To recruit the study participants, advertisements were made in teaching groups on social media and other English language teaching communities. The study details were presented in the advertisement, which also included a screening questionnaire to determine the suitability of participants. The candidates were shortlisted by manually checking applications, keeping in view the inclusion criteria. This would ensure that only those participants were included who had over five years of English language teaching experience and used digital learning tools in their teaching.

After obtaining the participants' consent, the interviews were successfully carried out. After every interview, participants were reassured that their identities would remain confidential. The interviews were recorded using audio recording software, and to ensure that transcriptions were done accurately, verbatim recordings were used. In addition, during the transcription, the names and identifying characteristics of the participants were removed. This would promote ethical integrity and allow participants to share their views freely, without fear of judgment.

Thematic analysis was carried out after transcription. The researcher reviewed each transcript multiple times to become familiar with the data, after which the initial observations were noted. In the coding process, the main ideas and concepts discussed during the interviews were

determined to create thematic codes. After coding all the interviews, the data were organized so that themes and subthemes could be determined. Similar themes were grouped into clusters, which would help in obtaining a clear and comprehensive presentation of intricate thematic relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2016). This methodological technique helped in organizing and developing the findings section coherently. Thus, this refined analytical process ensured that the results provided a clear picture of the perspectives and experiences of the participants regarding the topic of study.

Findings

This section reports the data of this study, based on a thematic analysis of interviews conducted with Saudi EFL teachers. The results provide information concerning teachers' perceptions and knowledge of learning loss, the causes of learning loss, and whether digital learning is effective in addressing learning loss. They also highlighted the challenges of implementing digital learning. In addition, this study concludes with potentially effective practices for mitigating learning loss in EFL. To keep the results meaningful, they were grouped into categories that highlight teachers' perceptions and experiences.

Perceived Learning Loss of EFL

The Saudi EFL teachers interviewed in this study expressed a common perception that their students had experienced learning loss. They referred to learning loss as the fading of previously acquired abilities, and highlighted writing, speaking, pronunciation, reading, and spelling as the most affected. They pointed out that these areas were bogged down because of the absence of regular baseline practice and the sudden switch to online media. One teacher noted that students frequently lose sight of grammatical rules and linguistic retention, which shows that most struggle to learn basic language without face-to-face classes. Concerning this issue, teachers perceived that it was worsened by online teaching and learning, as there are limited interactions and opportunities for correction and reinforcement of what has been learned. This is reinforced by the following quote from one participant: "There is a clear and tangible loss in the minimum of speaking, pronunciation, and spelling skills, and writing as well, with forgetting many of the rules that students learned due to weak or interrupted practice and training". (P#03)

This statement underscores that the fundamental skills that form the foundation of language acquisition are most vulnerable to loss. Teachers observed that these losses manifested prominently in assessments, reduced participation in class activities, and reluctance among students to engage in verbal communication. Many teachers have highlighted the erosion of student confidence as a key indicator of learning loss. This was evident from the observation of another participant: "Students' hesitation in speaking and their struggle with spelling basic words during assessments are direct signs of learning loss". (P#08)

This statement underscores that students struggle to demonstrate previously acquired competencies, and their hesitance to participate in verbal communication reflects their diminished confidence. Thus, learning loss in EFL is perceived as a multifaceted issue that affects both skill acquisition and the ability to apply knowledge effectively. This theme provides a nuanced understanding of learning loss as not only a measurable gap in achievement but also as a psychological and practical barrier to progress.

