

EFL VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: PERCEPTION, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a fad in the 21st century academic landscape. A number of studies found out that students perceive VLEs positively and that VLEs facilitate learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and provide an avenue for educators to extend a helping hand to their EFL students. Sustaining VLEs is not an easy task as it raises various concerns and challenges, particularly in the domain of EFL learning. This paper reports on the results of a qualitative study aimed to shed light on the stakeholders' perception towards VLE as well as the significant concerns and challenges encountered by EFL lecturers and their students on their actual use of VLEs in a higher education institution. Furthermore, the study unveiled the practical tips to create efficient and effective VLEs, based on the suggestions of both the EFL students and their lecturers.

Keywords: Virtual Learning Environment; e-learning; higher education

1. Introduction

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) has become a significant part of the 21st century academic landscape. It is a fad that continually gains immense popularity in the academe, which is gradually influenced by technology, blended learning, and the students' increasing propensity to use their smartphone or tablets wherever they are and whenever they like (Kukulka-Hulme et al., 2011, Tuzlukova, Al-Busaidi, Coombe & Stojkovic, 2016; and Scully, 2008). VLE refers to a particular form of e-learning technology that uses networked computers to provide a range of functions to tutors, students and other users (O'Leary, 2004). VLE is also defined as a web-based learning platform or learning management system created by a lecturer for his/her students, and intended for various academic purposes (Martins & Kellermanns, 2004). In a VLE, students can communicate, collaborate, access learning materials, upload homework and requirements, answer online quizzes, seek assistance from their lecturer, etc. beyond the confines of their classroom and beyond the official class hours. Created in various social networking sites or learning platforms like *Moodle*, *Edmodo*, *Schoology* and *Google Classroom*, VLE provides an avenue for educators to reach out to their

students by uploading ample learning resources, encouraging the students to raise questions about their lessons and making them more independent and responsible of their academic advancement (Kear, 2007; Dayag, 2018).

Recent studies suggest that VLE is perceived positively by students and that it has a positive effect on their educational experience (Al-Kathiri, 2014; Bicen, 2014; Al-Said, 2015; Al-Ruheili and Al-Saidi, 2015; Dayag, 2018). VLE fosters interaction and collaboration among students (Kear, 2007; Dayag, 2018) as it offers a number of communication tools that facilitate effective communication and collaboration among the primary stakeholders — students and educators alike — of the academe (Weller, 2007; Warner, 2013; Al-Kathiri, 2014). In several settings, VLE is perceived to have a positive impact on students' communication, collaboration and participation in the classroom (Mimirinis & Bhattacharya, 2007; Balasubramanian, Jaykumar & Fukey, 2014; Al-Ruheili & Al-Saidi, 2015, Al-Kathiri, 2014, Al-Said, 2015).

In the context of EFL, recent studies suggest that VLE is perceived by students as a helpful tool that offers a safe learning environment that allows them to deepen their knowledge and enhance their communication skills beyond the confines of their classrooms (Al-Kathiri, 2014; Bicen, 2014; Al-Said, 2015; Al-Ruheili and Al-Saidi, 2015). VLE is also deemed useful to students in terms of providing timely opportunities for learning and providing supplementary instructional materials that enrich students' learning experiences (Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017; Dayag, 2018).

2. The study

2.1. Statement of the problem

The study endeavored to ascertain the perception of selected EFL lecturers and Omani students on virtual learning environments. Specifically, it aimed to shed light on the following:

1. What learning platforms/sites/ learning management systems do the informants use?
2. How do the informants perceive VLEs?
3. What are the merits and demerits of VLEs?
4. What are the primary concerns (considerations) in sustaining VLEs?
5. What challenges have the informants encountered while using VLEs?
6. What are the informants' suggestions or tips to enhance VLEs?

2.2. Methodology

This qualitative research was conducted in Shinas College of Technology (ShCT), Sultanate of Oman, during the first and second semester of 2016-2017 academic year.

