

Behind the Screens: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Zoom in EFL Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract: This study examines the usage of Zoom platform features and functions in managing EFL classes from the perspectives of students and their instructors. The study used a mixed-method approach. Quantitatively, a questionnaire was distributed to undergraduate EFL students enrolled in advanced English courses (B2) in the first semester of the academic year 2023/2024 in a Palestinian university. The questionnaire was complemented by interviewing nine EFL instructors who have utilized the Zoom platform in their EFL classes. The quantitative data were subjected to statistical analysis whereas the interview data were analyzed thematically to obtain qualitative insights. The findings of the study revealed that Zoom features and functions significantly boost the online language learning experience in the EFL classes according to the students' views. The students highly appreciate the features of recording, raising hands, screen-sharing, mute/unmute controls, file-sharing, and chat box while learning the English language. The results also indicate that both male and female students have similar views on the efficiency of Zoom features and functions. The analysis of the qualitative data reveals that EFL instructors largely utilize Zoom features and functions in their EFL classes and appreciate the benefits of these tools. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate that the instructors encounter some challenges primarily related to technical issues. The findings provide valuable views to the field of language learning and teaching through building on the experiences of undergraduate students and instructors with the context of EFL.

Keywords: EFL classes, EFL instructors, Online teaching, Online learning, Zoom

1. Introduction

The notion of e-learning has been proposed and endorsed in most of the countries around the world. It is also considered as the latest trend in 21st-century educational methodology, which requires new knowledge and skills. In other words, it is an alternative form of delivering education through technologically facilitated tools. E-learning has significantly helped teachers in their teaching activities. The incorporation of e-learning in teaching helps make teachers' jobs easier. (Soon and Aziz, 2022).

Higher education in Palestine has experienced significant changes in the last few years (Badah et al., 2023). The sector has witnessed substantial advancements in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), especially with the increasing emphasis on online teaching (Abuhusein and Badah, 2024). Therefore, the development of technology-based management tools has become a necessary endeavor. However, this need has been magnified with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to unprecedented interruptions and transformations across various domains of life (Shweiki et al., 2021).

Zoom has been particularly popular despite the sudden ubiquity of remote teaching using different virtual platforms (Ohnigian et al., 2021). This is due to its enormous potential for foreign language acquisition. It has been proven effective in providing educators with a useful tool for formatively assessing learning, facilitating small group interactions, engaging learners, and extending learning beyond the 'traditional' classroom (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022).

This platform, a free access utility, offers various built-in useful functions and tools that support the teaching and learning process. The breakout rooms, the instant message feature, the screen-sharing option, the poll feature, the diverse reactions, the recording and language interpretation functions, the file-sharing, the chat box

options, the attendance tracking, microphone and camera controls, the Q & A feature, the waiting room and other collaborative features, such as the whiteboard along with different annotation options, are unanimously essential to the administration of online sessions. These functions can immensely facilitate communicative language learning through the use of authentic language instruction in interactive synchronous classes (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022).

For EFL instructors, handling an online class is a challenge. Nevertheless, this can be resolved if the right foundations are arranged appropriately and convenient tools are utilized in the teaching-learning process. Likewise, learners in a virtual classroom can explore the facilities of the internet to create meaningful and constructive learning environments (Sibanda, 2021). Moreover, boosting students' English-speaking self-efficacy to get involved in active learning activities is, therefore, key (Hartono, Widiyati and Anwar, 2023). Both EFL instructors and students entail support resources and ostensible technology requirements for this purpose. That is to develop technological competence in order to improve their ability to use digital tools to foster classroom interaction. Furthermore, teachers and learners need to be familiar with the features of various digital tools and how they can be used for teaching (Huong and Moorhouse, 2023). In this vein, Tarteer, Badah and Khlaif (2021) argue that technology plays a vital role in the educational methods that enhance effective learning when supported by ICT elements. Thus, the paper aims to investigate whether such technological tools, embedded within the Zoom platform, can impact EFL language learners. It will also help shed the light on the utilization of such tools by the instructors themselves as it will examine the extent to which these tools are implemented in their virtual English language classes.

It could be argued that prior studies either addressed Zoom platform in general or focused on breakout rooms or other features. However, there is a paucity in the studies that investigate the best practices of Zoom and the functionalities of Zoom features and their specific role within the online EFL classes. The current study, however, aims to explore the efficiency of Zoom features and functions from the perspective of both teachers and instructors. Its main objective is to evaluate the impact of Zoom functionality in learning and teaching English as a foreign language as perceived by EFL learners and instructors. By doing so, the researchers aim to determine how specific Zoom features and functions including the chat box, file sharing, recording and other tools can contribute to the online education environment. Specifically, the study seeks to identify which functions of Zoom are most appreciated by students. Besides, the study tries to provide valuable insights on the most frequently used Zoom features as viewed by the EFL instructors.

