

An Observation of Pedagogical Approaches for Online and On-Campus Teaching: The Case of United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper was to investigate whether observable differences exist between pedagogical approaches in online lessons and traditional, in-person lessons. To achieve this, an observation tool was employed to assess teachers during both online and on-campus lessons. The findings from these observations revealed numerous differences and similarities between teaching in a physical classroom and remotely. These insights hold significant implications for educators in the UAE, who are increasingly involved in various forms of online and blended learning. This paper contributes to the expanding body of literature on blended and online teaching experiences, particularly within the UAE's higher education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

Online Teaching, Blended Learning, Digital Education, UAE

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the education industry, prompting a shift from traditional lessons to remote learning due to the university's social distancing policy. For students and teachers, transitioning from face-to-face education to online learning in such a short period, without adequate training, orientation, or preparation, proved to be quite challenging. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) during the pandemic introduced the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to various new teaching and learning strategies, including the use of apps like Zoom for synchronous, real-time remote lessons. The use of such apps, however, had increased from 10 million daily participants pre-pandemic to over 300 million,

reflecting its critical role in maintaining education during lockdowns (Walker, 2020). As a result, online teaching and learning now play a crucial role in education. Some authors argue that integrating technology into teaching methods empowers students more than traditional approaches and fosters a student-centered learning environment (Abukhalaf, Charles, & Hill, 2024). Conversely, other authors contend that relying solely on computer-mediated pedagogy does not significantly enhance the teaching and learning process. This research study aims to observe some of the differences between online and face-to-face learning. The paper begins by reviewing key studies on these differences, followed by a description of the methodological approach adopted for this study. The results are then discussed, and key lessons learned are explained.

The UAE's rapid adoption of technology in education, driven by national initiatives like UAE Vision 2021 and National Strategy for Higher Education 2030, has led to the widespread use of both online and traditional teaching methods. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, revealing both the strengths and challenges of online learning, such as flexibility and access to resources versus issues like engagement and digital equity.

This study aims to compare the effectiveness of online and traditional teaching in the UAE, examining their impact on student learning, engagement, and the development of essential skills. Given the UAE's diverse student population and commitment to educational innovation, this research will provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers to optimize teaching practices and improve educational outcomes in both settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Online Education

Online education is not new; rather, a comprehensive body of research on it dates back to the 1980s. Many studies have focused on identifying the most effective instructional strategies for teaching in an online context. A prominent challenge in traditional lessons is the use of body language—such as facial expressions, posture, and physical gestures (Mahmood, 2021). In contrast, online teaching often limits teachers to relying primarily on their speech. Literature indicates that class discussions between teachers and students enhance interactivity and engagement, which can improve student comprehension (Townsend et al., 2002). A recent report from the University of Illinois supported online teaching but emphasized the importance of social interaction among students and between teachers and students in traditional classrooms (Stern, 2004).

2.2. Classroom Management

Classroom management, defined as supervising students' behavior in an instructional setting (Stewart, 2008), poses a different set of challenges in online environments. Teachers often have less control over students' behavior in online classes compared to traditional settings. To address this issue, authors suggest that teachers

can employ various activities to keep students engaged (Bao, 2020). Additionally, several action research studies have highlighted difficulties in structuring and organizing virtual lessons. Coordinating an entire class online and delivering engaging, structured lessons that foster learning is challenging (Rosalina, Nasrullah, & Elyani, 2020). Real-world problems such as time zone differences, unreliable Internet access, technological failures, and poor video quality further complicate lesson structure and transitions (Coverdale-Jones, 2000). A well-structured lesson clearly defines expectations, consistent rules, and engages students in activities (Maulana et al., 2012). Effective lesson structure involves outlining objectives, covering content, managing transitions, emphasizing key ideas, and reviewing them to aid retention.

2.3. Content and Online Teaching Challenges

Content delivery in online education faced numerous challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown. Nartiningrum & Nugroho (2021) argue that online teaching involves more than just distributing materials; teachers must guide students through meaningful learning experiences. Without a clear effort to build a positive social environment, students may feel isolated, so encouraging interaction and collaboration is crucial (ibid). A recent study found that 77% of students preferred traditional, face-to-face teaching over online learning (Abbasi et al., 2020).

2.4. Questioning Techniques and Student Engagement

Questioning techniques and student engagement are significant concerns in online education. In traditional classrooms, trained teachers use various activities and questioning strategies to foster critical thinking. However, online students often have their webcams turned off, which impedes engagement and reduces the frequency of teacher-initiated questions (Stewart, 2008). Research has shown that face-to-face students tend to have higher GPAs than their online counterparts, potentially due to lower engagement in online settings (Amro, Mundy, & Kingsville, 2015).