2.3. Research participants

The key informants were two lecturers and a total of 21 EFL students — comprised of 12 female and 9 male students who are members of at least one virtual learning environment (VLE) during the conduct of this study. All the student-informants (aged 17 to 21 years old) are enrolled in ShCT's Foundation Program. The lecturer-informants were selected because they are both creators and active users of VLEs; whereas, the student-informants were identified based on the following criteria: 1) they are enrolled in ELC's Foundation Program, 2) they currently belong to a VLE, and 3) they are willing to be interviewed for this study.

2.4. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to encourage the informants to freely offer their insight and observation on virtual learning environments. The semi-structured interviews were then recorded and transcribed. To unveil the common themes, patterns, concepts, insights and understandings (Patton, 2002), the qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. General perceptions of VLEs

The qualitative data revealed that the informants generally have positive perceptions of virtual learning environments. This supports the findings of earlier studies that students perceive VLE positively (Mimirinis & Bhattacharya, 2007; Al-Kathiri, 2014; Bicen, 2014; Al-Said, 2015; Al-Ruheili and Al-Saidi, 2015; Dayag, 2018). As shown in Table 1, the informants conveyed that they are members of VLEs created in free learning platforms or learning management systems, namely: Edmodo, Moodle, and Google Classroom. Some student informants indicated that their choice of VLE depends on what VLE their lecturer opts to use in their class.

Table 1. Informants and their virtual learning environments

#	Informant	VLE/ Learning Management System
1	Lecturer 1	Edmodo and Moodle

2	Lecturer 2	Edmodo, Google Classroom and Moodle
3	Yaqub*	Edmodo
4	Saleh	Google Classroom
5	Sultan	Edmodo and Moodle
6	Wael	Moodle
7	Mohammed A.	Edmodo and Moodle
8	Moosa	Edmodo and Google Classroom
9	Majid	Edmodo and Moodle
10	Mohammed B.	Google Classroom
11	Hussein	Edmodo
12	Zainab A.	Edmodo and Google Classroom
13	Sumaiya	Edmodo and Moodle
14	Hajer	Moodle
15	Baraah	Edmodo, Google Classroom and Moodle
16	Sheikha	Google Classroom
17	Ruqaya	Moodle
18	Fakharia	Edmodo and Moodle
19	Zainab B.	Edmodo and Moodle
20	Hanoof	Edmodo and Moodle
21	Jumana	Edmodo and Moodle
22	Marwa	Edmodo, Google Classroom and Moodle
23	Aisha	Edmodo and Moodle

**Not the actual names of the informants*

When asked to elaborate upon their choice of VLE, the informants gave varied responses that underscore their opinion on the learning platform they use. Some of the responses are as follows:

“I like Edmodo because it is safe and easy to use. Now, I regularly open our Edmodo group to get updates, communicate with my classmates and submit my homework to our Mister”[the term used by many Omani students to address their male EFL lecturers].”

“My virtual classrooms are found in Moodle and Edmodo. I think I like to use Edmodo more than Moodle though because most of my classmates are active in our Edmodo group.”

“I join all the VLEs created by my teachers in Google Classroom, Edmodo and Moodle because I get the chance to ask my teacher a lot of questions and message my classmates when we have homework.”

“My teacher in Speaking (Foundation Program) introduced me to Edmodo. At first I did not want to participate in our group, but I was encouraged when many of my friends joined and told me that our teacher often upload links to videos from TED talks.”

It is also noteworthy that the lecturer-informants regard VLEs positively and that they recommend it to their fellow EFL educators. As one informant expressed: “VLE is a fascinating and useful innovation. It may be challenging and hard to maintain VLEs but the benefits that our students get from joining VLEs make the sacrifice worth it. Every EFL lecturer must try using a VLE.”

Figure 1 shows a sample VLE created in a free social learning platform (Edmodo). Some of the informants claimed that they actively participate in the VLE named “Writing for Life” because they are regularly reminded of their homework and course requirements. The figure illustrates how an EFL lecturer makes use of the VLE to reach out to his students by sending them a gentle reminder and a link to a YouTube video, which students can access and watch wherever they are and whenever they like.

