Students' perceptions towards the roles and competencies of online English instructors

Hilal Güneş [a] * iD, Müge Adnan [b] iD

[a] Hacettepe University, Türkiye
[b] Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Türkiye

Highlights	Abstract
• This study investigated perceptions of English learners regarding the roles and competencies of online English instructors. • Students expressed facilitator and leader roles; as well as several competencies including fostering interaction, integrating technology into teaching effectively, offering and getting feedback, creating open and friendly environment, adjusting tone of voice, being accessible, managing time and online classroom, and seeking ways for professional development. • The students noted that the instructors often do not fulfill most of the roles and competencies due to various challenges related to technical infrastructure, teacher readiness, and student profile. • The students voiced the need for teacher trainings on online teaching issues.	This study aimed to discover the roles and competencies of online English instructors as perceived by their students. Participants consisted of eight students enrolled in a basic English course in Turkey, who were taking the course online. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data, which were analyzed using the content analysis technique with the help of Nvivo software. As a result of the study, roles of facilitator and leader; and competencies of delivering the content effectively, using varied teaching methods, activities and materials, fostering interaction, ensuring participation, having basic ICT skills, integrating technology into teaching effectively, offering and getting feedback, attracting attention, creating open and friendly environment, adjusting tone of voice, pre-class preparation, being aware of student profile and teaching accordingly, giving and checking assignments, motivating, being accessible, classroom and time management, evaluating effectiveness of the course, seeking ways for professional development, and adopting a favorable attitude towards teaching online were addressed by the students. However, the students asserted that their instructors do not perform most of these roles and competencies because of the challenges such as poorness of technical and technological infrastructure, interaction problems, lack of teacher readiness, and student profile. The students highlighted the necessity of a solid technical and technological infrastructure, and teacher development trainings on online teaching issues.

1. Introduction

In recent years, distance language learning has been reshaped as a result of technological advances. The advent of the internet, social networking, and mobile technology has made online language learning expanded and widely available (Hauck & Stickler, 2006; Hubbard, 2008; White, 2003). Advances in communication technology have improved and revolutionized language distance learning, and contributed

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* Corresponding author. English Language Teaching Department, Hacettepe University, Türkiye.
  e-mail address: hilal.gunes@hacettepe.edu.tr

to synchronous or asynchronous learner interaction. As a result of these developments, many universities have started offering campus-based online courses.

Online learning environments necessitate new roles, competencies, and responsibilities for everyone involved. In particular, the effectiveness of online education is highly dependent on instructors as they are active members of the design, development, teaching and evaluation of the educational process. In this respect, online instructors should rethink their roles and adopt a more facilitative approach (Baran, et al., 2011). They should develop new strategies to maintain student motivation and facilitate student interactions (Bennet & Lockyer, 2004).

Online education is one of the most hotly debated topics today, yet research on the changing roles and competencies of online instructors falls short of the desired level. Baran et al. (2011) underline the paucity of research critically examining the roles and competencies of online teachers, stating that the proposed roles and competencies have little impact on online teacher training programs that "address teachers' needs, individual dispositions, external social demands and capabilities within their unique teaching context" (p.422). In this regard, identifying roles and competencies of online instructors is critical to the design and development of online courses and teacher development programs.

There has been a wealth of research that has defined the roles and competencies of online instructors, which has provided valuable insights. However, there is still a dearth of study focusing on English language learners' perceptions, especially from a qualitative perspective. It would not be appropriate to list the roles and competencies of online English instructors without taking into account the views of their students, who are also experiencing this transition from face to face (F2F) to online education. Therefore, it is necessary to know what students think about the roles and competencies of online English instructors. As an integral part of the equation, student views and expectations hold significance as they will contribute to accumulating information for researchers and practitioners.

Against this background, the objective of this research is to explore the perceptions of English learners towards the roles and competencies of online English instructors. To achieve this goal, answers to the following research questions were sought throughout the study:

1. What are the roles and competencies of online English instructors from the perspectives of their students?

2. Do the students think that the instructors are able to perform these roles and competencies in their online classrooms?

2. Literature

This study adopts the Theory of Transactional Distance as a theoretical framework, which was first proposed by Dr. Moore in 1973 to explain the psychological and communication gap that exists between learners and instructors in distance education. Accordingly, transactional distance is affected by the structure of the course, the level of interaction between learners and instructors, and the degree of learner autonomy. In online learning environments, instructors play a critical role in reducing the transactional distance and facilitating effective learning. To do this, they should possess certain competencies, including the ability to design and deliver engaging and interactive learning materials, facilitate collaborative learning, provide timely feedback, and promote learner autonomy. Effective online instructors should also possess strong communication skills, be responsive to learner needs, and have a deep understanding of the subject matter being taught. By possessing these competencies, online instructors can help create an engaging and supportive learning environment that enables learners to achieve their learning goals.

So far, there has been extensive research that relied on distance education experts to define the roles and competencies of online instructors (Alvarez, et al., 2009; Baran et al., 2011; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Denis et al., 2004; Egan & Akdere, 2005; Goodyear, et al., 2001; Salmon, 2004; Williams, 2003). Among

them, Goodyear et al. (2001) held a workshop with distance education practitioners and researchers and reported eight e-instructor roles and various competencies for these roles. Accordingly, (1)*Process Facilitator* role necessitates facilitating student learning by understanding learners' needs, expectations, and concerns, encouraging active participation, and enabling learners to take responsibility for their learning, (2) *Advisor/Counselor* role involves working with learners privately, and providing counseling, (3) *Assessor* role is concerned with giving feedback, grading, and assessing learning by using online techniques, (4) *Researcher* role is related to keeping up with latest developments in the profession, evaluating the effectiveness of online teaching, and improving performance, (5) *Content Facilitator* role entails competencies of selecting appropriate learning resources, using relevant tasks, monitoring student progress, and providing feedback, (6) *Technologist* role requires possessing sufficient technical skills, using appropriate tools, diagnosing learners' technical challenges, being capable of editing and updating distributed learning sources, and respecting intellectual property rights, (7) *Designer* role demands preparing online learning activities before class, (8) *Manager/Administrator* is related to directing students to proper sources of support, and effective time management.