By doing so, the current research makes a meaningful contribution to the existing literature on online language education. It brings attention to how digital platforms can be used to enhance active participation in language education classrooms. Additionally, the results may be of interest to EFL teachers through revealing the EFL students' perceptions towards the most valued Zoom features.

Accordingly, the current study aims to find answers to the following three questions:

1. How do EFL undergraduate students perceive the efficiency of the usage of Zoom's different functions in improving their language learning experience in their online classes?
2. Are there any differences regarding the usage of Zoom features and functions in English language classes according to the gender?
3. To what extent do EFL instructors use Zoom platform's functions in their online classes and how effective are they from their own perspective?

The current study, therefore, endeavors to address these three questions so that the intended study objectives are met. First, it reviews related literature on the role of technology in EFL learning and the functions of Zoom in facilitating language learning, establishing the study's theoretical framework. Then, it refers back to similar studies to examine how Zoom platform is used in different settings and show the gap in the existing literature. The study, then, outlines its methodology. The findings are presented and thoroughly discussed and compared in relation to existing literature in the respective sections. Finally, the study provides a concise summary of its main conclusions, followed by pedagogical implications. Limitations of the current study and recommendations for further research are provided, too.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Role of Technology in EFL Teaching

The integration of technology in language education has witnessed a paradigm shift. As a result, the pedagogy of teaching methodology has also changed. In the contemporary era, the integration of technology, along with

its diverse tools and applications, has become increasingly salient in the educational process. This integration holds significant potential for enhancing the teaching and learning experience (Al-Ghazo, 2008), especially after the spread of COVID-19.

Even before the pandemic, educational institutions embraced synchronous learning for enhanced online education (Delello, McWhorter and Lawrence, 2019). Nowadays, online and blended learning are becoming very popular worldwide (Lee, 2021). Therefore, both teachers and students need to develop their digital skills. Huong and Moorhouse (2023) stated that "Technological competence concerns the teacher and student's ability to use digital tools to foster classroom interaction. For example, teachers and learners need to be familiar with the features of various digital tools and how they can be used for teaching" (p.2). As educators increasingly embrace online platforms, understanding the effectiveness and challenges associated with each one is significant. Therefore, teachers need to develop new digital competencies as they may not be competent to teach online (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022). Moreover, students' e-classroom interactional competence is not less important than teachers'. Students should learn how to interact in an online classroom (Huong and Moorhouse, 2023). In other words, instructors need to introduce to their learners the Zoom features that they will need to use during the virtual sessions like how to ask questions, how to show that they have done a task, how to interact in class, and so on (Ohnigian et al., 2021).

2.2 Effectiveness of Online Learning Environment

Some might argue that the shift to online learning implies the potential loss of real interaction, communication, and collaboration among students, impacting their sense of community. Also, Zhang (2020) claims that difficulties posed by online learning arise from students multitasking and lacking focus, encountering internet connectivity issues, and feeling awkward when speaking to a screen. It can also be argued that online teaching does not guarantee students' retention especially when students do not turn on their cameras (Querol-Julián, 2023) and that adults are reported to have shorter attention spans in online learning, approximately six to eight minutes (Ohnigian et al., 2021).

However, it is said that synchronous videoconferencing platforms like Zoom enable real-time teaching, fostering live interaction. Zoom provides a psychologically comfortable online environment, where students can form positive perceptions of their virtual learning spaces. This positive adaptation, and the combination of Zoom features which facilitate synchronous interaction similar to real-time communication promote learner engagement and facilitate effective communication, cooperation, and collaboration (Zaiarna, 2021). Moreover, online learning makes students feel less anxious and more comfortable than face-to-face learning since they are not in a direct physical contact with others (Hollister et al., 2022).

2.3 Zoom Platform's Functions and EFL Classes

The Zoom platform effectively facilitates the learning process, as the teacher, serving as the conference organizer, enables both oral and written communication by utilizing various functions provided by the system (Agapova, 2020). Zoom has gained eminence for its range of features beneficial to language education. Guzacheva (2020) mentions that Zoom has expedited the incorporation of several innovations into EFL teaching through its various features.

Zoom is a versatile application offering video, audio conferencing, chat, and webinars. Through Zoom, teachers can allow features such as the waiting room, meeting ID, meeting passcode, muting-all option, disabling students from sharing their screens, and removing participants to increase the security of the online sessions (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022). Teachers can also schedule or start instant meetings. During meetings, users can modify layouts, access chat messages, record, and use features like the whiteboard for drawing or writing. It also includes features, such as annotation tools, polls, breakout rooms and video and screen sharing. These functions facilitate communicative language learning through the use of authentic language instruction in interactive synchronous classes. (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022; Nurieva and Garaeva, 2020).

