



Online learning of English phonology in Saudi Arabia: Investigating college students' perceptions during the pandemic period

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Abstract

EFL curricula in Saudi Arabia are very comprehensive, with all components of language included in the syllabus. Phonology, or the study of speech sounds, is especially significant in the context of foreign language learning, given its central role in verbal communication. Accuracy of production is a factor of precision in the instruction, which brings in its offing learning challenges in the virtual mode. In the wake of the Covid-19 imposed norms EFL education in Saudi Arabia has undergone drastic changes, giving education new dimensions that deserve investigation. The current study investigates learner perceptions of English phonology online instruction to check its efficacy in the changed paradigm. The study is quantitative in nature, the participants are undergraduate female EFL learners at Qassim University, and the instrument is an online survey. Measurements over six factors indicate that the sample population hold positive perspectives for English phonology virtual learning, the feature that they demonstrate the highest positive attitude for is the teacher's interactive role, whereas pair and group discussion find the least favor with them. The study has long term implications in foreign language learning environments of the future as virtual learning appears to be here to stay.

Keywords: Online; Phonology; Perceptions; Covid 19; Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

COVID-19 which stands for Coronavirus Disease of 2019, and which originated in Wuhan, China in December 2019, led to the creation of a new world order given the fact that the human population worldwide is not dealing with a disease, but a deadly disease that spreads very fast and causes huge loss of life or quality of life. Within a few weeks of the outbreak, the virus had conquered the world, which led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare it a pandemic. Statistics that followed from WHO were shocking. Up to June 2021, there have been 178,503,429 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 3,872,457 deaths around the universe. As for Saudi Arabia in particular, there have been 475,403 confirmed cases of COVID-19, inclusive of 7,691 deaths (WHO, 2021). With this massive scale of the spread of the virus, the need of the hour was to order lockdowns across nations with the total shift to non-physical modes especially for the educational institutions. These were the most hard-hit as the young people are a country's asset and it was imperative to protect them against

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the disease at all costs. This cost has been borne by the teaching-learning community worldwide as they struggled to accept, adopt, and adapt to a new system, the online mode, not to mention the other aspects of life such as sports, entertainment, and social events, including marriages that were put on hold (Koley & Dhole, 2020; Al-Ahdal & Algouzi, 2021). The shift to virtual education brought new challenges in terms of infrastructure, skills, and attitudes that have been the subject matter of scholarly pursuit since the pandemic hit. At the same time, there were challenges on a parallel, micro level, especially in foreign language education in Saudi Arabia that warranted investigation (Kumar, 2020). To be specific, the reference here is to the impact of the new mode on the teaching-learning of micro content and skills. The current study focuses on an important aspect of foreign language (EFL) education, that is Phonology, examining the college students' perceptions towards online learning of it during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia.

To define it simply, Phonology is one of the main categories of linguistics that studies sound patterns in a particular language (Hawkins, 2018). Since virtual education is almost a new learning method in Saudi Arabia, learner experience in English Phonology appeared to be affected in diverse ways as they had never been taught this in the online mode, since learning phonology comprises training with moving lips, tongue, and jaw, and online teaching may not be effective in achieving the objectives. On the other hand, online learning may encourage students, especially reticent learners, to practice their English speaking skills because they won't feel embarrassed in front of their classmates.

Consequently, this research investigated Saudi undergraduate students' perceptions towards learning English phonology via Blackboard during the COVID-19 imposed off-campus education. Blackboard is an application for online learning and one that universities popularly use to run online classes, including Qassim University. The study undertook an online survey on virtual learning of English phonology with the EFL learners at the university by requesting feedback on a 24 item questionnaire. Accordingly, this research attempted to answer the following primary research question:

- What are the university-level students' perceptions toward learning English phonology via Blackboard during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia?

2. Literature Review

The following literature review is divided into two main sections. The first section discusses studies that showed preference of in-class traditional learning and highlighted the obstacles of online learning. On the other hand, the second section summarizes other studies that showed preference for online learning and the positive effects of virtual education.

