

**Interactivity in Virtual Academic Conferences
What perceptions do EFL academics at the University of Batna 2 have?**



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Abstract:

Reaching masterly levels of interaction in virtual academic conferences is an ultimate goal for all academics. This aim is especially challenging for them particularly in virtual meetings. Given the importance of interactivity in virtual academic conferences, there is still an open question as to what extent do virtual academic conferences increase researchers' level of interaction? A total of 50 researchers from Batna 2 university participated in the present study. Data were gathered from a survey. The findings revealed that a lack of social interaction, and unfamiliarity with computer affected researchers' satisfaction level. The results suggest that lack of social interaction is a global challenge to the effectiveness of virtual academic conferences which call for the need to organizers' intervention to take measures to increase their social interaction. Thus, it is recommended that researchers undergo compulsory training on technology use which enables them cope with the needs of such virtual academic gatherings.

Keywords: interaction; virtual academic conferences; modern technologies.

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Introduction:

Due to the important researchers' roles and responsibilities in the education field, the conferencing is demanding and challenging. It relies on various sources of sharing knowledge from researchers, learners, teachers and may focus on virtual conferences. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many of these gathering opportunities especially those involving in person interaction. Many of the conferences have been adapted to an online format, the long-term consequence of which is yet to be recognized. The changed format is likely to impact learning pedagogy effecting both learners and researchers. This requires a systematic approach to organization of online conferencing adaptation, in comparison to the previous format, where, in person integration may have been the focus.

Scientific conferences have an essential effect in the exchange of ideas, experiences and knowledge within the scientific community. Over the past 3 years, researchers have relied heavily on virtual academic conferences to share their research and engage in insightful discussions with their learners and colleagues of their field and keep the learning moving forward. A variety of platforms have been tried, everything from zoom and google meet to virtual roundtables. Many of these academic conferences were successful, while others struggled due to technology, difficult to organize or less face-to-face interaction.

1.Literature Review

1.1. The Importance of Interactivity

Interactivity is conceptualized as an important learning process and the level of interactivity has an effect on the quality of computer-mediated instruction Muirhead (2001). Allwright et al (1991, p.156) defined interaction as: "the fundamental fact of pedagogy and successful pedagogy involves the successful management of classroom interaction". Researchers' Interactivity in conferences has been suggested as a major goal in FL education (Hall & Walsh, 2002). Several studies show that conference interaction can help to gain new perspectives and broaden researchers' horizons (Chaudron,1988; Nuan,1991; Hedge, 2000).

Interaction offers researchers a way to get more practice, present and discuss their scholarly work; they can be more motivated to engage in further communication. According to Hedge (2000, p.13) "interaction pushes learners to produce more accurate and appropriate language, which itself provides input for other students. This is one reason why pair work and group work have become common features of contemporary classrooms.". Additionally, Chaudron (1988) argued that:

Interaction is viewed as significant because it is argued that only through interaction can the learners decompose the TL structures and derive meaning from classroom events. Interaction gives learners the opportunities to incorporate TL structures into their own speech, and meaningfulness for

learners of classroom events of any kind, whether through interactive or not, will depend on the extent to which communication has been jointly constructed between the teacher and learners. (p.10)

Interactivity can engage the researchers' participation in the conference by using the suitable platforms. It can be concluded that interactivity is beneficial in the teaching and learning process

2.2. Virtual Academic Conferences: Definition and characteristics

According to Rockinson-Szapkiw and Walker (2009), virtual conferences are commonly defined as web-conferencing or e-conferencing systems. Virtual conference is a conference that happens online instead of in the "real world. Virtual means that teachers, researchers and learners are present at one point in time, using the internet to communicate with each other, and it can be achieved using various platforms such as zoom and google meet. Lietzau and Mann (2009) found web-conferencing to be an "enhancement to learning in the online environment" (p. 116).