Causes of Learning Loss

The factors contributing to learning loss were grouped under teacher, learner, and other pre-existing or external factors. Some constraints discussed under teacher-related factors included insufficient teacher training and professional development, teachers' workload, and poor skills, knowledge, and understanding of how to apply technology in pedagogy. Another challenge is the limited knowledge of where to find applications or samples of good practices when incorporating technology into lesson plans. As for deficits, some teachers mentioned that their workloads have become heavier, and managing large online classes reduces the possibility of meeting every learner's individual needs. One teacher clarified the following points: "Some teachers lack knowledge of teaching methods and techniques, which results in a heavy workload, reduced focus, and weakened performance". (P#01)

Another teacher lamented, "Some teachers lack distance teaching skills and methods for integrating technology and multimedia and employing them during and after lessons". (P#04)

This highlights the insufficient professional development and lack of technical skills of some teachers as critical barriers to effective teaching during remote learning. Teachers' workload and limited skills in using educational resources further exacerbate this problem. Resistance to adopting new technological methodologies, particularly among teachers who prefer traditional paradigms, has also been noted.

Students' challenges further compounded this issue. Student-related factors included students' shyness, lack of motivation, and distractions during distance learning. A striking example came from a participant who observed the following: "Some students attend only to record their attendance or because of parental pressure, but are not mentally present in the lesson." (P#10)

Another participant noted that "some students experienced distraction and poor attention during the online lessons" (P#02). The participants described these recurring issues as key factors that created significant barriers to engagement. One participant elaborated on this as follows:

I think there are some causes for learning loss, such as the embarrassment and shyness of some students in participating, dialogue, and asking questions. In addition, student distractions and lack of attention and focus, as well as their fake attendance. (P#02)

This could mean that some students engaged in "fake attendance and logged into class without active participation. Additionally, some students struggled to adapt to independent learning because of loneliness in online classes and inadequate guidance. Many learners, especially those from humble backgrounds, do not have proper technological resources or space to study quietly, thus hindering their participation. These aspects have affected the loss of learning and students' educational progress during the pandemic.

Other pre-existing or external influential factors, including socioeconomic disparities and parental over-involvement, have also emerged as critical contributors. According to some teachers, the socioeconomic disparities of some families, such as limited access to devices and stable internet connections, placed additional strain on students and their families. One teacher explained "Economic barriers make it difficult for parents to provide devices for all children." (P#05).

Teachers also highlighted parental over-involvement during lessons, which undermined students' independence and responsibility. One participant stated the following: "Parents' constant intervention during distance learning reduces their sense of accountability". (P#09)

Another teacher explained, "Parents often intervene during lessons, solving homework for their children, so this undermines the student's independence." (P#07)

Overall, learning loss stems from a combination of teacher preparedness, student attitudes, and external factors such as family dynamics and systemic policies. These interrelated factors highlight the complexity of addressing learning loss and the necessity of multifaceted solutions to ensure adjustment to new digital learning.

Digital Learning as a Tool to Address Learning Loss

Digital learning platforms, such as Madrasati and iEN, are valuable tools for mitigating learning loss. Teachers emphasized their potential and role in addressing learning loss by fostering self-learning, enhancing student engagement, supporting skill development, and providing flexible access to educational resources. Teachers emphasized that digital platforms such as Madrasati and iEN facilitated personalized learning and encouraged students to develop self-learning skills, particularly through features such as recorded lessons and multimedia resources. These tools allow students to revisit content as needed and learn at their own pace, especially for slower learners.

One teacher noted, "Digital learning gave students the opportunity to think, discuss, and refer to recorded lessons" (P#08), and another teacher added that these features "allow them to learn at their own pace." (P#05). Additionally, digital platforms provide access to enrichment activities, which "greatly enhanced their learning experience" as one teacher noted. (P#02)

Through digital learning, the students were able to use several other sources. They were also more active in using multimedia tools, such as Madrasati, iEN, YouTube, online exercises, and worksheets. These tools promoted learner autonomy, averted a singular approach to learning, and complemented language development in a way that may not have been possible in regular classrooms.