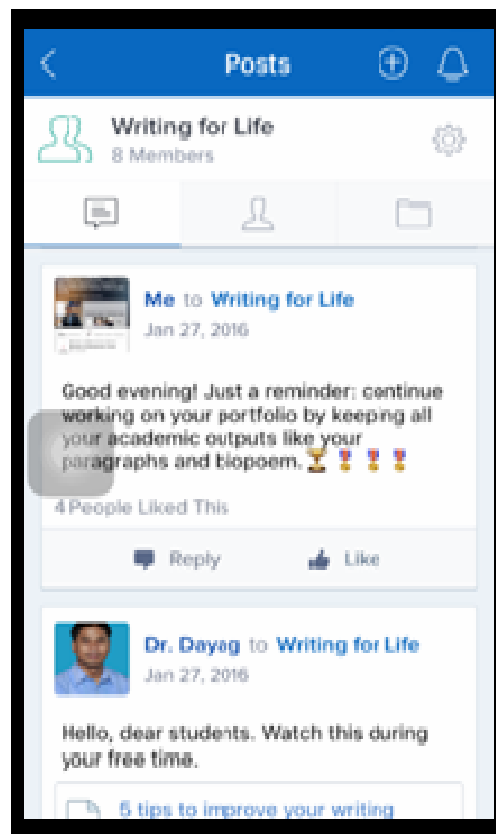


Figure 1. Screenshot of a sample VLE created in Edmodo

3.2. Merits of VLEs

Informants perceive that VLEs have a number of merits or strengths. The informants regard VLE as a good avenue for lecturers to reach out to their EFL students. Through the VLEs, EFL lecturers can easily lend a hand to the students in varied ways. Some of the informants’

responses were as follows: “VLE is good because I can ask help from my teacher”; “Shy students like me can ask questions in the discussion board and my teacher gives answers on the same day or maybe after two days;” “My teacher reminds me of my projects or essays so I do not forget what I need to do and submit these on time.” This finding runs parallel to the findings of recent studies (Kear, 2007; Bicen, 2014; Al-Ruheili & Al-Saidi, 2015; and Dayag, 2018).

Moreover, the informants pointed out that VLEs are perceived to be useful in deepening the students’ knowledge by providing students with meaningful learning experiences and enhancing their communication skills. Some of the informants’ responses include: “It is helpful in learning English;” I like the videos shared by my teacher in our VLE;” and “I can communicate with my teacher and classmates even outside our classroom.” This finding lends support to the outcomes of earlier studies, proving that VLEs facilitate EFL learning and help develop their communication skills in the target language beyond the confines of their classrooms (Al-Kathiri, 2014; Bicen, 2014; Al-Said, 2015; Al-Ruheili and Al-Saidi, 2015).

The informants also conveyed the idea that they perceive VLE as a useful tool in fostering collaboration and making EFL learning enjoyable. As one informant aptly put it:

As I can connect with my classmates and friends through our VLE or even Whatsapp, we can do our homework and projects more easily and submit these before the deadline. We usually have fun when we study and do our projects together.

This supports the findings of previous studies that VLEs encourage collaboration among students (Bicen, 2014; Bayburtsyan, 2016; Al-Said, 2015; Al-Ruheili and Al-Saidi, 2015; and Dayag, 2018). With the opportunity to seek help and lend a helping hand to each other, EFL students regard VLE as an avenue for cooperation; hence, VLE boosts collaboration among the students.

Furthermore, the informants suggested that VLE promotes autonomy among EFL students. Some of the informants’ responses were as follows: “Through our VLE, I can get many learning materials shared by our teacher and learn from these during my vacant time”; “Our VLE make[s] it easy to do our homeworks like essays and posters”; and “I can do our requirements like presentation and portfolio at home, without time pressure.” It can be gleaned from the informants’ responses that they become more responsible and independent when they join a VLE. This affirms the findings of recent studies that VLEs foster learner independence (Bicen, 2014; Bayburtsyan, 2016; Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017; and Dayag, 2018).