Preference for traditional, in-class learning

Al-Nofaie (2020) investigated the attitudes of 25 Saudi female students majoring in English towards Blackboard learning. The researcher conducted her study during the COVID-19 lockdown period, and the results showed that students preferred traditional in-class learning over online learning. The investigator was also the instructor for those students during this period in the virtual mode and for a previous academic semester with face-to-face on-campus education. Thus, she noticed that high-performance pupils did not necessarily have positive attitudes toward online learning because most of her students were indeed high-performance learners. Participants of this study also discussed the merits and demerits of online learning. The pros reported by students included convenience for shy students, interactive setting, and reachable learning goals, while the cons were lack of technical skills and facilities, home distractions, absence of physical interaction, and not having a satisfactory mode for examination/ assessment.

Similarly, Albedaiwi (2017) examined barriers to online learning according to teacher perspectives. He listed those barriers under five areas which are: (1) limitation of labs for operations; (2) lack of technical experience of the teachers; (3) limited access to technical specialists to help with technical issues; (4) reduction in face-to-face stimulation by professors; (5) shortfall in achieving learning outcomes. Based on students' perceptions Al-Nofaie (2020) found that online learning helped to reach the course objectives while Albedaiwi (2017) concluded, based on professors' points of view, that virtual education that failed to achieve the desirable learning outcomes.

Furthermore, a similar study looked at the obstacles of virtual education and listed them as lack of technical aids, decrease in students' technological awareness, digital illiteracy, stress, and absence of physical interaction (Andriivna et al., 2020). Mahyoob (2020) scrutinized the challenges of online learning according to the perspectives of English learners at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the experiences of 184 students, findings demonstrated that most English learners had negative attitudes towards online learning. They weren't satisfied with distance learning because they couldn't accomplish the objectives of learning English.

Preference for Online Learning

On the other hand, Chen (2016) conducted a study on students' perceptions about Blackboard learning in Open University Australia. Participants were 134 learners who reported their positive attitudes towards virtual learning regarding evaluation, information sharing, and online community. They considered Blackboard as an engaging learning environment that reduced virtual distance and allowed them to see and hear their professors (Chen et al., 2020; Al-Ahdal, 2020). Likewise, another study investigated English learners' opinions about online learning in a science and technology university in Taiwan. As many as 448 students participated in this study and the results showed that virtual education helped pupils to enhance their English language proficiency, including their phonological knowledge.

Fageeh and Mekheimer (2013) studied the impact of Blackboard on learning English academic writing. They enrolled 46 EFL learners in this study and used various instruments, such as observation, surveys, students' homework, discussions and interviews. Findings indicated that learners with more online experience had favorable perspectives toward using Blackboard for English academic writing. Also, learners who participated in Blackboard interaction had positive views on aspects like teamwork, production, and assistance. Moreover, results illustrated that online learning promoted student communication and improved learning through online discussions and peer reviews. Despite the positive views toward online learning, the study emphasized that virtual education cannot fully replace face-to-face learning (Fageeh & Mekheimer, 2013).

Furthermore, another research examined the perceptions of 35 Japanese undergraduate students of EFL engaged in online learning through Google Sites as a Course Management System (CMS). The research showed positive feedback to hiring Google Sites as a CMS (Gamble, 2018). Similarly, Alahmadi and Alraddadi (2020) investigated the effects of online learning on English communication at a Saudi English Language Centre (ELC). Participants were 90 female college students who registered in an English course. Findings showed that learners had positive views regarding English learning through online classes.

Additionally, the research declared that there was a satisfying virtual interaction among the learners. Likewise, another study was conducted on the students' views about Google Classroom in English phonology at Islamic College in Indonesia. A total of 48 graduate students registered in the English phonology course and participated in a survey. Results showed that pupils had positive attitudes toward using Google Classroom in English phonology courses (Deiniatur, 2020).

Another study was conducted at the English department of Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, Indonesia, to examine students' perceptions about online learning of the English language. Data collected from 100 students via a questionnaire and interviews with 17 students indicated that virtual learning enhanced pupils' English language acquisition (Mu'in & Amelia, 2018). Moreover, Pusuluri et al., (2017) looked at students' opinions toward Blackboard in the English courses at Aljouf University in Saudi Arabia. Data for the study was collected using a questionnaire administered to 50 male students. The results demonstrated that pupils had neutral perceptions toward Blackboard, but they considered Blackboard a convenient environment for various learning ends that encouraged them to learn independently.