The use of online conferences enables researchers to learn from anywhere, without setting to physically traditional conference (Morrow, Phillips, & Bethume, 2007). Virtual conferences allow for better researcher students, researcher-teachers, students-student, students-teachers' interaction in the conference so the teaching and learning process can be effective. "Good conferences contain thought-provoking presentations that are leading to change. This might not always be immediate, but by challenging our perceptions of reality, we have the opportunity to grow and to transform, thanks to new thought paths that have been created in the conference environment." (Edelheim et al, 2018, p. 101)

The characteristics available in the virtual conferences play an essential effect in maintaining interaction. Most of the virtual conferences technologies have a knowledge to share the researchers' PowerPoints, a breakout rooms for discussion and debate, text chat to comment or ask questions and other participants can interact using words and emoticons, and audio chat to talk via microphone or telephone with the presenter and other participants.

Park and Bonk (2007) listed the main advantages of using virtual conferences as: encouraging the exchange of different ideas and research works, increasing dynamic interactions among participants, getting prompt feedback, and reinforcing social presence. As the issue of examining the interactivity in virtual academic conferences has been investigated in different countries, the importance of conducting the present research work is that no similar studies pertain to the Algerian context, therefore, the present study sheds light on interactivity in virtual scientific conferences particularly EFL participant from Batna 2 university by attempting to answer the following questions:

- What perceptions and challenges do participants have about interaction

within the virtual conferences?

- What strategies and tools can organizers use to develop researchers' interactivity in the virtual conferences?

2. Methods and Tools:

To acquire comprehensive profiles of participants' practices and beliefs, the current research paper employed quantitative data (survey). Using a survey to collect data was an appropriate design. Neuman (2006) states that surveys are appropriate when asking questions about attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. The participants' survey was developed to collect data concerning attitudes and techniques of participants while presenting their research works virtually and to seek deep data about participants' interactivity and explore the difficulties they faced while interacting virtually.

A sample of university female and male researchers from Batna 2 took part in the study. They are/were all working in English language department. The rationale for choosing English language department is based on the accessibility of surveying participants. All participants agreed to take part in the study on a voluntary basis. The 50 academics were chosen randomly to fit the purpose of the study. All participants were Algerian Native-Arabic speakers.

For its design, the survey was divided into two sections: Section 1 focused on the participants' experience in virtual academic conferences while Section 2 was addressed to obtain detailed accounts of interaction in virtual academic conferences from participants and the challenges they face. Thematic analysis was used for the survey data. This involved grouping keywords into categories and identifying themes that emerged from the data. The themes were subject to intra-coder reliability checking.

The validity of the survey was achieved by conducting a pilot study. Two researchers were given the survey to complete. After slight modifications, a total number of 50 surveys were distributed among EFL participants/academics (researchers) at Batna2 university. After that, the data was collected and all the surveys were reported as valid. Eventually, the information was analyzed, the findings were discussed and supported by literature, and some recommendations were suggested.

3. Results and Discussion:

3.1. Participants' Experience in the Virtual Academic Conferences

Thematic analysis yielded the following themes showed in Table 1

Table 1

Participants' Experience in The Virtual Academic Conferences

The four main themes that emerged from the analysis of data are all

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Statements</i>
<i>Technological knowledge competence</i>	<i>Participants suffered of virtual conferencing when they were still "learning new technology" "we are struggling with implementing technology and digital resources,"</i>
<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Difficult to stay motivated to attend all session and discussion "I do not feel comfortable, confident motivated in online conferencing as compared to the traditional conferencing "I had never worked on zoom or google meet platforms because there was no need to use it professionally before"</i>
<i>Lack of training</i>	<i>Teachers' lack of knowledge and training on how to use and implement technological tools and platforms also hinders the provision of support for adopting virtual conferences</i>
<i>Convenience</i>	<i>Good for socio-economic status 'being in the comfort of own home instead travelling' and 'it is better for participants with anxiety'</i>

important aspects of virtual conferencing. 'technological knowledge competence' 'motivation' 'lack of training' 'convenience'. Majority of the respondents (70%) agreed that 'technological knowledge competence' is a barrier in online conferences due to which some participants cannot succeed. For example, not knowing well the process of operating some computer technologies, misuse of mobile phones/laptops', online communication is not as much functional as physical means, and poor time management are the obstacles.