Apart from the experts, some studies examined perceptions of online instructors (Briggs, 2005; Chang, et al., 2014; González-Sanmamed et al., 2014; Muñoz Carril et al., 2013) and students (Abdulla, 2004; Craig, et al., 2008; Huang, 2019; Lee, 2011) while determining e-instructor roles and competencies. Most of these studies adopted a quantitative methodology for data collection and analysis. For example, Muñoz Carril et al. (2013) and Chang et al. (2014) used questionnaires to identify e-instructors' view towards their roles. In both studies, the roles of content expert and instructional designer, and competencies of designing and developing course content and instructional materials, and updating online learning resources were regarded as the most crucial ones by the instructors. As being different from these studies, González-Sanmamed et al. (2014) examined perceived competency levels of e-instructors regarding the peripheral roles (e.g., social, evaluator, advisor, manager, researcher) by using a survey. They found that the instructors placed special emphasis on their social, technological, and advisory roles, while perceiving their personal and researcher roles as less important.

One of the earliest researchers who examined the roles and competencies of e-instructors as perceived by distance learning students is Abdulla (2004). By providing a list of roles (intellectual, technical, managerial, social) and related competencies, he asked students to rate the criticality of them. Results indicated that, the students regarded intellectual role as the most important one, followed by technical, managerial, and social roles. Abdulla (2004) asserted that, there is a gap between the ideas of experts and students, thus instructors and administrators should bridge this gap by giving importance to students' perceptions while designing and implementing distance education programs.

Craig et al. (2008) examined students' perceptions of e-instructor roles in an Australian university using a survey questionnaire. According to the results, providing feedback and guidance were regarded as the primary roles of teachers. In addition, students considered it important for teachers to challenge them to think, provide stimulating and challenging experiences, help them learn, and be available when needed. Lee (2011) conducted a survey study on the e-instructors' roles in the Korean context. As a result of the study, five different types of teacher roles were identified: pedagogical, managerial, technical, affective, and differentiating. The differentiating role was explained as entailing competencies for accommodating learner needs, offering multiple perspectives in activities, encouraging self-directed learning, and reflecting on the teaching and learning process. These competences are related to offering various ways for students with different learning needs, abilities, or interests. Most recently, in 2019, Huang investigated how university students perceived the roles of their teachers in F2F and online learning environments using a questionnaire. The statistical analyses revealed three sub-roles of teachers: cognitive role, managerial role, and affective role. It was also found that in F2F learning, teachers' cognitive role was perceived to be the most impactful, while in online learning, their managerial role was considered the most significant.

There are some researchers asserting that teaching a foreign language online requires different roles and competencies than other disciplines (Compton, 2009; Hampel & Stickler, 2005). Therefore, studies on online instructor roles in other fields may not be applicable to foreign language instructors (Güneş & Adnan, 2023). In the literature, a few distance education experts have identified the roles and competencies of online English language instructors (Compton, 2009; Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Hauck & Hampel, 2005; White, 2003). Hampel and Stickler (2005) proposed a 'pyramid of skills' for online language instructors that builds upon one another, starting from the most general and lower-level skills to higher-level and more personal teaching styles. At the bottom of the pyramid is basic ICT competence, followed by specific software competence such as using conferencing systems or educational software. The next step is to be aware of the constraints and affordances of a particular software and to make the best use of it. One level up on the pyramid, language tutors are expected to create a 'sense of community' by ensuring collaborative learning, a community of practice, and constructive knowledge development. On the next level, language instructors are expected to facilitate meaningful communicative interaction by using communicative language teaching methods. The next level of skills necessitates language tutors to be creative in teaching by choosing or adapting appropriate and enjoyable resources among the vast array of online materials, bearing communicative principles in mind. On the highest level of the pyramid, instructors are supposed to develop their own teaching style after increasing familiarity with the medium and growing confidence in their lower-level skills.

There is very little research that has gathered perspectives from online language instructors (Baumann et al., 2008; Güneş & Adnan, 2023; Rosell-Aguilar, 2007) and students (Ananjev & Krasnova, 2015; Michalopoulou, 2020) to define online language instructor roles and competencies. Among them, Rosell-Aguilar (2007) collected qualitative data from 12 language tutors and categorized perceived roles under three aspects as cognitive, social and administrative. The cognitive role is associated with providing language support to students through communicative activities and opportunities for practice, offering feedback on pronunciation and accuracy, and supplying resources and tools for developing autonomy. The social role is related to establishing a relaxing and friendly atmosphere, developing a personal connection with students, promoting their comfort and confidence in class, and giving emotional support to decrease speaking anxiety. The administrative role involves organizing breakout rooms, managing time, troubleshooting software-related issues, and providing technical support to students. Michalopoulou (2020) investigated Greek learners' perceptions towards the roles of English teachers in online courses by using questionnaires. A significant association was found between the teachers' technological expertise and the learners' satisfaction with online language instruction.