Syahrin and Salih (2020) examined English learners' views about virtual learning during the COVID-19 in Oman. The majority of 32 university students who participated in this study indicated that they preferred online classrooms. This research illustrated that virtual education helped students with receptive skills (listening and reading) but not with productive skills (speaking and writing). Furthermore, a similar study emphasized that e-learning was no longer a choice, but a necessity. It had many advantages, such as flexibility in time and place, direct evaluation, and enrolment of a large number of students (Alotaibi & Kumar, 2019; Andriivna et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

This quantitative study aimed to investigate college students' perceptions towards online learning of English phonology via Blackboard during the COVID-19 pandemic period in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the study employed a survey questionnaire that asked the participants about their experiences and opinions of the effectiveness of English phonology online classes. The purpose of this study was to examine Saudi undergraduate students' perceptions towards learning English phonology via Blackboard during COVID-19 and then try to improve the English phonology component in online learning based on the participants' responses.

Participants

Voluntary participation was encouraged for this study. The number of participants was 48 undergraduate students. All participants were female students because there are no coed universities in Saudi Arabia except for one university which is the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. However, this research was conducted in Qassim University. Participants were level two students majoring in the English language. All of them were registered in English phonology course for Spring 2021.

Setting

The setting of this research was Qassim University, established in 2004 jointly by two universities, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, and King Saud University. It is a public university located in the Al-Qassim Province of Saudi Arabia. It has almost 66894 students registered from more than 80 different countries around the world. The university entered the QS World University Rankings in 2022 for the first time in its history. This study was conducted in the Girls College of Sciences and Arts in Al Mithnab, specifically, in the English language department.

Instrument

The instrument was an online survey that the researcher designed to investigate the students' perceptions towards learning English phonology via Blackboard during COVID-19 pandemic (see

Appendix A). In the design phase, the researcher relied upon previous literature to include all relevant and pertinent parameters. The preliminary questionnaire consisted of 31 items. This was later reduced to 24 based upon the suggestions of three professors, two of whom specialize in Research Methods, and one in ELT. The survey started with a short introductory paragraph that encouraged the participants to feel free to express their actual views and be reminded that their responses would be used for research purposes only. The questionnaire consisted of six categories or factors onto which the items loaded: (1) Pronunciation; (2) Effectiveness; (3) Instructor; (4) Interaction; (5) Language Skills and; (6) Involvement. Each category had four statements under it to quantify the students' experiences with online learning. Then, there were four options for each sentence which the students had to choose from. These options were 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree'. The students were only required to click on the right option based on their experience. Moreover, they were free to write any additional comments at the end of the questionnaire since there was an optional question that said, *Any further comments which you wish to add?*

Data Collection

Since the researcher was the instructor of the English phonology online class in AlMithnab college, collecting the data did not pose any challenges and was quite effortless. At the end of Spring 2021, the researcher asked the students if they wished to participate in this study. She confirmed to the students that their participation was totally voluntary and would be kept anonymous. Furthermore, she clarified that their responses would be used for research purposes only to encourage them to express their real opinions about the course. The investigator distributed the online survey after the last class of the semester via Blackboard. The participants were free to take a few weeks to answer the survey, and from April 7, 2021 until May 21, 2021 she received 48 responses sheets.

4. Discussion

The survey included 24 statements about online learning of English phonology. These statements were classified into six categories or factors, which are Pronunciation, Effectiveness, Instructor, Interaction, Language Skills, and Involvement. Each category contained four statements. To analyze the data efficiently, the author converted each statement into an item number. Table 1 presents the statements on Factor 1, Pronunciation.

Table 1. Coding for Statements on Factor 1, Pronunciation

Item No.	Statement
A1	English phonology online classes are convenient to practice my pronunciation
A2	It is easy to get the right pronunciation via English phonology online classes
A3	I practice my pronunciation enough via English phonology online classes
A4	English phonology online classes motivate me to practice English pronunciation

As shown in Table 1, we can use item "A1" to express the statement "English phonology online classes are convenient to practice my pronunciation" and so on. Likewise, the rest of the categories are represented in the following tables. Table 2 shows the four statements for Factor 2, Effectiveness,

while Table 3 presents items for Factor 3, Instructor category. Further, Table 4 shows Factor 4, Interaction, Table 5 shows Factor 5, Language Skills, and Table 6 represents Factor 6, Involvement.