3.3. Demerits of VLEs

A number of informants made it clear that much is left to be desired in terms of offering an excellent, apt and efficient VLE to Omani EFL students. The informants pointed out two demerits or weaknesses of the VLEs they use in their EFL classes: cultural sensitivity and time constraint. Some of their responses include: “Some boys send me messages and ask my [phone] number (lady informant)”; “VLE is not good if boys can send messages to us” [lady informant].

Furthermore, one key informant reported that her group’s VLE is sometimes used by some male students to grab attention for themselves by posting unnecessary materials that are not relevant to their lessons.

The first demerit dwells on the possible problem that may prop up once male students begin to interact with their female classmates. Hence, the lecturer must see to it that students do not make use of their VLE as a dating site. If the VLE is not properly managed, the available learning platforms or sites that serve as an avenue for the creation of VLE may not be appropriate to the context of students in Oman. As far as the culture of Omanis is concerned, EFL lecturers need to be wary of the possibility of intimate communication between male and female students. EFL lecturers must ensure that their VLEs discourage direct interaction between male and female students.

The second demerit — time constraint — affects both the lecturer and the students. For the lecturer, it is a challenge. As VLEs require time, a lecturer needs to balance his/her time in doing all his other responsibilities and keeping his/her VLE up-to-date. Although it may seem effortless for some educators, sustaining a VLE (i.e. updating its contents and sending prompt replies to students) devours a considerable amount of time, which may otherwise be allotted to other academic responsibilities like attending meetings and doing academic research. Actually VLEs may take much of the educator’s free time if the students are so much engrossed with their virtual learning that they interact with their teacher regularly by sending queries, submitting drafts and asking the teacher to critique their drafts, and sharing their insights on the topics/issues raised in the VLE. On the other hand, students may be pressured when there are many homework tasks or requirements which are to be submitted online through the VLE. Hence, the informants suggested that EFL lecturers must not be too demanding in setting deadlines and they should give a reasonable number of homework considering the courses of the students.

3.4. Pervading concerns in sustaining VLEs

The informants expressed their conviction that the success of VLEs depends on at least three concerns or factors that must be given serious consideration. Figure 2 shows the following pervading concerns: interest, support and time.

First of all, lecturers must have a genuine interest to reach out to their students in order to create VLEs for their students; whereas the students must also have the interest to use VLEs to further their foreign language learning. Without the sustained zeal and initiative to try the VLE for their class, students cannot benefit from VLEs. The VLEs created by lecturers are futile if their students do not use them. Furthermore, without ample support from the college officials in the form of policies and provision of IT staff, lecturers may not be encouraged to go the extra mile in creating and sustaining VLEs for students.

Second, support is a significant concern as both technical and administrative support boost the confidence of the lecturers and students to enhance and patronize their VLE. Technical support is needed especially in uploading photos and videos which may need a heavy amount of time.

Finally, time is the third concern among students and lecturers alike. Creating a VLE and uploading instructional contents may easily be done in the college premises beyond the lecturers' class hours; however, responding to the students' queries may need so much time. Hence, lecturers must allot some of their free time for the sustenance of their VLE, particularly for sending responses to students' query, and sharing audio, video or textual contents on a regular basis.