In Turkey, there has been a lack of research concerning the roles and competencies of online instructors (Aydın, 2005; Güneş & Adnan, 2023; Kavrat, 2015). In Aydın's (2005) study, e-instructors were given a list of roles and competencies and asked how necessary they were and to what extent they fulfilled them in online classes. Accordingly, e-instructors perceived the assessor role as the most significant and the one they perform the most in their online classes. On the other hand, they regarded the material producer and administrator roles as less essential than the others and perform these roles the least. Although they considered the process facilitator, content expert, instructor designer, and technologist roles crucial for successful online teaching, they seldom perform the technologist and process facilitator role and almost never perform the content expert and instructor designer roles. Participants perceived the competencies of having ICT skills, following online teaching technologies, and encouraging and motivating students as important, but they have problems performing them. Similarly, Kavrat (2013) conducted a comprehensive investigation into the perceptions of online instructors towards their competencies. Data were collected through a self-designed questionnaire from 209 e-instructors from 32 universities in Turkey. The results revealed that the instructors considered content area competencies to be of the highest importance, while educational software design competencies were regarded as the lowest priority.

In a recent study by Güneş and Adnan (2023), perceptions of online English instructors regarding their roles and competencies were explored through interviews. The findings indicated that the facilitator role was deemed the most crucial, although instructors were found to perform the instructor role most frequently during online classes. The competencies that were emphasized the most include presenting the content, utilizing a range of language teaching methods, strategies, activities, and materials, promoting interaction, capturing attention, preparing for classes beforehand, creating instructional materials, possessing fundamental ICT skills, and efficiently integrating technology into teaching. The instructors reported that they face obstacles such as issues with interaction, lack of student participation, inadequate Learning Management Systems (LMS), insufficiencies in technical and content infrastructure, copyright concerns, large class sizes, which restrict their ability to perform most of the roles and competencies they deem vital.

To sum up, it is evident that the literature concentrated predominantly on explaining the roles and competencies from a theoretical standpoint, with delphi techniques and expert workshops being commonly used. Perception studies have been done mostly with instructors and relied on survey questionnaires, leaving a gap in the literature for a qualitative perspective that reflects the views of students. This study aims to fill this research gap by using a qualitative methodology to capture the real voice of students. The literature review has also revealed that the classification of online instructor roles and competencies differs among various fields, educational institutions, and countries. Moreover, the significance and implementation level of these roles and competencies vary depending on the context and the participants. Therefore, exploring the perceptions of Turkish university students on this issue can offer new perspectives and contribute to the development of online English teacher training programs in Turkey.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The aim of current research is to obtain more individualized and in-depth data, and as such, it utilizes a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis. Qualitative methodology is concerned with exploring and understanding complex social phenomena by gathering and analyzing non-numerical data (Creswell, 2013).

This is a case study which is an empirical investigation that focuses on current phenomenon within its authentic context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clear (Yin, 2009). A case study is characterized as a thorough investigation of specific examples of a phenomenon as they occur in their authentic setting, and with a focus on the viewpoints of the individuals who are actively participating in the phenomenon (Gall, et al., 2005). In this study, data were collected without any manipulation in the environment and opinions were obtained in a non-intrusive manner, so as to provide and accurate display of the phenomenon.

2.2. Study Context

This study was conducted at a state university in Turkey whose online education programs have been coordinated by a Distance Education Centre (UZEM). UZEM is responsible for ensuring all relevant activities pertaining to administrative, technical, and educational requirements of online education. Students follow courses offered through an internet-based LMS. Students with PCs can take online courses at home. As the courses are recorded, students are able to revise the courses anytime on their own. For those who do not have a PC to participate in online courses, computer and internet access is available in labs.

Before teaching online, English instructors had undergone a compulsory online teacher development program arranged by UZEM. This training program is designed to provide essential knowledge and skills for online English instructors. It included basic concepts of online learning, online learning theory, use of LMS and virtual classrooms, methods of designing online lessons, copyright and intellectual property rights, academic ethics and plagiarism, basic concepts of measurement, assessment, and e-assessment, quality assurance in e-learning, graphic design, creating visuals, graphics, multimedia materials, using

social media tools. The program was delivered in LMS, supported by one-hour interactive virtual classes and additional F2F and hands-on classes.

2.3. Participants

The participants of the study consist of eight students from different departments who take common compulsory Basic English Course online at as state university in Turkey. The participants were selected through purposive sampling technique as the sample have particular characteristics and properties that enable the researchers to explore and understand the main themes that they intend study (Ritchie, et al., 2003). Of the purposive sampling techniques, a maximum variation sampling strategy was used for student selection to ensure rich and robust data (Cohen, et al., 2009). For this purpose, students were selected according to their participation rate in online English courses. First, student participation rates in online classes were divided into three categories: high, medium, and low. Among them, students were selected randomly on a voluntary basis. Apart from the pilot study, eight students were interviewed until the data were saturated. Participants' demographic information is demonstrated below:

Table 1.

Online English language learners' profile

Participants	Gender	Age	Grade	Study department	Online learning experience
S1	Male	21	1st	Business Administration	1 semester
S2	Female	21	2nd	International Trade and Finance	1 semester
S3	Male	18	1st	International Trade and Finance	1 semester
S4	Male	20	2nd	Healthcare Management	2 years
S5	Male	20	2nd	Physical Education	1 semester
S6	Female	22	2nd	Public Administration	2 semesters
S7	Male	21	1st	Energy Engineering	1 semester
S8	Male	22	2nd	Energy Engineering	2 semesters

S= Student

2.4. Data Collection Method

In this study, qualitative data were obtained through interviews as they are suitable for learning attitudes, providing detailed data and giving information about participants' way of thinking (Christensen, et al., 2015). Semi-structured interviews were preferred as the researcher "is able to develop broad questions about the topic in advance but does not want to use ready-made response categories that would limit the depth and breadth of the respondent's story" (Dörnyei, 2007, p.136).