Remarkably, participants indicated that some students were uncomfortable making contributions in face-to-face classes. However, once online learning was introduced, students performed much better. As reported by some participants that,

Digital learning provides opportunities for some students. For example, students with low levels of participation and very weak participation in traditional classes showed tangible interactions and effective participation through distance education and digital learning with their teachers and colleagues. (P#06)

Digital learning has been proven to be transformative for students who were previously less engaged or disengaged in traditional classrooms. Teachers observed increased interaction and confidence, particularly among shy students. Another participant reflected "some students who were hesitant in class became active participants during online lessons." (P#09)

Students may find a space of freedom in which they can express themselves freely. In addition, minimal pressure in terms of face-to-face interactions may reduce students' shyness and fear. This contributed to the continuous improvement in their levels.

In terms of skills development, teachers reported that these platforms improve digital learning using digital resources and interactive and multimedia tools to enhance learners' pronunciation, listening, and reading skills. Teachers noted that Madrasati can provide students with various digital materials that could improve their reading and listening skills and stated that it involves

learners in technology-oriented life interactions through mobile phones and simulations. As stated by a respondent that "these tools encourage students to look for specific vocabulary, meanings, and synonyms." (P#07), another participant asserted, "digital education allows students to refer to recorded lessons and use electronic resources like online dictionaries" (P#08). It was also emphasized that "digital tools help students assimilate new vocabulary' (P#02). Participants also stated that there are many hands-on activities that "help them to learn new vocabulary and grammar, and practice them" (P#10), and such tools and apps can help "making English learning in their hands" as stated by a participant (P#04).

In addition, some participants mentioned the potential of digital learning, which contributes to enhancing their teaching efficiency and, as a result, helps them address learning loss. One participant explained this as follows: "Many programs and applications provide educational activities and enrichments to help teachers and students." (P#09)

Another participant indicated, "Through digital learning tools, my students and I can access various educational resources and materials, which facilitate communication between us". (P#05)

Digital learning platforms offer many advantages, such as providing rich teaching materials, enabling differentiated instruction, and facilitating efficient teacher-student communication. This facilitates the reduction of teachers' workload. Thus, teachers can allocate more time to instructional activities, provide better support for students' learning progress, and effectively address learning losses.

Overall, feedback from respondents provided illuminating perspectives on the advantages of using digital learning tools such as Madrasati and IEN to address learning loss and develop students' English skills. Teachers noted improvements in pronunciation, listening, and reading skills owing to the availability of diverse applications and multimedia enrichment. However, they highlighted that writing and speaking skills require personalized attention.

Challenges in Implementing Digital Learning

Despite the potential benefits of digital learning, several issues have influenced its effectiveness. Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews, the teachers identified some challenges in implementing digital learning, such as the Madrasati platform and other digital learning tools. These challenges include teacher training and professional development, teachers' workloads, inappropriate class sizes, socioeconomic constraints, parental intervention, and home environments. Although some of these issues were mentioned as potential causes of learning loss, they also emerged during the interviews as challenges in implementing digital learning. These challenges are discussed in detail below, supported by excerpts from the teachers' insights.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

One of the most significant challenges is insufficient training of teachers to effectively use digital platforms. Some teachers expressed concerns about their limited familiarity with the technical demands of digital teaching and pedagogical methods required for online teaching. Consequently, they struggle to fully leverage the features of Madrasati or to integrate other digital tools into their lessons. As one teacher stated, 'The sudden shift to distance education left many of us unprepared, and there was no time for proper training' (P#10). Another teacher emphasized that " digital learning requires teachers to have the necessary technical competencies, which some of us lack" (P#06). In addition, one participant stated that "some

teachers lack knowledge of teaching methods and techniques for integrating technology, which reduces their effectiveness in digital teaching," (P#04). It was also explained by a participant that, "Insufficient training makes some teachers feel pressured to adapt to unfamiliar digital tools", she continued "this added tension may lead to fatigue and diminished effectiveness." (P#01)

This confirms that insufficient teachers' training and lack of their professional development are key challenges in implementing digital learning, which can negatively impact teachers' ability to effectively use digital platforms.