Moreover, Zoom is widely regarded as advantageous in the educational process because it experiences minimal disconnection issues. Moreover, the audio quality during online video sharing on Zoom ensures clear communication for all participants (Dharma, Asmarani and Dew, 2017).

A substantial body of research confirms that the option of recording the online classes in Zoom provides students with an enduring resource where they can retain the knowledge at their own convenience and pace (Ohnigian et al., 2021; Liu and Wang, 2023; Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022), ridding students of the anxiety since they do not need to worry about the Internet instability (Liu and Wang, 2023). The recording tool also encourages

students' autonomy; they can choose to either watch the class offline or online, thus encouraging them to develop self-study skills (Liu and Wang, 2023).

In addition, the chat box tool in Zoom meetings could be a more student-friendly option since it allows teachers to send corrective feedback on students' work through private chat boxes, helping them to avoid feeling embarrassed about their mistakes. This is because "correcting the students' mistakes in e-learning, as the classes are recorded, might lead to the speakers' anxiety and demotivation because the language learners watch the files again" (Liu and Wang, 2023, p.6). The chat option is also helpful for students unwilling to show their confusion or weak oral skills in front of their classmates. Therefore, it grants them the comfort of messaging their questions to the teacher privately and even anonymously (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022). Although it is argued that the chat function can be misused by some students to chat with each other or send inappropriate content, teachers have the option of preventing student-to-student chatting and can disable the send-to-all function for a better class behavior management (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022).

Furthermore, the poll's function can be utilized to mitigate students' chances of feeling bored and to increase their engagement through making classes more interactive. This function can also be employed as a formative assessment tool through which teachers can check their students' understanding before moving on (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022). It can also be applied as a way to check students' active or actual presence to encourage students' retention (Ohnigian et al., 2021).

Another Zoom feature that is effective in EFL learning is the reactions function. According to Kohnke and Moorhouse (2020):

"Zoom allows students to indicate through non-verbal icons when they have a question, show agreement or indicate if they want the teacher to speed up, slow down or take a break. These icons can provide useful information regarding students' attentiveness, excitement, agreement or confusion with the language content being presented". (p.297)

Furthermore, the screensharing function of teachers' slides and instructions fosters students' EFL writing skills since, according to Huong and Moorhouse (2023), it enables students to learn essay structures and linguistic expressions for academic writing.

There is consensus among scholars that Zoom has become one of the most preferable virtual learning platforms (Agustina and Suharya, 2021; Lee, 2021; Hastomo and Marcela, 2021; Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022) mainly because of its breakout rooms feature (Hartono, Widiyati and Anwar, 2023), a distinctive feature of Zoom that is not found in other platforms. This functionality enables teachers to partition students into smaller groups, allowing them to assess presentations and participant interactions in each subgroup. At the designated time, participants are impeccably returned to the main room when the session concludes. Breakout rooms allow students to participate in hands-on communicative tasks and assignments within a smaller peer group (Chandler, 2016).

Conversely, it is argued that Zoom group discussions via breakout rooms may become time-consuming since, in comparison with face-to-face interactions, it takes a longer time to implement the group activities, and it is more challenging for instructors to oversee and manage online groups (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022; Huong and Moorhouse, 2023). Furthermore, Cavinato et al. (2021) note that while breakout rooms offer advantages, students may struggle to share answers efficiently, resulting in slower discussions than traditional classes. Also, students' prolonged screen time might lead to fatigue, termed "Zoom fatigue" (Wiederhold, 2020, p. 437). However, the benefits of breakout rooms outweigh the downsides. Through engaging students in group activities via breakout rooms, they get the chance to communicate with peers and enhance their proficiency in the English language in a way that encourages collaborative peer learning, increases students' motivation to participate in class discussions (Huong and Moorhouse, 2023; Hartono, Widiyati and Anwar, 2023) and boosts their self-efficacy in speaking English (Chandler, 2016).

2.4 Similar Studies

Nuryanto (2021) asserts that Zoom meetings offer students features for both independent work and collaborative discussions, contributing to increased engagement and motivation. Students appreciate the efficiency of incorporating Zoom into the learning process, noting time and effort savings. The study also highlights the perceived environmental friendliness of online learning through Zoom as it reduces paper usage.

In a study carried out by Nabil, Ayubi and Ansari (2023), the findings reveal that most participants believe Zoom enhances collaborative learning and boosts interaction between students and professors. Ease and cost-

effectiveness of sharing in discussions are also highlighted as notable advantages of Zoom technology by the participants. Additionally, more than half of the participants affirm that they find the features of the Zoom program easy to comprehend for educational purposes.

Furthermore, a study that examines the benefits of Zoom, conducted by Tuncer and Karatas (2021), reveals that Zoom offers tailored features for education, aiding the transition from face-to-face to online learning. It creates a supportive virtual environment, fostering synchronous interaction, communication, collaboration, and improving foreign language skills.