So as to ensure internal validity of the study, extensive literature review was conducted by the researchers before preparing the interview questions. The first draft of the interview was reviewed by four experts with experience in online education, qualitative studies, and English Language Teaching research. After gathering feedback on the content, clarity and design, a second draft was created. Then, a pilot interview was conducted to ensure the clarity and comprehensibility of the questions. Based on the results of the pilot study, necessary changes were made, and the interview form was finalized.

2.5. Data Collection Procedure

After the names of the participants were determined, permission for data collection was obtained from the student administration. The students' contact details were requested from their departments, and interview appointments were arranged with students who volunteered to participate in the study. Prior to the interview, the researcher introduced herself, and explained the purpose of the study. The students were assured of the confidentiality of their names and answers. All students signed an informed consent form to declare that they voluntarily participated in the study and allowed interviews to be recorded.

Before the interview, participants were given opportunity to review the interview questions. No one was present in the room during the interviews, enabling the participants to express their opinions freely. During the interviews, the interviewer created a relaxed and comfortable environment to encourage participants to express their thoughts openly. To do so, the interviewer was friendly, respectful, and impartial while asking questions in a non-threatening manner to ensure that participants were not confused or discouraged from sharing their genuine thoughts. These strategies helped to create a sense of ease and focus among the participants throughout the interview process. The interviews were conducted in Turkish, so as to create a relaxed environment where the participants could comfortably and freely express their thoughts in their native language. Each interview lasted for 25 to 45 minutes.

2.5. Data Analysis

For the analysis of data, content analysis was used following the steps described in Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. For the analysis, a PC-based software program, NVivo v.10, was utilized. Prior to the analysis, all of the interviews were transcribed by the first researcher, and then were uploaded to NVivo program. During the data reduction process, first, transcripts were read thoroughly read several times in order to become familiar with the data, and some notes were taken related to key points, patterns, and concepts. The researcher then began the open coding process, by identifying and labeling segments of the data with descriptive codes. Once the open coding is complete, the researcher grouped the codes into categories based on their similarities and differences, which is called axial coding. During the coding process, some codes were merged and some were rearranged as sub-codes.

So as to ensure inter-rater reliability, the second researcher carried out an external code check by examining %10 of the data and recoding it independently. Once the coding is complete, the Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated to measure the inter-rater reliability by using online calculator (https://www.graphpad.com/quickcalcs/kappa1/). The Cohen's kappa coefficient was found to be .86, indicating almost perfect agreement (Everitt, 1996). Then, the similarities and differences were determined and original codes were revised. After this process, a second-level coding was conducted by recoding the original transcripts in line with the new codes; codes were clustered in categories and themes were defined.

For the data display, the researchers created frequency tables to show the number of times each category appeared in the data. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the analysis and interpretation of the data, which involved making inferences and generalizations about the findings and relating them back to the research questions or objectives.

3. Findings

4.1. Roles of online English instructors

When the students were asked about the roles of online English instructors, only 'facilitator' and 'leader' roles were addressed by the students.

Table 2.

Roles of online English instructors

No		Frequency
1	Facilitator	3
2	Leader	2

1. Facilitator

It has been stated that English instructors should act as facilitators by guiding students through the learning process. However, it has been argued that some instructors fail to facilitate learning and instead merely act as traditional instructors, simply reading directly from the course book or relying solely on PowerPoint slides.

S4: His/her main role should be a facilitator.

S7: The instructor should not read directly from the book. It would be better if the teacher asks us a question, we write our answers in the chat box, and then facilitates us to find the answer. However, our teacher asks the question and gives the answer immediately.

2. Leader

The leader role has also been emphasized, with instructors expected to possess leadership qualities such as the ability to inspire and engage students, as well as having strong rhetorical skills.

S5: S/he should have leader role because s/he should manage the classroom. So, s/he should have leadership qualities, and leave an impression on students. Therefore, s/he should have rhetoric skills.

4.2. Competencies of online English instructors

Table 3.

Competencies of online English instructors

No		Frequency
1	Delivering the content effectively	8
2	Using varied teaching methods, activities and materials	8
3	Fostering interaction	8
4	Ensuring participation	8
5	Having basic ICT skills	7
6	Integrating technology into teaching effectively	7
7	Offering and getting feedback	6
8	Attracting attention	6
9	Creating open and friendly environment	6
10	Adjusting tone of voice	6
11	Pre-class preparation	5
12	Being aware of student profile and teaching accordingly	5
13	Giving and checking assignments	5

14	Motivating	4
15	Being accessible	4
16	Classroom management	3
17	Time management	2
18	Evaluating effectiveness of the course	2
19	Seeking ways for professional development	2
20	Adopting a favorable attitude towards teaching online	1

1. Delivering the content effectively

All students declared that online language instructors need to deliver the content effectively; have sufficient content knowledge and have teaching skills:

S1: I think the most important competency is the way of presenting the content. There are more distractions in online education (…) Tone of voice, examples given and being friendly are important features to attract the attention of the student to the lesson.

S3: If a teacher teaches well, that's enough. In fact, we do not expect more, our aim is to learn something (…) The important thing is how the teacher treats you, the examples s/he gives and how s/he teaches you. These three things are very important to me.

However, some students have claimed that their teachers are unable to deliver the content effectively. They simply read from the book and provide immediate answers to exercises, which discourages the students from learning English actively.