Teachers' Workload

Data analysis showed variance and differences among participants regarding the impact of digital learning on teachers' workloads. Some participants believed that digital education provided great facilities for teachers and contributed to reducing their burdens. One participant stated, Traditional lessons' preparation and activities used to consume a lot of time and effort, now with digital learning this is no longer the case, but rather it has become easy" (P#02). Another participant indicated, "For me, digital learning has saved me time and effort in preparing lessons and preparing assignments and exams" (P#08). Another participant explained this as follows:

Preparing lessons and activities has now become much easier compared to traditional education …. Many programs and applications provide educational activities and enrichments to help teachers and students. (P#09)

In addition, some participants mentioned the potential of digital learning tools to automate routine tasks, such as grading and assessment. This is reinforced by the following quote from one participant: "These digital platforms, such as Madrasati, provide automated grading for assignments and quizzes, which can help reducing the time I spend on marking." (P#05)

Digital learning platforms offer numerous facilities that enhance teaching efficiency and alleviate teachers' workload. These tools streamline lesson planning, automate assessments, facilitate communication, and provide ready-made resources, allowing teachers to focus more on instruction and student engagement than on administrative tasks.

However, some teachers perceived that the transition to digital learning increased their workloads. Preparing digital materials, troubleshooting technical issues, and monitoring students' online activities requires additional time and effort. One teacher highlighted that 'heavy workload reduces focus, weakens performance, and decreases our motivation to use these platforms' (P#03). Another participant stated, "It is not just about teaching. We have to be IT experts, troubleshoot problems, and ensure students are engaged, all while handling our regular duties" (P#07). Another teacher elaborated on the following issues: "When I have many practical burdens, what do you expect from me? .... of course this weakened my teaching performance." (P#04)

When teachers experience or are forced to contend with such burdens, their ability to focus on effective teaching is detracted. Chronic stress can reduce enthusiasm for innovative methods, thereby limiting the effectiveness of digital tools in combating learning loss. Thus, teachers' well-being directly affects their ability to deliver high-quality instruction.

Although some teachers believed that digital education reduced their workload and facilitated their teaching, others perceived it as increasing their workload, which detracted from their ability

to focus on effective teaching. This variance and difference among teachers could be due to a lack of digital proficiency, insufficient professional development, challenges in technology adaptation, or a preference for traditional paradigms.

Large Class Sizes

Managing a large number of students in virtual classrooms is another systemic challenge. Teachers reported that monitoring participation, addressing individual queries, and providing feedback became increasingly difficult in the larger classes. One teacher explained: "When there are more than 30 or 40 students in one class, it is impossible to ensure that everyone is paying attention or participating actively." (P#01)

Another noted that in large classes, students who are shy or struggling often get left behind because there is no time to address their needs individually" (P#07). Thus, this challenge limits individualized attention and reduces the effectiveness of digital tools in addressing diverse student needs.

Socioeconomic Disparities

One of the themes mentioned in the interviews was unequal access to digital devices and reliable internet connections among students. Socioeconomic disparities imply that some families with multiple children cannot afford adequate resources, forcing them to share devices with their siblings. This may limit their ability to participate fully in lessons or even miss them.

Economic barriers in some households, as shared by a participant, can make "siblings alternate using the same tablet, laptop, or smartphone' (P#10). Another teacher reported that he knew that "two brothers in different classes alternate using one tablet" and he continued "this affected their learning progress" (P#03). This makes consistent attendance in online classes difficult, especially if siblings simultaneously have classes to attend.

In addition, limited or unstable internet access in some rural or remote areas hinders the effective use of digital learning platforms. Even if devices are available, teachers noted that some students reside in areas with poor or unreliable internet service, resulting in frequent disconnections. This disrupts lesson flow and diminishes student engagement. One participant stated, "We have some students in rural areas who cannot attend regularly because of poor internet connectivity" (P#06). Another reported that "Sometimes I missed some students during distance learning time … as they get kicked out of the session because of internet problems' (P#02). These disparities hinder equal and consistent access to learning opportunities, particularly among students from low-income families and those living in remote areas.