Another study implemented on 36 students, who were enrolled in an English-speaking course, concludes that the Zoom breakout rooms function increases students' speaking self-efficacy through providing them with opportunities to speak and discuss given topics with their teammates, and even ask questions about unclear instructions or ideas (Hartono, Widiyati and Anwar, 2023).

In a similar study, Huong and Moorhouse (2023) surveyed the e-classroom interactional competence of approximately 243 participants in terms of using Zoom breakout rooms. It mainly aimed at investigating what technological and interactional competences students have or need in order to more efficiently engage in breakout rooms activities. The results indicate that students tend to exchange ideas and opinions with their group members about the activities given in breakout rooms rather than asking the teacher to explain any ideas about the activity. Students' responses to the open questions accredit the Zoom breakout rooms feature for its effectiveness in enhancing communication skills, teamwork and group work.

Furthermore, Lee (2021) conducted a research study on a group of 25 students who were enrolled in English communication courses in a private university in South Korea. Lee's study indicates that most students were satisfied with using Zoom breakout rooms in EFL classes.

Another study, carried out by Kim (2020) to investigate the effect of online teaching using Zoom on learners' English reading comprehension achievement, highlights that learners were satisfied with Zoom lectures since they increased their motivation towards learning, encouraged autonomous learning and students' interaction, provided easy access and offered the option to retrieve information. However, it notes that some learners are dissatisfied with Zoom due to technical problems that are related to Internet stability and audio quality.

Similarly, Vu and Bui (2021) investigated the impact of EFL students' engagement when studying English reading comprehension online through Zoom. The study targeted 44 intermediate-level students at a public university in Vietnam. These students were placed into a control group and an experimental group. Traditional teacher-centered approach was utilized in teaching the students in the control group while students in the experimental group experienced student-centered type of teaching through engaging in breakout rooms for pair work, group work and screen sharing. Afterwards, students' vocabulary and reading comprehension abilities were assessed through a post-test whose scores indicated that the experimental-group students outperformed the control-group students.

As for the studies that examined the usage of Zoom features and the gender, they are very few as evidenced in the available literature. Alfadda and Mahdi (2021), for example, explored the usage of Zoom application in language learning among undergraduate EFL students. Their study shows that the variable of gender did not influence students' acceptance of using Zoom in language learning classes. Prevala et al. (2022) investigated the readiness of university male and female students towards using Zoom. Interestingly, their study revealed that females had higher attitude towards distance education than males.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current study adopts a mixed-method approach to meet its main goals. The study design includes quantitative as well as qualitative data collection techniques in order to ensure a deeper understanding of the research questions. Creswell and Creswell (2017) state that this approach involves collecting both quantitative and qualitative data and then merging these datasets to derive insights or draw conclusions. They argue that qualitative data typically include open-ended information where responses are not predetermined, while quantitative data involves closed-ended responses such as those commonly found in the questionnaires. The researchers adopted this approach as it provides a comprehensive understanding of Zoom platform through capturing measurable and numerical results as well as informed and personal experiences. Whereas the quantitative data provide generalizable perceptions from the EFL students, the qualitative data generated by the interviews reveal the usage degree, challenges, and benefits of Zoom as experienced by instructors.

Together, the two methods provide a more comprehensive view and a more robust answer to the study’s three questions.

3.2 Participants

3.2.1 Students

The study population consisted of all undergraduate EFL students enrolled in the advanced English course (B2) during the first semester of the academic year 2023/2024. The course is a four-credit hour course that mainly focuses on effective argument. 108 undergraduate students from different academic backgrounds responded to a questionnaire that was specifically designed for this purpose. Female participants represented 67.3 % whereas 32.7 % were males as illustrated in Figure 1. The majority of them (80.6 %) were in their first academic year. They were chosen to participate in the study since they have previously attended online EFL courses and used Zoom in their language classes. The students were selected purposefully based on their usage of the Zoom platform whereas their participation was voluntary. Table (1) shows the socio-demographical characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Participants’ Socio-demographical Characteristics

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Males	35	32.0
	Females	72	67.3
Academic Year	First Year	87	80.6
	Second Year	20	18.5
	Third Year	1	0.9
How long have you been using Zoom in language learning classes?	Less than 3 months	31	28.7
	3-6 months	41	38.0
	6-12 months	17	15.7
	more than 12 months	19	17.6