S7: The instructor should not read directly from the book. It would be better if the teacher asks us a question, we write our answers in the chat box, and then facilitates us to find the answer. However, our teacher asks the question and gives the answer immediately. In this case, all our enthusiasm is lost because we are already sitting on the other side. We take our teas/coffees and just sit there.

2. Using varied teaching methods, activities and materials

All of the students asserted that their instructors should use a variety of teaching methods, strategies, materials and activities that would attract their attention and facilitate their learning. Some students are satisfied that their instructors use different kinds of activities and materials that takes their interests:

S2: In online classes, our instructor shows videos, pictures, animations… S/he uses a lot of visual materials. In this aspect, I think s/he is quite good.

On the other hand, some students voiced that their instructors cannot achieve this; they only give instruction and use the coursebook as a course material.

S7: As I said before, the instructor should not read directly from the course book. This is the most problematic point. S/he can utilize the materials of the online platform.

3. Fostering interaction

All of the students argued that fostering interaction is a crucial competency that online English instructors should possess. However, students remonstrated that they cannot see the instructor and each other during the online lessons. They stated that most of the instructors do not turn on their web-cam:

S8: I think, sometimes the lesson should be done by turning on the web-cam. In a traditional classroom, the instructor walks around the classroom and students look not only at the whiteboard, but also

around. Therefore, rather than only writing on the whiteboard, if the teacher delivers the lesson by looking at the web-cam, I think it would be more efficient.

One of the students indicated that opening web-cam while teaching is a sign of respect:

S3: The courses do not contain any visual elements; even the instructor doesn't show up. I think an instructor opening a web-cam means that s/he respects his/her profession and students.

Students reported that they have difficulty interacting with their teachers and friends because they did not see them, which reduces the effectiveness of the lesson, and their grade point average (GPA).

S5: I think it [distance education] is inefficient; because we cannot participate in the lessons actively. We can participate through computers and we cannot see the teacher, make interaction, and the teacher cannot show us something. Because of this, my GPA has also decreased.

Students also expressed discomfort that they cannot speak, and interact mostly through chat.

S2: You cannot ask questions as easily as in F2F education; when you don't understand, you can ask by typing in chat, but it is not as effective as F2F.

S2: I just get bored after a while … Only teacher speaks and we cannot …

4. Ensuring participation

Another competency which was articulated by all of the students is ability to ensure participation. They asserted that instructors should check attendance and try to increase participation in the lesson.

S8: Definitely, attendance must be taken a few times during the lesson. In distance education, logging in to the online platform means that you attend the class (…) When a student opens a new tab and deals with other things, s/he will not be able to see attendance is taken again, so s/he will be counted as absent. To prevent this, s/he will have to follow the lesson.

S1: The students who listen to the lesson needs to be determined by asking questions. I think if the teacher controls who attends the lessons and makes the grading accordingly, it would be better.

Some of the students complained that their instructors do not facilitate their learning or promote participation; which decreases the efficiency of the lesson.

S7: It would be better if the teacher asks us to answer questions like fill-in-the-blank exercises and we type the answer in chat box. However, our teacher says 'the answer for this exercise is this'; and reads the sentence one more time, and then moves on to the next exercise. Thus, this is obviously not beneficial for us. We can find the answer key from the internet as well.

On the other hand, most of the students admitted that they do not attend or participate in the online classes. Since the instructor doesn't see them, the students seem to be attending the class simply by logging in to the LMS; but later they leave.

S3: Students think that "the teacher does not see me, so I can do whatever I want", and they log in to the system but they do not listen to the lesson.

S7: What we do in distance education is log in to the system, and then leave. If we need to fill in something we just do that; and before the exam, we memorize them a little bit before the exam.

5. Having basic ICT skills

The majority of the students asserted that online instructors should have basic ICT skills; use computer and the LMS effectively. Nevertheless, some of the students complained that their instructors lack basic ICT skills which creates problems during the lessons:

S8: S/he should definitely know how to use a computer. Our first lesson was unsuccessful because while our instructor was writing on the 2nd board, we were seeing the 1st board. Therefore, we had to do the lesson again.

S7: I think it would be better if the lessons were conducted F2F. Because distance education occurs in a digital environment and most of our teachers don't know using computer at all; thus, there are lots of disconnections and we cannot understand anything.

S5: Our instructor writes something on the board and almost covers the whole board with one word. S/he cannot use the board effectively.

6. Integrating technology into teaching effectively

Most of the students argued that online instructors need to integrate technology into teaching effectively. Yet, most of the students uttered that their instructors could not use technology effectively in online courses.

S7: First of all, the instructor should know how to use a computer. Secondly, s/he should know how to connect to the online system remotely and use chat. In addition, when we want to show something on our computer screen, s/he should be able to accept it, show it on the computer screen and make changes on it. S/he should know such kind of things. However, our teacher does not know how to use a computer.

A few students indicated that their instructors integrate technology in lessons, which attracts their attention:

S3: One of our instructors was using online games, which attracted our attention. We all liked it and participated in the activities. Even the students who just log in to the system and leave, participated in the lesson.

7. Offering and getting feedback

A lot of students enounced that online instructors need to receive feedback whether students understood the topic, and give feedback when necessary.

S2: After teaching the topic, s/he can often ask if there is something that we did not understand.

S4: When students do something wrong, it should be explained as 'you used this affix wrong because of this'.

Nevertheless, some students complained that their instructors do not give or receive any feedback in online classes, making it difficult for them to grasp the topic.

S5: My English level is not good enough. I already cannot understand much, and when the teacher delivers the topic very fast, I understand nothing.

It was also put forward that the instructors cannot get enough feedback from students to know if students understand the topic since they cannot see students.