Table 2. Coding for Statements on Factor 2, Effectiveness

Item No.	Statement
B1	Effective interaction is possible throughout English phonology online classes
B2	English phonology online classes positively affect my English speaking
B3	English phonology online classes positively affect my grades
B4	I interact effectively with other students during English phonology online classes

Table 3. Coding for Statements on Factor 3, Instructor

Item No.	Statement
C1	The instructor's voice is clear enough to understand the right pronunciation via Blackboard
C2	The instructor interacts effectively with the students in English phonology online classes
C3	The instructor responds efficiently during English phonology online classes
C4	I get enough feedback on my pronunciation via English phonology online classes

Table 4. Coding for Statements on Factor 4, Interaction

Item No.	Statement
D1	I feel confident when I interact in English phonology online classes
D2	I enjoy interacting in English phonology online classes
D3	English phonology online classes boost pair and group discussions
D4	English phonology online classes motivate me to interact more

Table 5. Coding for Statements on Factor 5, Language Skills

Item No.	Statement
E1	English phonology online classes improve my English speaking
E2	English phonology online classes improve my English writing

E3 English phonology online classes improve my English listening

E4 English phonology online classes improve my English reading

Table 6. Coding for Statements on Factor 6, Involvement

Item No.	Statement
F1	I participate in English phonology online classes efficiently
F2	I easily share my ideas in English phonology online classes
F3	English phonology online classes help to overcome some psychological issues such as fear and shyness
F4	English phonology online classes are good opportunity for me to speak English without feeling shy or embarrassed

All the previous statements had the same response options, which are ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘disagree’, and ‘strongly disagree’. In order to regulate the data, the researcher coded these response options in Table 7.

Table 7. Coding for Response Options

Response	Code
Strongly Agree	4
Agree	3
Disagree	2
Strongly Disagree	1

Thus, the highest score means that the participants advocated online learning for English phonology while the lowest score means that the students did not prefer online learning for English phonology and think that online learning is not convenient for English phonology.

Data Analysis

The author organized the data into an Excel spreadsheet. First, she inserted participants in rows while the statement items were in order in columns. Then, the participants’ responses were inserted accordingly. After that, the researcher calculated the average score for each statement item (see Figure 1).

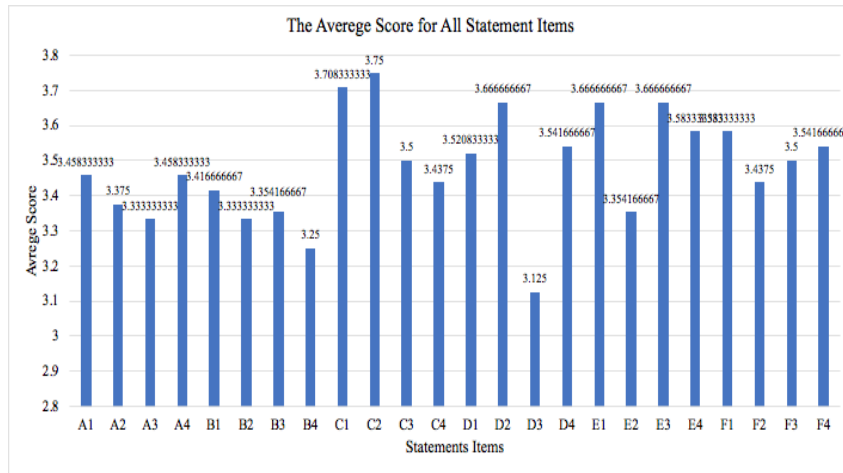


Figure 1. Average Score for All Statement/ Items

Figure 1 shows the average score for all statements by using the Average Function in Excel. At a glance, the reader can see that the average score for all statements is higher than 3 which indicates that most students held a positive perspective towards online learning for English phonology. It also shows that nearly all participants think that online learning is convenient for English phonology.

The most significant contrast was between item C2 and item D3. The highest average score is 3.8 for statement item number “C2” which is *The instructor interacts effectively with the students in English phonology online classes* (see Figure 2). On the other hand, the least average score is 3.1 for statement item number “D3” which is *English phonology online classes boost pair and group discussions* (see Figure 3).