When considering the motivation of the teachers in the present research work, it seems that, according to the results, their motivation went through many worries: from stress and fear, to tiredness. The teachers' tiredness could be explained by the long term of this situation. This challenge can lead to teachers' burnout (Sokal et al., 2020; Tzifopoulos, 2020). On the other hand, many of them (64%) who expressed fear and stress, had little or no experience with technologies. Previous experience with technologies may have affected the initial reaction in terms of motivation of the teachers interviewed (Van der Spoel et al., 2020; Portillo et al., 2020)

Lack of training on how to deal with technology is another challenge; all participants said that lack of training has a great influence on their satisfaction. This includes having no motive, not getting inspired to participate and share their works and studies, and having no interest in conference. When they do not get the essence of a real conference, they get unsatisfied. The physical presence of them

also has a great effect on conferences' success. This evidence concurs with the findings of Guskey's study (2003)

Further the result of the present study indicates that some participants (36%) having a more favorable attitude towards virtual conferences than other participants (64%). Results of this study indicates that young participants with good or basic experience with technology having a more favorable attitude towards online conferences than the old participants finding virtual conferences more convenient as it is good for their socio-economic status and for participants with anxiety. May be young respondents are well exposed to the new technology and having good network connections are the major reasons. Teachers' perspectives are also related with personal characteristics such as gender (Asabere, & Enguah, 2012), years of teaching experience (Wasserman, & Migdal, 2019) and exposure to computers (Asabere, & Enguah, 2012)

3.2. Participants' interaction in the virtual academic conferences

Participants' perspectives are listed in various themes presented in Table 2

Table 2

Participants' Interaction in the Virtual Academic Conferences

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Statements</i>
<i>Lack of interaction and collaboration with other participants</i>	<i>Online learning seems impersonal and isolated as compared to traditional classroom. "there is a lack of social context cues in the online conferences" "I feel isolated in the virtual conferences" , Audience engagement, limited question-answer sessions</i>
<i>Difficult to read non-verbal cues</i>	<i>It is challenging to understand non-verbal cues, as participants stated, which makes building relationships with participants more demanding</i>
<i>Feedback</i>	<i>Timely feedback, prompts for feedback, private text</i>

chat, limited feedback

The results of the research found that attitudes of the majority of participants (70%) are not favorable towards interaction in virtual academic conferences. The cause behind the average attitude of participants is the difficulty to read non-verbal cues, getting audience engagement, and limited question-answer sessions. May be developing the communicational skills of participants is an aspect often neglected during online conferences. Due to the lack of face-to-face communication between participants and audience in online setting, they find that they are unable to work effectively and build connections with their fellow. A lack of any kind of face-to-face communication with participants/audience inhibits peer feedback, causes social isolation as there is no sense of community with participants, and could cause them to feel a lack of motivation. Limiting the problems due to interactions will result in successful online learning (Schullo, 2005)

Because of the intimate connection between interaction and feedback, it is relevant to consider how the different conceptual attitudes participants identified sit with what feedback respondents generally consider good feedback practices. The perceptions of the responding participants varied across the survey; few of them (42%) are showing more favorable attitude towards feedback in virtual academic conferences become satisfied when they experience the presence of personalized feedback describing it as timely feedback while the rest stated clearly their attitudes as limited feedback and interactions. It brings a struggle with feedback because respondents feedback provision in an online setting is a whole process which is quite complex to execute easily and because of this, the concerns and questions of participants remain unsolved.

3.3. Participants' Challenges in the Virtual Academic Conferences

The responses from the survey were analyzed then interpreted as table (3) revealed

Table 3

Participants' Challenges of Virtual Conferences

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Statements</i>
<i>Difficult to interact and collaborate with other Participants</i>	<i>Many participants raised worries about "tough" and "inconsistent" virtual conference attendance</i>
<i>Lack of knowledge and skills in virtual conferencing</i>	<i>Participants may have inadequate skills to access the internet and its devices and platforms</i>
<i>Long term use of online learning</i>	<i>Poor-quality internet connection makes</i>

	<i>online conferencing very difficult</i>
<i>Difficult to replicate physical conferences</i>	<i>Not the same as in person gathering</i>