S2: The teacher continues lecturing as s/he cannot know whether we understand the topic or not as s/he cannot see our faces. As there is no eye contact, I think something is missing.

8. Attracting attention

Most of the students expressed that the instructors need to attract their attention in online classes to increase participation and efficiency of the course.

S6: In fact, attracting attention is very important. First of all, as I said before, music or an emblem that appears suddenly can attract attention. It's very boring for us to sit in one place and do the same things, and it's the same for every lesson. If you do something different, for example, even the increase in tone of the voice makes a difference.

S3: First of all, the roll call issue is meaningless. They should do something different and draw students' attention to increase the participation in the class. Once they achieve this, students start to participate.

Students declared that, using different and enjoyable activities, and humoristic teaching style take their attention.

S3: One of our instructors was using online games, which caught our attention. We all liked it and participated in the activities. Even the students who just log in to the system and leave participated in the lesson.

S6: My instructor is using drama. S/he is very cheerful and gathers attention very well. I am very happy about that.

S2: Our instructor's humorous style of teaching also attracts our attention more.

9. Creating open and friendly environment

One of the most reported competencies is creating open and friendly environment. Students reported feeling more relaxed, engaged, and motivated when their instructors are friendly, sincere or humorous.

S3: A friendly relationship is better than a hierarchical one between a teacher and a student. That way, the instructor can make students do anything. The instructor gives homework and students respect this. They think that our instructor values us, so we should also value her/him.

S3: There are shy students who are not comfortable expressing themselves verbally or in writing. A more open environment should be created to involve all students in the lesson.

One of the students remarked that, online instructors should meet students outside of the online classroom so as to establish rapport:

S5: Since we do our lessons online, the instructor can meet the students at a cafe and have conversations to establish a close relationship.

Some of the students delivered that their instructors create friendly and open environment in online classes which attract their attention more.

S2: If the instructor is sincere and smiling, one can ask anything easily. Our instructor has also a humoristic teaching style that attracts our attention more.

S6: For instance, my instructor was using drama. S/he is very cheerful and gathers attention very well. I am very happy about that.

10. Adjusting tone of voice

Another commonly emphasized competency by the students is adjusting tone of voice while teaching. However, some of the students complained about their instructors' tone of voice in online classes. Students indicated that, when the instructors speak with the same tone of voice, they get bored.

S1: Tone of voice is important. When the instructor speaks in a low tone, I don't want to listen.

S5: The instructor should not speak in the same tone of voice. Our instructor always speaks in the same tone, so we stop listening. We just sit and stare at the screen.

11. Pre-class preparation

Being prepared for the online class is also perceived as an important competency. Students maintained that online instructors should revise the topic they will teach, prepare instructional activities and materials, and check the online platform before teaching.

S3: Before teaching online, the instructor needs to revise the topic s/he will teach, prepare and check instructional materials.

S4: S/he should revise the topic, activities, and materials before the lesson. Besides, s/he should control online platform if there is any problem.

12. Being aware of student profile and teaching accordingly

The students declared that instructors need to be aware of the student profile; their needs, interests, English level, and teach accordingly.

S6: It would be better if they develop empathy for students. For instance, they need to know that students have different learning skills, each student is different.

13. Giving and checking assignments

Some students noted that online instructors should give and check assignments, which can facilitate their learning.

S2: Homework can be given. We don't want to do it when they are too challenging, but maybe we can be encouraged to do them. The more fun the lesson, the more willing we will be to do the homework.

S7: Even if we don't want to do homework, it should be given. (…) If I am given responsibility, I feel like I have to do it.

14. Motivating

The students also remarked that the instructors should motivate them. They suggested that online instructors should use interesting and diverse activities and materials to motivate.

S3: They need to be motivating. Scaring students can be effective at first. But in the long run, it is absolutely useless. Students go to class not to learn something, but because it is compulsory. On the other hand, if the teacher motivates us by explaining why the lesson is important to us, it is more effective.

15. Being accessible

Some of the students underlined the importance of being accessible outside of the online classroom.

S6: To be honest, I have always received support from my teachers, which is very important. When I told them I was new and might fail; they said "if you need anything I'm always welcome". In this respect, they were very good.

16. Classroom and time management

A few students stated that online instructors should have classroom management skills:

S8: Whether it is distance or F2F education, the instructor should take control of the class.

S5: The instructor should have leader role because s/he should manage the classroom. Thus, s/he should have leadership qualities and rhetoric skills.

17. Time management

The students also indicated the importance of time management skills.

S1: Considering that students might get bored, they should adjust the duration of the lesson accordingly.

S8: Every second that teacher waits, makes you more bored. Our teachers do not keep us waiting long, but it would be better if they were faster.

18. Evaluating effectiveness of the course

Two students proposed that instructors should evaluate effectiveness of the online course, and then take appropriate actions based on the evaluation.

S3: As for everything, evaluation must be done definitely and then acted accordingly.

S8: Feedback should be received from the students about the efficiency of the lesson and act accordingly. For example, what you are doing right now is a good thing.

19. Seeking ways for professional development

It was also indicated that online language instructors need to improve their skills through getting teacher training or receiving support.

S7: I think, the instructor should give importance to professional development. Hence, s/he should get teacher training or consult somebody who know using computer.