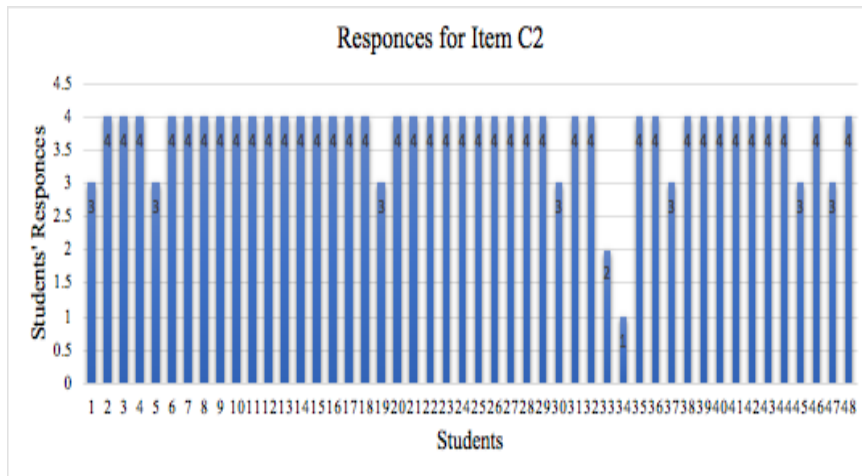


Figure 2. Students’ Responses for Item C2

Figure 2 represents the students’ responses to item number C2, which is *The instructor interacts effectively with the students in English phonology online classes*. The figure shows that most of the students (39 out of 48) ‘strongly agree’ with the statement, and seven students ‘agree’ with the statement. On the other hand, only one student ‘disagrees’, and another one ‘strongly disagrees’ with the statement. This indicates that the part that the pupils most like about English phonology online classes is that the instructor interacts effectively with them.

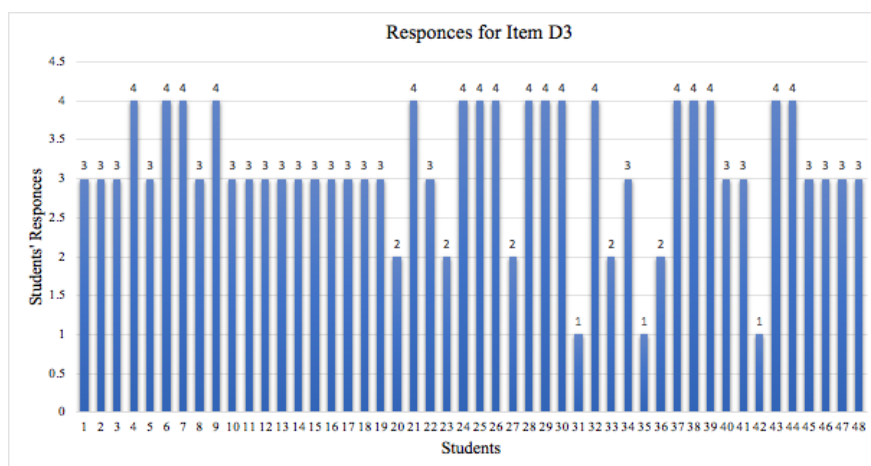


Figure 3. Students' Responses for Item D3

Figure 3 shows the participants' feedback to item number "D3" which is *English phonology online classes boost pair and group discussions*. In contrast to the responses of item C2, the students' responses for item D3 were 23 'Agree, 17 'Strongly agree', five 'Disagree, and three 'Strongly disagree'. Even though item D3 has the least average score (3), most students agreed with that statement item. This indicates that most of the students enjoyed English phonology online classes.

5. Results

There are eight studies reviewed in this paper that showed positive attitudes toward online learning. These studies are Chen et al.,(2020), Chen, (2016), Fageeh and Mekheimer, (2013), Gamble, (2018), Alahmadi and Alraddadi, (2020), Deiniatur, (2020), Mu'in and Amelia, (2018), and Syahrin and Salih (2020). All these studies were regarding English online learning, except for Chen et al., (2020). Moreover, only one study discussed English phonology in particular which was Deiniatur, (2020). Likewise, the findings of this study showed a positive attitude toward English phonology online classes. Besides, the study indicated that most students enjoyed and advocated in favor of online learning for English phonology. It also showed that nearly all participants think that online learning is convenient for English phonology. These findings are different from Al-Nofaie, (2020) and Mahyoub (2020) that showed that most English learners have negative attitudes towards online learning.