Parental Intervention and Home Environment

Although parental involvement can be beneficial, excessive interference during online lessons has been identified as a significant issue. Some parents may complete homework or answer questions on behalf of their children, thus undermining the learning process. One teacher remarked, "In some cases, some parents interrupt the lesson to ask questions or complain, which disrupts the lesson" (P#08). Another added, "Parents sometimes help their children answer questions during class, which is a challenge' (P#05). Another one explained: "Some parents help too much … I know they want their kids to be notable outstanding, distinguished ... but this reduces their real engagement". (P#09)

While parental support is essential, some parents overstep by doing homework and assignments for their children. This undermines student independence and reduces their sense of accountability. One teacher stated, "some parents do the homework for their kids" (P#01). Another explained "Parents' constant interventions during distance learning or by doing homework reduced students' sense of accountability" (P#09). In addition, "students' independence is also obstructed due to their parents' over-involvement" one participant noted (P#04).

Thus, frequent parental intervention during lessons or assignments reduces students' sense of responsibility and their ability to learn independently. This disrupts the learning process and reduces the effectiveness of learning platforms. When parent complete assignments for their children, this leads to artificially inflated grades and obscures learning deficits.

On the other hand, in some households, parents are minimally involved, leaving children to navigate online learning alone, often without autonomy or self-discipline to stay engaged. One teacher remarked, 'There is a lack of interest and follow-up by some parents … sometimes children sleep or are distracted during distance learning sessions' (P#03). Another one emphasized: "I believe that parental supervision and monitoring are important. Some students experienced distractions and poor attention during lessons". (P#06)

The issues of limited space and noisy environments for some families have also been raised. One teacher reported that "there were sometime interference of sounds and noises during distance learning" (P#07). Another teacher explained, " When brothers and sisters are in the same room or small house… it is difficult for students to focus' (P#02). Thus, large families in small homes contend with overcrowding and background noise, reducing students' capacity to engage in learning and to focus on teacher instruction.

Effective Practices to Mitigate Learning Loss

Given the potential impact of learning loss, the participants highlighted several preventive strategies, stressing the need for purposeful lesson planning and interactive instructional methods. Among the various approaches, flipped learning has emerged as an effective strategy for preparing students with foundational knowledge that enhances their understanding and engagement. Teachers posted instructional videos and printed or digital worksheets for students to preview before class. This allowed students time to discuss and analyze the content during synchronous lessons, saved valuable class time, and helped students take more responsibility for their learning process.

The teachers described how providing pre-class resources allowed students to be better prepared, saving time during lessons for deeper discussions and activities. "Flipped learning enables students to engage with the material beforehand and come to class ready to participate" explained one teacher (P#06). Another teacher described his experience as follows:

 I employed flipped learning for some lessons, provided students with short videos with a simple worksheet, and asked them to follow them and solve the worksheet before class. I found this to be a very helpful strategy, as students attended with prior knowledge and information about the lesson. (P#09)

In addition, the participants indicated positive impacts when using collaborative learning activities. For instance, collaboration promotes group discussions and online learning activities. Offline inter-group interactions, on the other hand, enhance communication skills and friendly

interactions. These activities were particularly effective in fighting monotony and isolation because they all involved communication between the students.

This was emphasized by most of the participants. One teacher stated that "collaborative activities reduce isolation and enhance engagement during digital learning" (P#10). Another participant mentioned that "I found encouraging students to collaborate with each other during and out of the class has a positive impact on their progress' (P#02).