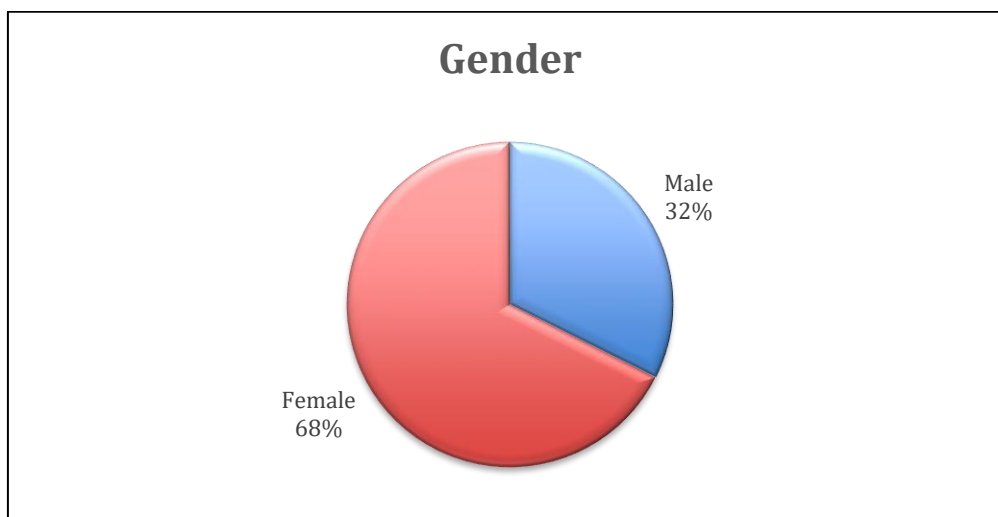


Figure 1: Gender of Participants

3.2.2 Instructors

Nine EFL instructors from the same university were interviewed to gather their insights and attitudes about the usage of Zoom tools in online EFL classes. All instructors have had the opportunity to use Zoom platform for teaching purposes. They were briefed about the research main goals. The selection criteria were based on their usage of Zoom platform features in their online classes.

3.3 Study Instruments

3.3.1 The questionnaire

A questionnaire was distributed to all undergraduate students learning English as a foreign language in a Palestinian university. The questionnaire was assessed by two experts who teach English as a foreign language in two Palestinian universities. Simultaneously, a qualified statistician evaluated the items and the scoring mechanism. This approach ensured a rigorous and comprehensive examination and thus enhanced the reliability and validity of the survey tool. The questionnaire included statements ensuring complete confidentiality for the participants' responses and that they can voluntarily respond to its items. It was developed using Google Forms and disseminated through the respective department in the university. The survey consisted of three sections: an introductory part stating the study objectives, a section generating background information such as gender, academic year, and the duration of using Zoom for language learning, and a section electing the students' attitudes towards using Zoom features and functions in EFL classes.

3.3.2 The interview

In-depth structured interviews were conducted with nine EFL instructors to gain their insights based on their personal experience in EFL classes. The interview questions, listed in Appendix A, covered key aspects about the specific Zoom features used by them, the frequency of their usage, and their impact on teaching practices. Besides, the instructors were questioned about how these features contribute to student engagement and participation in EFL classes, the challenges encountered with Zoom, and the strategies employed to overcome them. The interviews offered informative qualitative data complementing the quantitative results from student questionnaires, providing a comprehensive view of Zoom's role in EFL classes.

3.4 Data Analysis

Regarding the quantitative data, descriptive statistical analysis was employed to interpret the data gathered from the students' questionnaires. Specifically, frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations were calculated to measure the tendencies and variations among the responses. In addition, thematic analysis was applied to the data gathered from the EFL instructors' interviews, where the data were coded, categorized and further thematically organized to classify the recurring themes and patterns.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations related to this study were addressed to ensure the integrity and respect of both the instructors and students involved in the study. An official approval for conducting the research at the university was granted by the head of the Department of Languages and Translation, who consulted the relevant staff at the deanship. Both group of participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was secured prior to their involvement. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, and all data were used exclusively for research purposes.

4. Results

The results are presented separately for the EFL students and their instructors in line with the research questions. The finding indicate that both groups almost have similar perceptions towards the efficiency of using Zoom features and functions in EFL classes.

R.Q.1: How do EFL undergraduate students perceive the efficiency of the usage of Zoom's different functions in improving their language learning experience in their online classes?

Overall, as shown in Table (2), the Zoom features and functions significantly boost the online language learning experience by promoting engagement and facilitating communication in the EFL classes. The table shows that students highly appreciate the features of recording, raise hand, screen-sharing, mute/unmute controls, file-sharing, and chat box while learning the English language. Other features including direct messaging, attendance tracking, annotation, non-verbal emojis/reactions, polls, Q&A, waiting room, breakout rooms, and camera option are perceived slightly less positively compared to the previous ones with high agreement.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for perspective regarding the usage of Zoom’ features and functions in English language classes