20. Adopting a favorable attitude towards teaching online

One student asserted that online instructors need to have positive attitude towards online teaching:

S6: First of all, s/he must love to teach. If s/he comes to class unwillingly, every student understands this.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

When asked about the roles of online English instructors, the students only articulated the facilitator and leader roles. Nonetheless, some students indicated that their instructors did not effectively fulfill these roles in online classes. Instead of creating a student-centered environment and facilitating learning, many instructors have relied heavily on lecturing, and taken on instructor role predominantly. Several researchers have addressed the facilitator role in online teaching (Abdulla, 2004; Baran et al., 2011; Chang et al., 2014; Craig et al., 2008; Muñoz Carril et al.,2013). Abdulla (2004) emphasized that online facilitators should provide open-ended expressions and examples, encourage participation by employing a variety of teaching methods like discussions, debates, exchanging one-on-one messages, and pay attention to his/her proportion of contribution to discussions. Additionally, leader role was also revealed by many studies (Anderson, et al., 2001; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Muñoz-Carril et al., 2013).

Apart from the roles, the students also identified numerous competencies that online English instructors should possess. Firstly, all students agreed that online English instructors are responsible for delivering the content effectively by meeting the lesson aims and objectives. It was emphasized that the instructors should possess necessary content knowledge and teaching skills, as affirmed by previous research (Abdulla, 2004; Aydın, 2005; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Chang et al., 2014; Kavrat, 2013; Lee, 2011). According to Baumann et al. (2008), as subject matter experts, online language instructors should:

> Understand how learners learn grammar, provide appropriate help with grammar, be up-to-date with cultural developments in target language countries, have native or near native competency, be up-to-date with current linguistic developments in target language countries, be aware of linguistic diversity in target language, have knowledge of the countries and cultures where language is spoken and be aware of cultural differences (p. 391)

On the other hand, some students pointed out that their instructors do not convey the content effectively, which decreases their interest and enthusiasm towards learning. Most of the students emphasized that adjusting tone of voice is crucial in online education. Students indicated that the instructors should not speak with the same tone of voice, as they can get bored. Yet, some of the students complained that their instructors speak in a tone that is too flat, which makes them get distracted and bored.

Another competency that was highlighted by all of the students is the use of a variety of teaching methods, activities, and materials as previous research suggested (Bates, 2015; Compton, 2009; Muñoz-Carril et al., 2013; Rosell-Aguilar, 2007). Ally (2008) also emphasized that online teaching should not only involve placing contents or links of web tools on the internet, but also using different learning activities to address different learning styles. Unfortunately, the students remonstrated that, most of the instructors only use Grammar Translation Method (GTM), lecturing and demonstration methods, and rely on PowerPoint,

videos, and coursebook as teaching materials, and utilize same kind of activities in online classroom. This is in line with Simonson et al.'s (2008) observation that some instructors still prefer lecture-based instruction in online education rather than embracing a learner-based instruction.

Other prime competencies articulated by all of the participants are fostering interaction and ensuring participation. A large body of research has also found that fostering interaction and ensuring active participation are fundamental competencies of online instructors (Abdulla, 2004; Compton, 2009; González-Sanmamed et al., 2014; Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Muñoz-Carril et al., 2013).

Nonetheless, the students reported a lack of interaction between instructor and students, as well as among the students in online courses. It was declared that, only the students see the instructor, and the instructor cannot see the students. The students complained that, some instructors do not turn on their webcams, which makes them bored. In relation to this, Wang (2004) highlights the importance of audiovisual interaction as it allows seeing visual clues and contextual elements in online environments:

> Without visual input, the language learning environment is far removed from real-life situations, thus compromising the ultimate goal of language learning according to communicative methodologies, that is, to communicate and interact in the target language in an authentic environment. The importance of visual input and interaction may be even more prominent to distance language learners in that it can help reduce isolation and anxiety and build confidence (p. 378).

Likewise, it was indicated that some instructors do not ensure student participation. Some students admitted that they only log in to LMS, but do not listen to the instructor, as the instructor is unable to see them. At this point, Tuzun (2004) recommends the use of active learning strategies (e.g., online discussions, real-world projects, and collaborative learning activities) in online learning environments. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2001), point out that sustaining participation is troublesome issue for instructors teaching in a text-based computer conferencing environment. Hence, they suggest that sense of presence should be created in online learning environments. White (2003) also put that in the absence of visual clues, language instructors can encourage and maintain discussion so as to develop a sense of community.

It was indicated that, offering and getting feedback is another important responsibility of the instructors. This competency was also detected by previous studies (Alvarez, et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2008; Goodyear et al., 2001; Huang, 2019; Muñoz Carril et al., 2013; Rosell-Aguilar, 2007). However, some students complained that, as the instructor do not take any feedback regarding whether the subject is understood or not, they have difficulty in grasping the content. Apart from this, numerous students emphasized the importance of online language instructors being able to attract student attention. To achieve this, the students have suggested utilizing a variety of engaging activities and materials. Additionally, it has been endorsed that the use of audio-visual materials and ice-breaking activities can effectively serve this purpose. Similarly, Güneş and Adnan (2023) have affirmed the significance of ice-breaking activities in e-learning environments as a means to attract student attention.

A large number of students highlighted the magnitude of possessing basic ICT skills and integrating technology into teaching effectively. According to the students, instructors should know using computer, LMS, and educational web-tools effectively in accordance with teaching objectives. A huge number of studies (Alvarez et al. 2009; Chang et al., 2014; Compton, 2009; Lee, 2011; Michalopoulou, 2020) also established the significance of having basic ICT skills, knowledge of instructional technology, and using digital materials and activities properly in online classes. On the other hand, the participants outlined that some of the instructors lack computer and LMS knowledge, basic ICT skills, and competence in using technology efficiently in online classes.