Another practice that the teachers identified as helpful was encouraging self-learning. Through independent research and resource utilization, teachers facilitate adequate student capacity for self-education. According to the teachers' explanations, students need these skills to memorize information better in the long haul, and self-learning would minimize learning loss. One teacher emphasized that "The success of digital learning depends largely on the student possessing self-learning skills' (P#01). Another explained:

There are many educational enrichments on iEN and YouTube channels and the Madrasati platform, but those who benefit most from these digital tools are those who have self-learning skills. (P#04).

Encouraging self-learning could help build students' capacity for independent learning, which is viewed as a cornerstone for mitigating learning loss.

Consequently, the success of digital learning in addressing learning loss depends mainly on employing effective strategies for teaching English, such as flipped learning and collaborative learning activities. In addition, promoting students' self-learning skills enables them to search for information, view, read, and search from multiple sources and develop their analysis and thinking skills with the importance of teachers' follow-up and supervision. Such strategies focus on student-centered learning and leveraging digital tools to effectively address and prevent learning loss.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings related to learning loss and the effectiveness of digital learning in EFL education. The focus was on how EFL teachers view learning loss, the role played by digital learning in addressing learning loss, and the difficulties faced in using digital learning tools. In addition, valuable insights and implications for teaching practices and policies are also discussed.

Perceived Learning Loss

The findings of this study show that learning loss in the context of EFL is quite complex, leading to a decline in various English skills such as speaking, pronunciation, and writing. The participants asserted that these challenges emerged because of the rapid shift to distance learning following the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, as well as due to limited interaction and engagement and a lack of practice and reinforcement consistently.

The results of this study are aligned with earlier studies carried out on learning loss and online learning. It was determined by Kuhfield et al. (2020) that when there are disruptions in structured practice and interactive learning, language acquisition becomes difficult. Such disruptions can lead to decreased retention and impaired the development of language skills (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020).

The current study confirms these findings, as the EFL teachers noted that the linguistic capabilities of their students declined significantly. This also emphasizes the outcomes of Choi and Chung (2021), who found that a gap in language skill development had emerged because students did not receive real-time feedback from teachers and did not interact with their peers consistently. EFL students are more likely to face these issues because their language skill development mostly depends on daily communication practice within their school environment.

Effectiveness of Digital Learning in Addressing Learning Loss

The findings suggest that digital learning tools such as the Madrasati and iEN platforms can reduce learning loss as they can promote self-learning, provide educational resources and enrichment activities, and support flexible learning platforms that improve students' learning and interaction. This emphasizes the outcomes of previous studies that digital educational tools support learner independence and encourage self-guided study habits, which are crucial for language retention (Chong & Reinders, 2022). Aljuaid' study (2021) also showed that digital tools offer effective means for achieving sustained learning with interactive activities and practices.

An interesting finding of this study was that some students, particularly those who were less engaged in traditional classes, demonstrated increased participation and engagement in a digital learning environment. This contradicts the widespread belief that students are less likely to be engaged in digital learning environments because of the lack of face-to-face interaction. Previous studies have demonstrated similar findings (Aljuaid, 2021; Al-Samiri, 2021; Zhang, 2020), suggesting that digital learning platforms can facilitate a more comfortable environment that is less intimidating for introverted or shy students and encourages them to participate confidently. Learning environments with reduced pressure and self-directed learning opportunities are more likely to promote active participation and engagement.

Despite the valuable opportunities to improve listening, reading, and pronunciation skills, participants observed difficulties in writing and speaking skills development, which can be due to the lack of real-time feedback and interactive interactions. This is supported by Alzamil (2021), who concluded that face-to-face interaction remains critical for language skills development, particularly for students' speaking abilities.