N	Sentence	Mean	SD	Degree	%
1	The recording feature has been beneficial for reviewing language class lectures.	4.29	0.93	High	85.8
2	The raise hand function has been effective in promoting participation during language classes.	4.16	0.85	High	83.2
3	The screen-sharing option has enhanced my understanding of language skills.	4.07	0.83	High	81.5
4	The mute/unmute controls have been effective in managing language classes.	3.92	0.89	High	78.3
5	The file-sharing feature has facilitated the exchange of language learning materials	3.78	0.84	High	75.5
6	The chat box has facilitated communication with my teacher and classmates during language classes.	3.71	0.96	High	74.2
7	Overall, I am satisfied with the interactive functions provided by Zoom in my language classes.	3.70	0.96	High	74.0
8	The whiteboard feature has enhanced collaborative learning experiences during my language classes, allowing for effective visual explanations and interactive discussions.	3.68	0.83	High	73.6
9	The direct message feature in the chat box has facilitated privacy with my teacher and classmates.	3.64	0.92	Medium	72.9
10	The attendance tracking feature has encouraged me to attend the language classes continuously.	3.64	0.98	Medium	72.7
11	The above-mentioned features have contributed to my commitment to attend the whole language class.	3.64	0.86	Medium	72.7
12	The annotation feature has played a significant role in my language classes by enhancing collaborative activities and providing visual explanations,	3.44	0.78	Medium	68.8
13	The use of non-verbal emojis and reactions has added a positive aspect to language class interactions	3.38	0.91	Medium	67.7
14	The poll feature has helped engage me in language learning activities	3.35	0.77	Medium	66.9
15	The Q & A feature has been effective in addressing my personal inquires that are related to language learning.	3.33	0.95	Medium	66.5
16	The waiting room feature has helped the instructor to manage student entry effectively.	3.28	1.06	Medium	65.6
17	The breakout room function has positively impacted my language learning experience	3.25	0.84	Medium	65.0
18	The camera option has facilitated the communication during language classes.	2.87	1.13	Medium	57.4
	Average	3.62	0.51	Medium	72.4

R.Q.2: Are there any differences regarding the usage of Zoom’ features and functions in English language classes according to the gender?

The results of this question, as shown in Table (3), show that there is no statistically significant mean difference perspective regarding the usage of Zoom’ features and functions in English language classes according to the gender $p=0.995$. Both male and female students have similar views on the efficiency of Zoom features and functions.

Table 3: Mean Difference of Perspective Regarding the Usage of Zoom’ Features and Functions in English Language Classes Based on Gender

Gender	n	Mean	SD	DF	t-value	p-value
Males	35	3.62	0.53	105	0.006	0.995
Females	72	3.62	0.46			

R.Q.3: To what extent do EFL instructors use Zoom platform's functions in their online classes and how effective are they from their own perspective?

The results of this research question reveal that EFL instructors largely employ Zoom features and functions in their language classes and that they appreciate the benefits of these tools. On the other hand, the results demonstrate that the instructors encounter some challenges primarily related to technical issues. The results are presented below, and they are based on themes derived from a thematic analysis approach. Five different themes were identified from the interview questions conducted with the EFL instructors. Such thematic analysis ensures a structured and detailed representation of the qualitative data that were collected.

Theme 1: Frequency of Utilized Functions

The qualitative analysis of data reveals interesting threads from the EFL instructors' responses. The respondents indicated that they have actively utilized many functions including screen sharing, breakout rooms, chat box, raise hands, annotations, mute-participants, polls, recording, microphone, remove-participants, and reactions. It was obvious throughout the interviewing process that instructors have preferences for specific features. Arguably, this depends on their teaching styles and preferences, their students' levels, and the overall course objectives. It is also worth highlighting that screen-sharing, chat box, raise-hand, annotations and breakout rooms, respectively, are the most frequently used functions among the interviewees whereas the polls function seems to be ignored by most of the instructors interviewed. One can conclude from the instructors' answers that most instructors tend to use the basic features of Zoom when there are numerous additional functions to leverage.

Theme 2: Enhancement of Teaching

It was obvious that most of the EFL instructors particularly indicated that they have favorably utilized screen-sharing, chat box, raise-hand, annotations and breakout rooms over other tools. They claim that these features have significantly enhanced their teaching practices by allowing them to share the materials, facilitate group/pair work, assess students' work, provide visual explanations, and enhance peer learning.

One participant explains that Zoom has enhanced instructors' ability to reinforce their students' learning through sharing different types of educational content within class. To elaborate, one participant states that "It also helps when we are sharing videos. It is also helpful if I want to google something quickly and show it to them". Such options cannot be easily utilized in face-to-face settings. Participants also addressed their abilities to use features like the polls and the chat box which help them assess their students' understanding and foster their learning. Instructors also highlight how these features help maintain students' focus and attention during online classes.