When asked what challenges of virtual conferencing, the respondents listed number of ideas as: long term use of remote learning, lack of knowledge and skills in virtual conferencing, difficult to replicate physical conferences and difficult to interact and collaborate with other participants. Lack of face-to-face interaction (94%), and unfamiliarity with computer (64%) were the major disadvantage of virtual conferencing; while collaborative learning among participants is important for them as they develop and share their knowledge. Participants by nature are social members who want to learn and interact with their fellow. It has been observed that internet use excessively can affect the brain to shrink and the condition may lead to decline in concentration. The lack of social interaction might also decrease learning motivation (Eksail et al, 2020; Hazwani et al.,2020). It goes without saying that since the research participants formerly present their studies in a face to face settings, and the shift of modality abruptly occurred, most likely they are left with no choice but to adapt for new situation. Interaction and options to contact potential new collaborators are limited in the virtual space (Oester et al., 2017)

In the present research work, the attitude of teachers towards technology was found to be significantly related to the experience and age. In line with this claim, Summers (1990) believes that researchers' attitudes will have effect on their acceptance, style of implementation, and outcome of using computers for teaching

Conclusion:

As the American economist Thomas Sowell says, "There are no solutions, there are only trade-offs; and you try to get the best trade-off you can get, that's all you can hope for". To put it in the present study's context, all types of conferencing can fit the aim, but in various ways and with advantages and disadvantages. Despite the exchange opportunities brought by virtual academic conferences, it is still not a perfect gathering means there are still a lot of intractable problems. The participants generally appreciated the flexible meeting mode but felt that their chances for real-time and extensive communication and interaction were constrained. Accordingly, they preferred meeting in-person because they could obtain face to face interaction on their thoughts from peers and audience. Despite the challenges, the respondents understood that moving their professional meetings practice online was a must during critical times.

With the collected data, it is feasible to know what is needed for effective interaction in virtual conferences, the following aspects should be considered when organizing a virtual academic conferences:

- **Support interaction opportunities in virtual academic conferences**

Supporting interaction and getting audience engagement are factors that must be carefully considered when choosing the mode of a conference. As stated by Anderson (1996), a "virtual conference is a professional education conference – with some changes in the technology that supports interaction and communication" (p. 122).

Accordingly, conferences designers should reconsider the position and duration of chat session which last for only a few minutes and set extended discussion sessions that follow a study presentation. Offering further sessions that respond to the queries of participants, and being flexible responsive can help to boost their communication and increase audience's engagement. Sempere (2011) states, "It is important always to allow the user control and feedback over who is being addressed and how. Not all systems need to provide all possible scopes, but the ones that they do support should be immediately and clearly visible" (p. 183)

Encouraging good practice for presentations will improve interactivity and engagement. Planning to publish the research work before the presentation may help to increase participants' attention and focus and motivates them to engage in higher-level critical thinking. Presumably, as the researchers use virtual communication spaces more systematically. According to Carr and Ludvigsen (2017):

Online conference designers can face some challenges in supporting informal and social interaction among participants, however these forms of interaction may be essential to develop the safety and trust required for effective engagement in formal conference activities, as well as the formation of professional relationships that last longer than the conference. The social design parameters available to conference organizers include boundaries, facilitation, modes of interaction, the balance between synchronous and asynchronous events, relevant modes of knowledge, the duration of the conference, and the conference outputs (p. 122)

- **Making the most of the available technology**

The support of interaction opportunities is not enough for assuring the advantages for effective virtual conferences to socially interact. In particular, there

is an emergency need for a well-established e-conferencing atmosphere where academics can rely on. Virtual academic conferences will become more popular that researchers need to be well-equipped with effective training on technology use. Knowledge of e-learning plays an essential role in deciding if to accept or reject it (Rogers, 2003).

Universities should try to ensure that the available technology is what their teachers, students, and researchers require. Additionally, administrators should find trainees to work with teachers/researchers who are new to technology use. While present research work suggests the integration of technology on academic performance produces a positive impact, it will be important to help teachers/researchers use and value technology for their professional career. If too much resistance is faced, it may be more functional to start working with volunteer teachers/researchers who are more enthusiastic than others.

As discussed previously, virtual conferencing may not be suitable for all researchers. However, when organizing an academic conference in future, using a hybrid mode seems to be suitable and most preferred option for most of the researchers. Future research should also look into which e-conferencing modes/formats are more apt for effective interaction and successful audience engagement. This type of research would provide both organizers and researchers with information on whether they would do well in virtual learning for their benefit. "Hundreds of studies have been attempted to link computer applications to improved academic performance" (Attewell and Belkis et al. 2003, p. 280).

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