Challenges in Implementing Digital Learning

The study findings demonstrate that there are several challenges have emerged as potential factors hindering the effective implementation of digital learning in reducing EFL learning loss, including inadequate professional training, increased workload, large class sizes, socioeconomic disparities, and parental involvement. This supports Alqahtani (2022), who concluded that, while digital learning tools offer valuable learning opportunities, they might also present challenges to students' engagement and motivation. Pokharel (2022) and Zhang (2020) reported similar results, noting that because of an insufficient professional development, teachers were struggled to adapt to online instruction. In addition, Chang and Fang (2020) identified higher teacher workload, lack of technical training, and low student engagement as major obstacles to online learning. This study shows that lack of structured and continuous professional development programs has limited teachers' ability to effectively use digital platforms. Teachers often resort to trial-and-error methods, which are time consuming and ineffective. Thus, there is a clear need for ongoing professional development and technical training in using digital platforms to ensure

that teachers can make the most of these tools. Promoting technological proficiency among teachers is a key factor in increasing their ability to use digital platforms effectively.

Furthermore, socioeconomic disparities have been found to affect student engagement in digital learning contexts. This was also determined in earlier studies, which suggested that students from low-income backgrounds might face difficulties accessing reliable internet connections and digital devices (Kang et al., 2024; Seoudi & Carter, 2022; Tan et al., 2022; Zhang, 2020). Socioeconomic status is particularly important for the success of students' online learning. This is because a good socioeconomic status enables parents to provide their children with more home learning resources. It also allows parents to spend more time monitoring and supporting the learning progress of their children in online learning sittings. According to Tan et al. (2022) students with more home monitoring and support have more learning resources access, and are more likely to have more cognitive-emotional regulation, high online self-efficacy, and digital skills development. Therefore, it is important to consider addressing socioeconomic disparities and support low-income parents to enable them to effectively monitor and support their children's online learning progress.

Additionally, the results of this study demonstrate the importance of parental involvement in the digital learning context, but emphasize that excessive intervention may have negative effects on students' independence and accountability, and as a result, hinder their performance. This is consistent with studies that emphasized the significant role of parental involvement in improving students' performance and achievement (Banda & Ota, 2024; Kang et al., 2024; Olivar & Naparan, 2023; Rohmatillah et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2022). It is also aligned with other studies which reported that excessive parental involvement may have negative effects on students' learning outcomes (Barger et al., 2019; El Nokali et al., 2010; Kang et al., 2024; Otani, 2020; Qasim et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2024). This underscores the complexity of parental involvement patterns in their children's learning processes and their potential impact on students' performance, particularly in the digital learning context. Although parental involvement plays a vital role in improving students' performance and achievement, the negative impact of parental involvement is particularly evident when parents excessively participate in performing their children's homework and learning tasks or attending online classes on their behalf. In addition, parental over-controlling and constant monitoring could be considered as negative patterns of parental involvement. These patterns of parental involvement can result in excessive pressure, reduced motivation, and decreased independence. Parent over-involvement may also artificially boost learners' achievement levels without meaningful performance. Thus, they can negatively affect students' learning performance and achievement in online learning settings (Qasim et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2024).

EFL learning, especially in terms of oral skills, depends on consistent and authentic engagement. If parents distort performance by intervening or if the home environment discourages active participation, teachers struggle to gauge genuine progress and effectively address learning loss. This dynamic creates additional challenges for teachers who must balance lesson management and address parental concerns. According to Tan et al. (2022) parents should not be highly involved or totally uninvolved in the online learning process. Instead, the quality of parental involvement is crucial and should include different combinations of practices to meet the learning needs of their children. Hence, strategies that balance parental involvement with encouraging student autonomy in digital learning settings should be adopted.

The study's findings also showed that carrying out authentic interactions on digital platforms was difficult. The participants reported that online platforms might be unable to simulate the interpersonal elements of traditional classrooms that are needed for language learning, particularly a lack of real-time interactions and instant feedback. In the social constructivist context, learning refers to a socio-cognitive process in which interaction is required to acquire knowledge. In digital learning environments, effective direct communication may not occur, and because of this, students miss out on key elements of social learning, such as discourse and body language (Qassarras, 2023). Thus, more interactive aspects and discourses need to be incorporated into learning platforms to address the issue of learning loss in EFL contexts.