2.5. Feedback and Assessment

The final areas of concern in online education research are feedback and assessment. Online assessments are prone to academic integrity issues, such as cheating and ghostwriting for non-exam assignments (Nicol et al., 2014). Conversely, online education offers advantages in feedback delivery, with options such as video recordings, audio recordings, and instantaneous responses to formative assessments (Li & Irby, 2008).

3. Methodology

The primary research question for this research is, “Are there noticeable differences between an online lesson and a traditional lesson?” For this study, observation was used as the primary research method. Classroom observations allow

researchers to investigate a topic from a qualitative perspective, meaning no quantitative data was collected in this instance. To conduct these observations, we adapted a lesson observation tool originally created by [Heafner, Petty, and Harts-horne \(2011\)](#). We selected this tool because it was designed to evaluate instructional strategies, classroom management, organization, content, questioning techniques, student engagement, feedback, and assessment.

The researchers observed two lessons. The first lesson was delivered online by an experienced female Emirati teacher, aged 28, who holds a bachelor's degree in science. She taught this lesson to approximately 40 mixed-gender students, all mature learners aged 21 or above, from various nationalities and backgrounds. The second lesson was delivered on-campus by an experienced female Jordanian teacher, aged 35, who holds a bachelor's degree in English. She taught the same group of students. All participants were informed about the nature of the study and consented to participate. For ethical reasons, the identities of both teachers and all participating students will remain anonymous in this study. To reduce subjectivity that could affect the validity of the research, cross-checking was implemented to ensure that the observer's conclusions accurately reflected what occurred during the observations ([Louis, Keith, & Lawrence, 2000](#)).

4. Findings and Discussion

As noted earlier, the primary goal of this project was to observe how teaching methods have transformed from face-to-face instruction to online instruction, focusing on both student engagement and pedagogy. Additionally, the study aimed to assess the extent to which these changes affect both teacher and student engagement. These challenges impact students' growth ([Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020](#)). This section of the paper presents the findings from the observations and discusses the main differences observed.

4.1. Observation 1—The Optical Lesson

This lesson was delivered online by a science teacher on the topic of optical tools to 50 students. The teacher primarily focused on the creation and purpose of optical tools as outlined in the objectives. The teaching method used was predominantly direct instruction. The lesson began with the teacher asking questions about students' views on the importance of visual tools, aiming to gather information on their prior knowledge and experience.

As a starter activity, the teacher played a video about the biology of the human eye and asked students to write down the components of the eyes and the steps involved in vision based on the video. Students were required to record their answers individually on Google Docs, which meant they worked in isolation and did not have the opportunity to collaborate in groups. Following this, the teacher explicitly explained the steps involved in vision, serving as the sole source of information while students listened passively.

The second activity involved identifying the parts of a camera. Students watched

a video and then wrote down the main parts of the camera individually on Google Docs. The teacher then demonstrated how the camera works in a passive manner.

In the third activity, students were asked to individually research other optical tools, such as microscopes, telescopes, and binoculars. They had to define each tool and explain why humans need them. At the end of the lesson, the teacher assigned a challenge where questions were displayed on a shared screen for all students to see. Students participated by answering the questions using their own devices.

4.2. Observation 2—The English Lesson

The second lesson was delivered face-to-face by an English teacher on the epic term “BEOWULF.” The teacher incorporated some principles of the VARK method, which suggests that students learn best when teaching methods and activities align with their learning styles and preferences. The lesson began with the teacher introducing “BEOWULF” and asking, “What is an epic?” to prompt critical thinking. She then posed real-life questions such as, “What makes someone a hero?” and “Do you prefer a hero with flaws or an ideal hero?” These questions were intended to engage students with the character “BEOWULF.”

A 3-minute video was shown to illustrate the protagonist and antagonist of the poem. Following this, guided discovery learning was used to help students identify the elements of an epic poem. The teacher assigned various tasks to different teams, thereby implementing inquiry-based learning. Eight students presented their findings based on their group’s task, and real-life examples were provided to elaborate on each group’s ideas.

For assessment, the teacher continuously asked questions to help students retain the information they had acquired. Additionally, students were asked to open a link and answer questions to determine whether the lesson’s objectives had been met.

4.3. A Comparative Analysis

As a disclaimer, teachers often have their own teaching styles so in addition to the teachers conducting their instruction on different platforms, personalized methods need to be taken into consideration. The subjects being taught in these observations as well as the lessons themselves vary and must also be taken into consideration during this comparison and analysis.