Many students declared that instructors should have planning skills and be prepared for the online course, which involves planning the course, review the subject matter, control the online platform and internet connection, preparing and uploading activities and materials to LMS. Supporting this result, different studies also revealed the significance of planning skills for online instructors, which encompass lesson

planning, organizing teaching-learning process, designing online interactive content, setting up time parameters (Abdulla, 2004; Alvarez et al., 2009; Hampel & Stickler, 2005).

Most of the students laid emphasis on the significance of creating open and friendly environment so as to establish rapport, make students feel relaxed, motivated, and engaged. Students indicated that the instructors should be friendly, sincere, humorous, and cheerful. Similarly, a large number of studies (Abdulla, 2004; Baumann et al., 2008; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Lee, 2011; Muñoz Carril et al., 2013) have emphasized the need to establish a friendly, relaxing and open atmosphere should in online classes. Parallel with this, Rosell-Aguilar (2007) maintains that, in addition to teaching, communication, technical, and management skills; online instructors' personality and sincerity is vital for the success of online classes. According to Baumann et al. (2008), online instructors should be "flexible, open-minded, enthusiastic, committed, patient, respecting individuals, positive, attentive, approachable, encouraging and supportive" to create a constructive online setting (p. 391).

Students asserted that instructors should learn about student characteristics, needs, interests, and teach accordingly. Lots of previous research has also emphasized the importance of this competency in online learning environments (Abdulla, 2004; Craig et al., 2008; Goodyear et al., 2001; Huang, 2019; Lee, 2011). In relation to this, Anderson (2008) set forth that learning materials should be appropriate for the learner profile so that learning becomes meaningful and learners personalize knowledge. Richards, et al., (2004) posited that content and activities should be delivered in small chunks (about 10-15 minutes) in online education in compliance with the needs and interests of new generation.

Another important competency that students indicated is that online instructors need to be motivating. Similarly, Bennet and Lockyer (2004) suggested that online instructors should develop new strategies to motivate students they meet only on online platforms. Apart from this competency, it was stated that online instructors should be accessible outside of the classroom. Earlier research has also indicated that instructors should keep in touch with students after online classes (Baumann et al., 2008; Craig et al., 2008; Gülbahar & Kalelioğlu, 2015; Güneş & Adnan, 2023).

The students expressed that online instructors should assign and check homework as it could facilitate their learning. However, some students admitted that they would not do it even if given homework. In addition to this competency, students attached importance to managerial roles of online instructors, with competencies of classroom and time management were indicated as crucial. A lot of research has also stressed the significance of managing the classroom, time and student interactions in online classes (Alvarez et al., 2009; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Baumann et al., 2008; Denis et al., 2004; Goodyear et al., 2001; Huang, 2019; Lee, 2011).

Lastly, a few students uttered that online instructors need to evaluate the effectiveness of the course, seek ways for professional development, and adopt a positive attitude towards teaching online. Nevertheless, it was stated that the instructors are not competent enough for teaching online, so they need to improve their skills by taking training and following the developments. In congruence with this result, a huge amount of research highlighted the significance of these competencies (Craig et al., 2008; Denis et al., 2004; Goodyear et al., 2001; Güneş & Adnan, 2023; Lee, 2011; Muñoz Carril et al., 2013). According to Simonson et al. (2008) evaluation is a fundamental part of an instructional process to assess what works and what needs improvement.

To conclude, this study examined the perceptions of students regarding the roles and competencies of online English instructors. In total, the students identified 2 roles (facilitator and leader) and 20 competencies that English instructors should possess in online education. The most frequently mentioned competencies were delivering the content effectively, utilizing varied teaching methods, activities, and materials, fostering interaction, ensuring participation, having basic ICT skills, integrating technology into teaching effectively, giving and receiving feedback, attracting attention, creating open and friendly environment, and adjusting tone of voice while teaching. As discussed so far, results of this study are consistent with a large body of

research that investigated online instructor roles and competencies. It is noteworthy that, there is a significant difference between what is regarded as important role or competency, and what is performed in online classes. The students underlined the necessity of teacher training regarding the usage of computers and LMS, as well as the effective integration of technology into lessons.

6. Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

This study unearths critical issues that should be considered by higher education institutions in order to provide an effective online language teaching and learning environment.

In the light of the findings, it is recommended that higher education institutions enhance their the technical, technological, and material infrastructure to support online teaching. Additionally, they should provide instructors with an ongoing and hands-on training, including regular refresher courses and workshops, covering basic ICT skills, proper use of LMS, online material development, copyright issues, and effective integration of instructional technology into lessons. Training activities should be flexible in timing to accommodate instructors' teaching loads and include practical experience with the institution's LMS and video-conferencing system. Moreover, high-quality electronic course content should be prioritized in online courses. Institutions should either purchase commercial off-the-shelf products or provide guidance to instructors on selecting, adapting, or creating online materials, activities, or tasks that comply with copyright regulations. Furthermore, students should be provided with a technology orientation before taking online courses. Finally, when creating online language classes, students' English proficiency levels need to be taken into account to better manage diversity issues.

Due to practical constraints, this study was unable to provide a comprehensive examination of the roles and competencies of online English language instructors. Therefore, the study has limitations since it relies on self-reported data collected from a limited number of participants through interviews. To ensure generalizability, future research may use quantitative or mixed-methods with a variety of data collection tools. To enhance validity and reliability, researchers can use triangulation of data from multiple sources, such as classroom observations, focus groups, think-aloud protocols, and survey questionnaires.

It is worth noting that the participants of this study had only one or two terms of online learning experience, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Further studies could be conducted after participants have gained more online learning experience. Additionally, a follow-up study after providing instructors with further training and orienting students would be useful. Lastly, future studies could explore the roles of students in online learning environments by adopting different research methodologies.

Acknowledgements

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