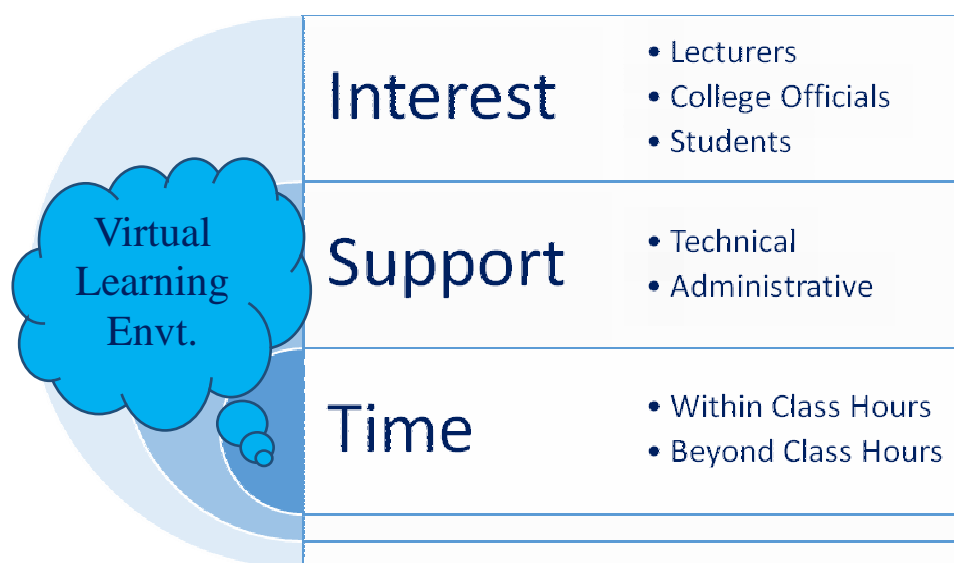


Figure 2. Pervading concerns in sustaining Virtual Learning Environments

3.5. Challenges encountered while using VLEs

The informants identified five challenges that they often encounter and address to make their VLEs successful. These include difficulty to collaborate, time management, students' native language preference, lack of support, and weak internet connectivity. Three of the challenges were identified by the student respondents, while the others were pointed out by the lecturer respondents.

Some student-informants claimed that they found it difficult to collaborate with other students as some lack motivation or technical knowledge to participate in their VLEs. Some of their classmates do not have the initiative to learn the basic features of the VLEs as they readily complain about the intricacies or complexities involved in accessing their virtual classroom.

Another challenge pointed out by the student-informants is time management. This is evident in the responses of two informants: "I do not have much free time to open my VLE regularly; No time for submitting homework in Edmodo." This challenge may be addressed if the lecturers do not overload their students with homework.

In addition, the native language preference among some students likewise poses a challenge. As observed by some student-informants, many of their fellow students frequently prefer to communicate in their native tongue, which is Arabic. This is quite understandable as some of them are not yet that confident to use the target language, hence, they resort to Arabic whenever they communicate with either the lecturer or their classmates.

Meanwhile, the lecturer-informants identified two challenges: lack of support, and working with luddites and pessimists. An informant claimed that lack of technical support affects the sustenance of VLE. "Sometimes, I need technical support to solve the issues in our virtual learning environment." The informants also pointed out that weak internet connectivity is another challenge. "It is difficult to log in once in a while so I have to open my VLE in the College, especially if I need to upload video clips."

Regardless whether EFL lecturers have created their VLEs to promote learner independence or to effectively reach out to their EFL students, they certainly need to go the extra mile and have an unwavering resolve to overcome the challenges that may hinder the success of their VLE.

3.6. Suggestions to enhance VLEs

The key informants put forward a number of suggestions and tips to improve VLEs and make these suitable and sensitive to the context of Omani EFL learners. As the VLEs are owned

and managed by the lecturers, it is appropriate to enumerate the pervading tips offered by the primary users — the EFL students — who would benefit much from attractive, secure, user-friendly and effective VLEs.

- a) Make the VLE eye-catching by putting familiar icons or images related to English language learning in particular and education in general.
- b) Upload instructional materials (e.g., PowerPoint presentations and handouts) regularly. This will encourage as many students as possible to join VLEs.
- c) Share links of audios and/or videos of lessons to maximize the power of blended learning.
- d) Encourage students to send messages, raise questions, and request clarifications exclusively in English; however, male students must not be allowed to interact with their female classmates.
- e) Conduct online quizzes. This is a good way to check EFL students' progress.
- f) Announce homework in the VLE and follow this up in the classroom.
- g) Encourage students to turn in or submit their work on time. Once students have developed the habit of submitting their homework or project on time, they would surely deserve a pat on their back.
- h) Praise students who actively participate in the VLEs. Do this both in the VLE and in the classroom.
- i) Let students revise and resubmit their homework or project if they have submitted outputs of poor quality. If they do so, it is a positive sign that they are becoming intrinsically motivated to learn and enhance their skills.
- j) Conduct online polls to let students feel that their opinion and insights are taken into consideration.
- k) Let students do some collaborative homework or group projects.
- l) Encourage students to share great quotes, informative articles, or links to informative audio and video clips related to their lessons.