As we observed the two different lessons—online teaching and face-to-face instruction—it was clear that the online teaching lacked physical interaction among students, leading to a noticeable decline in student engagement. In contrast, the face-to-face instruction employed more effective instructional strategies, resulting in active student involvement in the learning process.

In terms of classroom management, the online lesson presented challenges for the teacher in monitoring students’ behavior and assessing their progress and contributions. The sense of isolation in the online setting made it difficult for the

teacher to engage with students effectively. Conversely, in the face-to-face lesson, the teacher established clear expectations for student behavior, which helped manage the class more efficiently and minimized verbal conflicts among students, creating a cooperative and productive learning environment.

Regarding lesson organization, the online lesson was notably poorly structured. Students appeared confused, and the flow of the lesson was disjointed. In contrast, the face-to-face lesson was well-organized, with logical transitions between different parts of the lesson.

In terms of content delivery, the online lesson, despite using visual aids, did not provide opportunities for students to explore the material independently and was hindered by technical issues that caused distractions. Surprisingly, the face-to-face lesson made more extensive use of audiovisual materials and proved to be more meaningful for student comprehension.

The questioning techniques used in the online lesson were superficial, primarily eliciting basic information from students. On the other hand, the face-to-face lesson employed a variety of WH-questions, leading to more thought-provoking and meaningful responses and discussions.

Regarding student engagement, the online lesson lacked group or peer activities, leading to many students being neglected. Although the face-to-face lesson also did not include group work tasks, students remained adequately engaged.

Finally, neither teacher provided satisfactory feedback during their lessons, nor did they include sufficient formative assessment. Overall, our observations align with research findings that suggest in-class lessons are more effective for student learning compared to online lessons.

5. Discussion

The study's findings suggest that face-to-face instruction is more effective than online teaching. The results are aligned with a recent analysis conducted by [Sul-eymanova, Gawanmeh, & Al-Alami \(2023\)](#), which indicated that the transition from online to physical classes was significantly smoother for students, with 82.5% finding it easy compared to only 32% for the shift from physical to online classes. In terms of teamwork skills, 60% of respondents believed that physical classes better fostered these skills, compared to just 36% for online classes, emphasizing the benefits of in-person interaction. Additionally, 66% of students reported that turning on their camera and microphone during online classes was the most bothersome aspect, whereas only 22% felt similarly annoyed during on-campus activities. Conversely, another study conducted by [Gaur, Chaudhary, & Mittal \(2015\)](#), demonstrated that e-learning techniques were more effective than traditional teaching methods, as reflected in the high positive feedback received from various user groups, including students, researchers, teachers, and staff. E-learning emerged as the preferred choice across all categories regarding conceptual understanding, indicating a strong inclination toward digital learning environments over conventional classroom settings. Despite the positive feedback for e-learning,

some concerns were noted. Teachers expressed difficulties in tracking learner activities during e-learning sessions, while learners questioned the validity and reliability of the content delivered through these platforms (ibid).

6. Conclusion

When comparing online education to on-campus learning, the literature consistently investigates eight factors: 1) instructional strategies, 2) classroom management, 3) organization, 4) content, 5) questioning techniques, 6) student engagement, 7) feedback, and 8) assessment. For this research, we observed two lessons—one online and one on-campus—using a peer-reviewed observation tool that focuses on these factors. The observations indicated more effective teaching practices and student learning in the on-campus lesson. This could be attributed to a lack of knowledge, skills, and experience with online education on the part of the teacher delivering the online class, or it could be that individuals learn more effectively when physically present in the same location. This remains an interesting topic, and the debate is likely to continue for many years.

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

1) Theoretical Implications:

This study contributes to the understanding of blended learning by comparing online and on-campus teaching approaches in the UAE. It adds to existing theories by considering regional and cultural factors that influence teaching practices and student engagement, expanding the global conversation on educational transformation.

2) Practical Implications:

The findings provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers in the UAE. Teachers can use the best practices identified to improve their online and hybrid teaching methods. Policymakers and administrators can leverage the results to guide investment in teacher training and technology, improving educational outcomes and adaptability in both settings.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study has a few noteworthy limitations. Firstly, the small sample size and brief observation period—limited to a single one-hour lesson—restrict the depth of insights. Additionally, the study observed teachers instructing two different subjects, which may not capture the nuances of teaching in a single subject. Future research could mitigate these limitations by including a larger and more diverse sample size, extending beyond Dubai to other cities in the UAE. Additionally, expanding the scope to include younger students under 18 years of age and observing multiple teachers teaching the same subject would provide a more balanced analysis. Prolonging the duration of the observations could further enhance the comprehensiveness of the findings. Addressing these limitations would offer a more robust understanding and guide future educational research in the UAE

context.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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