6. Conclusion

This quantitative study demonstrated that most participants had positive attitudes toward English phonology online classes. It appeared that most students advocated for online learning for English phonology. It also showed that nearly all participants think that online learning is convenient for English phonology. Thus, the study answered the research question, which was "What are the university-level students' perceptions toward learning English phonology via Blackboard during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia?"

Furthermore, the most part the pupils like about English phonology online classes is that the instructor interacts effectively with them. On the other hand, the least favorite part of English phonology online classes was pair and group discussions. Even though that was the least preferred item, most students agreed with the statement *English phonology online classes boost pair and group discussions*. This indicates that most of the students enjoyed English phonology online classes.

7. Limitations

Even though this paper answered the research question, there were three limitations to this study. The first limitation was the method used to collect data. Since the method was a survey, the information provided might not be completely accurate because responses were self-reported. There were certain options that might force the participants to choose one of them. This might lower the reliability and accuracy of the study. In addition, the questions could be misunderstood which may lower the validity and authenticity of the research.

The second limitation was the participants. There were only 48 students who participated in this research, which may not represent the perceptions of all Saudi students about English phonology virtual education. Besides, all the participants were females which may not reveal the attitudes of male students.

The third limitation was generalizability. Saudi Arabia has 43 universities, 29 public universities and 14 private universities (Ministry of Education, 2020a.). However, this study was conducted at only one college of Qassim university which may not represent the perceptions of all Saudi universities. As a result of these three limitations, the finding of the study may not be generalized freely.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research could use more than one methodology. Since data were self-reported, other studies could use observation or qualitative methods in addition to the survey. This might help to produce more accurate results.

Another recommendation is to increase the number of participants, besides involving male and female participants, not only one gender. Also, further research could be conducted at different universities around Saudi Arabia. This would help to generalize the results.

Since this paper investigated English phonology online classes, other researchers could examine other skills of English such as writing or reading with respect to virtual education. Additionally, other investigators could explore the same problem, but in a language other than English. Likewise, other studies could explore the exact subject, but in another country.

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Appendix A

Survey on English Phonology Online Classes

Dear respondent,

This questionnaire constitutes a part of a study on “the effectiveness of English Phonology Online Classes”. It is meant to seek your experiences and opinions of the same. Could you please spare a few moments of your precious time and tick the box (es) of your choice. Please feel free to express your actual views and notice that the responses given will be used for research purposes only.

Thanking you dearly for your time and cooperation

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Pronunciation				
English phonology online classes are convenient to practice my pronunciation.				
It is easy to get the right pronunciation via English phonology online classes				
I practice my pronunciation enough via English phonology online classes				
English phonology online classes motivate me to practice English pronunciation.				
Effectiveness				
Effective interaction is possible throughout English phonology online classes.				
English phonology online classes positively affect my English speaking.				
English phonology online classes positively affect my grades.				
I interact effectively with other students during English phonology				

online classes.				
Instructor				
The instructor's voice is clear enough to understand the right pronunciation via Blackboard.				
The instructor interacts effectively with the students in English phonology online classes.				
The instructor responds efficiently during English phonology online classes.				
I get enough feedback on my pronunciation via English phonology online classes.				
Interaction				
I feel confident when I interact in English phonology online classes.				
I enjoy interacting in English phonology online classes.				
English phonology online classes boost pair and group discussions.				
English phonology online classes motivate me to interact more.				
Language Skills				
English phonology online classes improve my English speaking.				
English phonology online classes improve my English writing				
English phonology online classes improve my English listening.				
English phonology online classes improve my English reading.				
Involvement				
I participate in English phonology online classes efficiently.				
I easily share my ideas in English phonology online classes.				
English phonology online classes help to overcome some				

psychological issues such as fear and shyness.				
English phonology online classes are a good opportunity for me to speak English without feeling shy or embarrassed				

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