The informants posited that following the aforementioned suggestions or tips to enhance VLEs would certainly help the lecturers to create interactive, user-friendly and effective VLEs for their EFL students

4. Limitations of the study and implications for future research

Some of the limitations of the study include the following:

- a) results of this study do not provide conclusive evidence on the effectiveness of VLEs because the study primarily focused on the key informants' perception towards VLE and not on the students' actual learning performance after joining VLEs;
- b) most of the key informants use Edmodo as their VLE, hence their observations are primarily based on their actual experience in using Edmodo, which may have features that are quite different from those of the other VLEs;
- c) the insight and opinions of the informants were predominantly based on their actual experience with the VLEs during the conduct of this study.

Considering the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the following:

- a) conducting more comprehensive studies on the impact of VLE in EFL learning and teaching;
- b) determining the effect of VLE on developing learner autonomy, collaboration and communication through the conduct of an experimental, or quasi-experimental study;
- c) encouraging EFL students to participate actively in VLEs;
- d) empowering EFL educators to create VLEs and to explore the various features of VLEs that may be helpful to students;
- e) encouraging EFL educators to post or upload challenging and fun-filled activities in respective VLE;
- f) ensuring support for EFL lecturers who reach out to their students by sustaining interactive and effective VLEs;
- g) evaluating EFL lecturers' actual use of VLEs in varied EFL contexts.

5. Conclusion

VLE is perceived by Omani students to have a positive effect on their EFL learning. With carefully designed VLEs, Omani EFL students feel that they can enjoy better collaboration, communication and learning at their own pace; whereas the lecturers can easily promote learner autonomy, lend a hand to their EFL students, and eventually kindle students' love for learning. VLEs in the EFL setting have several merits and demerits, nonetheless the merits outnumber the demerits. While using VLEs, lecturers and students encounter five challenges: difficulty to collaborate, time management, students' native language preference, lack of support, and weak internet connectivity. These challenges must be addressed judiciously to ensure that students participate actively in their EFL virtual classrooms and benefit from the perceived advantages of using VLEs. Meanwhile, the success of VLEs depends on at least three primary concerns: interest, support and time. Hence, sustaining an effective VLE cannot

be possible without the lecturers' genuine commitment to reach out to their EFL students and the authentic zeal to touch their lives.

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Appendix

EFL VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: PERCEPTION, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

Interview Guide

- A. Perception towards VLEs
1. What VLEs (sites/ learning platform/learning management system) do you use in your EFL classes?
 2. A. For students, do you like virtual learning environment/s? Why or why not?
B. For lecturers, do you recommend VLEs in EFL context? Why or why not?
- B. Merits/Strengths/Advantages of VLEs
1. Considering your actual use of your VLE, what do you like best in that VLE?
 2. Does VLE help you in learning English as a Foreign Language? If yes, in what way/s?
- C. Demerits/ Weaknesses/Disadvantages of VLEs
1. What do you like least in your virtual learning environment?
 2. Which of the features of your VLE do you like least? Why?
 3. Which of the features do you want to be improved? Why?
- D. Concerns in sustaining VLEs
1. What are the primary concerns (considerations) in sustaining a VLE?

E. Challenges encountered while using VLEs

1. What challenges/ problems have you encountered while using your VLE?

F. Suggestions to enhance VLEs

1. What feature/s should be found in your VLEs?
2. What are your suggestions to enhance VLEs?