A notable finding was that the participants had different perspectives regarding how digital learning affected their workload. Some teachers were of the view that it facilitated lesson planning and other administrative tasks and made it easier for them, while others stated that it was more stressful because it increased their responsibilities. These varying viewpoints may be due to the different digital competence and literacy levels of the participating teachers (Alqahtani, 2022; Choi & Chung, 2021). Teachers with strong technological competencies may find digital learning tools more beneficial, whereas those with limited skills and competencies may struggle with an increased workload. Moreover, because of a lack of training and increased work burden on teachers, they may show resistance to adopting technology. This was previously reported by Zhang (2020), who concluded that the success of digital learning depends on teachers' technological skills and competencies. Hence, digital learning solutions will only be successful when contextual factors, such as teacher readiness, institutional backing, and instructional design, support them.

Overall, it can be concluded that the effective implementation of digital tools may be hindered by several challenges, including insufficient teachers' support and competencies, socioeconomic disparities, family interference and dynamics, and lack of authentic and real-time interactions along with instant feedback. These challenges should be addressed by adopting effective practices and strategies that maximize the benefits of digital learning and enhance EFL instruction experiences for educators and students.

Implications for Teaching Practice and Policy

This study has several implications that are not limited to EFL education in Saudi Arabia. First, it emphasizes the importance of consistent teacher professional development in enhancing digital skills and teaching competencies. In addition, systematic educational capacity-building programs are required to support and encourage technologically integrated pedagogical practices. Such initiatives can contribute to maximizing the benefits of digital learning and reducing its challenges, particularly in EFL instruction (Zhang, 2020).

Second, this study asserts that continuous access to digital resources is essential for decreasing educational disparities. It was reported that inadequate technological access fosters an educational divide, particularly among low-income populations (Kang et al., 2024; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2022). Therefore, priority should be given to providing the necessary digital resources and reliable internet access to those students from low-income backgrounds or rural areas along with more efforts to mitigate socioeconomic disparities.

Third, this study demonstrates that it is important to identify the positive patterns and effective practices of parental intervention that contribute to improving students' online learning performance. In addition, parents must be educated about the negative impacts of their excessive

intervention and expectations of their roles and involvement in digital learning processes. Positive patterns of parental involvement may include providing learning resources, social and emotional support, supervision and monitoring of learning progress, and offering guidance and incentives (Banda & Ota, 2024; Qasim et al., 2021; Rohmatillah et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2022). These parental involvement patterns are very important for helping learners overcome challenges in online learning settings, improving their learning outcomes, and achieving online learning success.

Finally, in terms of social constructivism perspective, digital learning thrives when there is an interactive learning environment. Hence, digital learning platforms that support effective real-time communication and simulate live interactions should be developed and adopted. These features are essential for language skill development (Ghavifekr, 2020). Along with considering these factors, educational stakeholders should promote and encourage digital learning as a valuable innovation in language instruction and sustainable education practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that digital learning can present promising solutions for mitigating EFL learning loss, but its success depends on its effective implementation along with addressing existing challenges such as insufficient teacher' professional development, increased teachers' workload, large class size, excessive parental intervention, and socioeconomic disparities. By adapting best practices and strategies along with addressing the existing challenges, educational systems can benefit greatly from the unique potential of digital tools to address EFL gaps and reduce the long-term impact of learning loss. This will contribute to promoting digital learning initiatives, creating a more inclusive and effective educational environment, as well as enhancing educational experiences of teachers and students in Saudi Arabia and beyond. This study recommends ongoing developing and adapting pedagogical, interactive, student-centered digital learning approaches that promote and encourage authentic interactions, autonomy, skill development, and retention. Future research should focus on AI-driven language tutors, virtual reality classrooms, and gamified learning to enhance EFL instruction. Further studies should also examine the long-term effects of digital learning on language retention, fluency, and student motivation, particularly among students with learning difficulties.

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