Distance learning during COVID-19 in Afghanistan: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract
This study examined students’ attitudes toward distance learning, and its relationship with the duration of using Telegram and schooling. It specifically explored students’ experiences of the challenges and opportunities that distance learning created during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, two null hypotheses were formulated: (1) there is no significant relationship between students’ attitudes toward distance learning and the duration of using Telegram; and (2) there is no significant relationship between students’ attitudes towards distance learning and the duration of schooling. Data were collected from a survey questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews with students from the English Department of Herat University, Afghanistan. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, an independent samples t-test, and ANOVA. The results of the t-test showed that the first hypothesis should be accepted, meaning there is no relationship between students’ attitudes toward e-learning and years of Telegram use. Further, the one-way ANOVA test showed that the second null hypothesis was affirmed. Moreover, the qualitative findings indicated that distance learning via Telegram is associated with context-specific challenges and several opportunities.

Keywords
Distance learning, COVID-19, online learning, social media networks, Telegram, t-test

Introduction
The spread of COVID-19 has influenced different aspects of human life including education, economy, politics, and religion. Although people across the world have attempted to maintain normal lives during the quarantine, one of the most affected areas is education in which academic institutions have faced various restrictions. While face-to-face schooling has been limited, educators have attempted to employ educational alternatives like distance education. According to Kabat
Higher educational institutions embrace increasingly the need for distance learning (DL), as students require more spatio-temporal flexibility in the educative process” (p. 162). Given its unique socio-political character, Afghanistan has facilitated employing distance learning optimally during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although several decades of war and internal conflicts have had a devastating impact on education in Afghanistan (Babury and Hayward, 2014; Sarwari, 2018), the country started offering distance education, particularly through the popular messaging app Telegram. Developed by Pavel and Nikolai Duroy in Germany, Telegram is used for various purposes such as sending and receiving texts, images, audio and video, and documents in different formats such as Microsoft word, Microsoft excel, and portable document formats (Ibrahim et al., 2016).

Lack of technological knowledge and resources among educational stakeholders has constrained distance education in Afghanistan. According to Khalid (2020), lack of required technological tools, lack of resources, low-speed internet, and lack of digital media literacy among teachers and students challenge the development of e-learning in Afghanistan. Moreover, it is the first time that higher education institutions in Afghanistan have experienced large-scale distance education due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, there is little documented research on distance learning through Telegram in the Afghan context. Therefore, Afghan EFL learners’ perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of distance learning through Telegram must be investigated.

In particular, this study used students’ reported experiences to explored the possible challenges and opportunities that distance learning brought forth during the COVID-19 pandemic; according to Moore and Kearsley (2012), distance education is defined as “teaching and planned learning in which the teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies, as well as special institutional organization” (p. 2).

As a result, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of Afghan undergraduate EFL students toward Telegram-delivered distance learning?
2. How do the students perceive their distance learning experiences on Telegram?

Two null hypotheses were then formulated: (1) There is no significant relationship between students’ attitudes toward distance learning and years of using Telegram and (2) there is no significant relationship between students’ attitudes toward distance learning and years of schooling.

This study raises awareness about the challenges that Afghan EFL learners encountered using Telegram as a tool to educate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the opportunities and effectiveness of teaching and learning through Telegram in an Afghan context could be revealed. The findings of the study may help English language teachers in underdeveloped and under-resourced countries become aware of the challenges that students struggle with while learning through Telegram. Considering the challenges and difficulties students experience, teachers could more effectively facilitate the process of distance learning. Moreover, the findings may help policymakers and administrators in higher education to render distance learning more facilitative in underdeveloped and under-resourced countries, particularly in the Afghan context.

**Review of literature**

Today, distance education is one of the most popular industries globally, as it offers support, information, and careers to much of the global population (Bawa, 2016). Learning through online platforms has evolved worldwide to connect and involve users in mutual knowledge sharing and intercultural connectivity.
According to Dharankar (2012), distance educators recognize the substantial affordances of non-print media, which have the potential of overcoming physical obstacles and transcend the constraints of traditional teaching methods. In a similar vein, Hjeltnes and Hansson (2005) stated that distance education is considered as one of the most highly practiced modes of education in the 21st century since it offers possibilities for new learning opportunities not restricted by time, distance or learners’ differences. Further, Power (2007) mentioned that “Distance education, increasingly dubbed online learning and even e-learning, represents an important societal movement, as witnessed by the sudden emergence of a worldwide knowledge industry in which universities play a central role” (p. 1).

Çakıroğlu et al.’s (2016) findings revealed that effective online learning is contingent upon collaborative work. These authors found that online computer programming courses affected teaching methods, systems of web conferencing, and teachers’ roles. It was also concluded that students’ cognitive skills can be enhanced in various stages by creating social networks, implementing collaboration tasks and negotiation, and exchanging their knowledge and skills during online/distance courses. Du et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of leadership for effective group work in online courses. The instructors of online courses were also suggested to prepare quality, purposeful, challenging, competitive, and engaging group projects. Furthermore, creating reliable communications among group members was considered as significantly vital in online courses, according to the findings.

**Distance education during COVID-19 pandemic**

Daniel (2020) considers the pandemic as a significant challenge to education systems that teachers, institutional authorities, and officials need to address this crisis. Moving to distance teaching during the pandemic has had profound impacts on educational systems as well as on the psychological well-being of both students and faculty members globally (Alqabbani et al., 2020; Odriozola-González et al., 2020).