Furthermore, features like breakout rooms facilitate group/pair work, granting students the chance to collaborate with their classmates for more effective learning opportunities. To illustrate, one participant indicates that breakout rooms "are excellent for group work as they help teachers design collaborative activities and help instructors broadcast voice and written messages to all during the activity".

Moreover, it is argued that some features like the chat box enhance peer learning. For instance, one participant claims that through the chat box, students "would still answer even if they made mistakes because they could all look at each other's answers and check their answer", thus utilizing peer assessment to boost their learning.

Theme 3: Student Engagement

According to the EFL instructors, Zoom features enhance students' participation and engagement by providing opportunities for interaction via the breakout rooms, chat box, and reactions features. For instance, one participant claims that the chat box maximizes the engagement of students of all mixed abilities and personality types that even "shy students who are hesitant to use the microphone to participate are active in the chat box". Furthermore, when instructors provide feedback on students' written responses in the chat box, students feel more motivated to actively participate in the discussion and become productive and self-regulated learners since they might consult further resources before they share their answers in the chat box. Chat box and reactions features are said to encourage student participation by providing various channels for them to ask questions, respond to prompts, and engage with course materials at their own convenience.

Moreover, features like breakout rooms facilitate student collaboration and engagement. For example, one participant states that "The breakout rooms function is very engaging. It helps the students interact with each other as well".

Theme 4: Effective Classroom Management

Instructors have strategically leveraged the Zoom features to manage classroom dynamics, control interruptions, and ensure a smooth session flow. Features such as waiting rooms, mute options, remove participants, polls, and raised hands have helped these instructors maintain discipline and organization as noted.

These features are effective in managing the classroom environment by regulating student entry, controlling disruptions, and maintaining order. Therefore, it was obvious that instructors have utilized various features strategically to ensure smooth session flow and minimize distractions, demonstrating effective management techniques in the online setting. One participant noted that “the option to have students raise their hands, let students open their cameras and have control over that is important to prohibit anything that might be inappropriate in one way or another”. Another instructor exclaims that these features have even helped students to become self-regulated and self-disciplined” since they know that any disruptions will be addressed effectively by the instructors.

Theme 5: Challenges and Recommendations

Overall, some instructors have expressed some concerns about technical issues (e.g., internet connectivity), time-consuming features (e.g., breakout rooms, annotations), students’ misuse of certain features, security issues with online exams, and students’ as well as instructors’ unfamiliarity with certain features. However, some instructors redressed that, with experience, they managed to address most of the above-mentioned challenges. For example, Participant four mentions that to prevent students from misusing the share-screen function, instructors can control who can share what.

Recommendations include improving cybersecurity for examinations, providing additional feedback beyond the chat box, activating new Zoom features through the university’s account/subscription plan, and addressing technical issues to enhance the online teaching experience. For example, one of the participants claims that there are more updated versions of Zoom that have more beneficial features to utilize than the features available through the University’s current subscription plan. Therefore, this participant has purchased the latest Zoom App saying that “it has other features like taking attendance. I can make a summary of the meeting that could be sent to students”.

5. Discussion

As demonstrated by the results of the first question, Zoom was found to be useful in EFL classes as viewed by the students themselves. This positive reception suggests that Zoom functionalities are helpful in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of online language teaching and learning processes. This result is consistent with that of Souheyla (2021), which concluded that Algerian EFL students viewed Zoom as useful in their classes. Specifically, the study showed that EFL Zoom classes increase students’ motivation, enhance their interaction, provide a diversity of learning materials, and integrate proper assessment.

The findings of the second question suggest that Zoom’s features and functions are viewed similarly by both female and male undergraduate students in EFL classes. One female participant said that “I use all of the features” once she was asked about the type of Zoom features that she uses in her language classes. This gender neutrality shows that the design and usage of these features are universally accessible irrespective of gender. Additionally, it provides an inclusive learning environment where both males and females can equally benefit from the technological tools in the EFL classroom. Such results also indicate that the efficiency of Zoom features and functions is consistent across different demographic groups. Arguably, these implications can be advantageous for educators in designing the teaching strategies in the online learning modality, knowing that the Zoom features and functions they use are equally effective for all students. Interestingly, since gender does not affect the respondents’ views, EFL researchers may focus on other factors that influence the usage and effectiveness of Zoom features including technological proficiency, age, and social backgrounds.

Considering the results of the third question, it could be argued that the instructors’ responses highlight the multifaceted role of Zoom features and functions in boosting online language learning and teaching. These features and functions have the ability to facilitate curriculum delivery, enhance student engagement, and support effective class management. However, addressing issues related to the technical issues and improving certain features could optimize the online teaching process.

Most of the respondents registered a high preference toward using the screen-sharing feature mainly for sharing the textbook with their students. One respondent stated that she uses this feature for many purposes. She added, “we share screen for the videos, audio, links, Google Drive”. This might, however, point to a more

traditional, teacher-oriented perception of the instructor's role as instructors tend to be the center of the learning process when sharing books and imparting knowledge. Although sharing the textbook with students on Zoom is advantageous especially when students have a limited access to the textbook, teachers can enrich this experience and demonstrate a more learner-centered learning approach through applying various techniques. That is, students can be asked to present and discuss certain activities and sections in the textbook instead of being solely presented and discussed by their instructors. In addition, instructors are advised to indulge their students in collaborative discussions and let them participate in annotating texts. Utilizing such annotations can aid teachers throughout the screen sharing process. By encouraging learners to take the lead in terms of annotating the shared material, teachers can definitely help students learn and be more involved.

Six out of the nine interviewed instructors reported using the breakout rooms feature. One of the respondents clearly mentioned that they "use breakout rooms for collaborative work". This might reflect their awareness of what Chandler (2016) reported of the breakout rooms tool as a distinctive feature of Zoom platform. Moreover, Hartono, Widiyati and Anwar (2023) claim that Zoom is the most preferred teaching platform mainly because of its breakout rooms feature. However, this utilization of the feature was considered by the majority to be a challenge. One of the respondents stated plainly, "the breakout rooms were a challenge". It seems that this could be referred partly to the reported low preference of this feature by students. Students might not prefer being obliged to participate in discussions and collaborative activities as they might favor activities that are based on self-selection. Another potential reason for struggling with the breakout rooms feature could be instructors' unfamiliarity with such features that would entail they step out of their teaching comfort zones. Some instructors might not be competent in using such features. Therefore, instructors need to enhance and continuously update their digital competencies to be able to teach online effectively (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022).

Some of the participants announced that they view breakout rooms as a time-consuming feature. One participant expressed doubts about the effectiveness of this function stating: "I do not use breakout rooms a lot. I'd rather listen to the students because I teach lower levels, so I do not think it would be very effective". This is consistent with results of other studies. In their study, Kohnke and Moorhouse (2022) reported that it is worth noting that Zoom group discussions via breakout rooms are time-consuming since it takes a longer time to implement the group activities and are challenging for instructors to oversee since it is harder to manage online group discussions the way teachers manage in-person discussions.

It was also clear that the interviewed instructors asserted that their utilization of Zoom features contribute pointedly to students' engagement and participation in collaborative activities and discussions. These results receive support from the studies of Nuryanto (2021) and Nabil, Ayubi and Ansari (2023). Nuryanto states that Zoom meetings offer students features for both independent work and collaborative discussions, contributing to increased engagement and motivation. Students appreciate the efficiency of incorporating Zoom into the learning process, noting time and effort savings. The study also highlights the perceived environmental friendliness of online learning through Zoom as it reduces paper usage. Similarly, Nabil, Ayubi and Ansari (2023) argue that most participants believe Zoom enhances collaborative learning and boosts interaction between students and professors. Ease and cost-effectiveness of sharing discussions were also highlighted as notable advantages of Zoom technology by the participants. Additionally, the study unveils that more than half of the participants find the features of the Zoom program easy to comprehend for educational purposes.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the role of Zoom features and functions in the online EFL learning experience from the perspective of both students and instructors. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that incorporating these tools can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes in the EFL classroom. While the study has highlighted an important aspect of the EFL online learning environment, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The study was restricted to one academic semester and a particular cohort of undergraduate students and instructors in a Palestinian university. This would limit the generalizability of the results to a broader context. Accordingly, EFL researchers may broaden the scope beyond a single semester and specific university in order to comprehensively explore Zoom's effectiveness in EFL education. Besides, future research could build on the results of the current study and use qualitative methods to deeply explore the students' experiences in using Zoom platform in learning a foreign language. Finally, future research might examine the influence of EFL instructor training on using Zoom features effectively in EFL contexts.

The findings of this study offer some practical implications for online language education. First of all, the positive view of Zoom features and functions suggests that EFL instructors can encourage student participation through

integrating these tools intentionally in their EFL language classes. Besides, the challenges that were perceived by EFL instructors suggest that they need to work on mitigating them effectively to facilitate the educational process within the context of online language education.

Ethics statement: Needed approval for conducting the study was granted by the related head of the department. Besides, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was secured prior to their involvement.

AI statement: The participants exclusively used AI-enhanced tools to enhance the article's readability.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be made available on request

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- Please mention the functions/features of Zoom platform that you use in your online EFL classes.
- How often do you use different Zoom platforms functions to manage your online classes?
- To what extent do these functions /features enhance your teaching practices?
- To what extent do such functions /features contribute to students' retention, engagement and participation in EFL classes?
- What challenges have you encountered when using Zoom for EFL classes, and how have you addressed them?
- In your opinion, how can functions /features offered by Zoom platform be optimally used to enhance language teaching and learning?