According to Ali (2020), following the Federal Government of Pakistan’s order, the Higher Education Commission issued and released directives to higher education organizations to initiate offering distance learning programs, rescheduling the examinations, and assisting students’ online programs if the COVID-19 pandemic persists. Similarly, Kaur and Bhatt (2020) stated that the pandemic has made the experts rethink the conventional methods of face-to-face learning and consider distance learning as a practical option to reduce the risk of student infection.

Adnan and Anwar’s (2020) study indicates that COVID-19 impacted academic institutions’ instructional methods worldwide. To resume education, educational administrators opted for online/distance classes. These authors asserted that although distance learning reduces the risk of infection among students, it is not as effective as traditional methods of teaching/learning. They added that online learning cannot fill the gap in underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, where most learners cannot access internet due to technical and monetary hurdles.

**Integrating Telegram into the classrooms**

According to Hamadi et al. (2021), using social media as teaching and learning tools has attracted the attention of researchers from different fields. In a similar vein, Stewart (2016) stated that social media apps are used to provide different platforms for online communication.
According to Aghajani and Adloo (2018), Telegram, with millions of users among students and teachers worldwide, is one of the most favored social media applications through which people of different ages communicate and share ideas, photos, and videos. Furthermore, it is a useful tool for teaching and learning in which student-teacher relationships can be enhanced by creating a fruitful and productive collaborative experience. Similarly, Bello and Dange (2017) stated that Telegram could be used as a useful teaching tool through which teachers can provide valuable instructions; therefore, the researchers suggested English language teachers to integrate Telegram into their classes. According to Yinka and Queendarline (2018), students and teachers use Telegram for educational purposes because of the useful features that this app provides, such as a secure and free-open source platform and its cloud-based messenger feature.

**Telegram as a learning tool from students’ perspectives**

Several research studies have reported students’ positive attitudes toward using Telegram in English language classes. Zarei et al.’s (2017) findings revealed that most students in their experimental group enjoyed utilizing Telegram as a learning tool. The learners expressed a positive attitude and liked using Telegram to discover and seek ideas. Furthermore, most participants showed a strong agreeability toward doing assignments and reading/re-reading using Telegram. Moreover, the learners claimed that they learn grammar and vocabulary better through Telegram. Similarly, Ghobadi and Taki’s (2018) results indicated that using Telegram stickers for vocabulary teaching purposes could benefit students.

Additionally, Sarvari and Ezzati’s (2019) findings demonstrated that although both the experimental and control groups were homogenous in proficiency, the experimental group that received instruction via Telegram outperformed the control group on the posttest; therefore, it was concluded that Telegram is significantly effective in developing EFL students’ writing skills.

**Method**

The present explanatory mixed-methods study examined students’ attitudes toward distance learning and its relationship with years of using Telegram and schooling years, respectively. This study also used students’ reported experiences to explore the possible challenges and opportunities that distance learning brought forth during the COVID-19 pandemic. A mixed-methods design was used in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Both types of data sources provided the researchers with a better understanding of the research problem than a single instrument (Creswell, 2012).

**Context**

Herat University, located in the western part of Afghanistan, is one of the five major public co-educational Afghan universities, offering BA in 16 different fields as well as MA in two colleges: Farsi-Dari literature and business administration. A total of 17,086 students, 8332 females and 8750 males, study at this university (Sarwari, 2018). Since the spread of COVID-19 and a ban on face-to-face classes, the Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education developed the Higher Education Learning Management System (HELMS); using HELMS. The universities are supposed to conduct distance courses via different online platforms. Telegram was one of the major social media applications used delivering distance courses.
**Research population and sampling method**

The total target population comprised 210 college students majoring in English Literature. After calculating sample size, the online questionnaire was distributed to the total population and only 122 participants responded. The student participants were all Herat University English Department freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, and they were all Farsi and Pashtu native speakers. Participants who completed the survey were 74.8% female students and 25.2% male. Moreover, freshmen, sophomores, and juniors constituted 35%, 23.6%, and 41.5% of the participants, respectively. About 26% of participants had the experience of using Telegram for more than 3 years, while 23.6% used Telegram for less than one year; 22.8% of the participants used Telegram for two years, 16.3% for three years, and 11.4% for 1 year (Table 1).

For the qualitative phase of the study, 12 students from the English department were invited for a face-to-face interview and only 10 participants responded positively. Three female and seven male students from freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, who had the experience of taking distance courses on Telegram during the COVID-19 pandemic, were interviewed. Although IRB approval is not required in Afghanistan, the researchers obtained consent before conducting the interviews and the survey.

**Instruments**

Attitude was defined as “learned predispositions to respond to an object or class of objects in a favorable or unfavorable way” (Fishbein, 1967: p. 257). Attitude has three different features that need to be studied altogether. Cognition is a set of underlying beliefs an individual maintains toward an “attitude object”; affect refers to individuals’ emotions about the “attitude object”; and finally, conation that replicates intention or behavior. Here, an “attitude object” referred to anything from an individual being in relation to actual behavior, a decision, policy, or distance learning (McClelland, 2001; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004).

A Likert-scale questionnaire, which yielded a high alpha value ($\alpha = 0.95$) for content reliability and met the Pearson correlation coefficients by Liaw et al. (2007), was adapted to measure the students’ attitudes toward distance learning. The scale included 15 statements that fell into the three main constructs of cognition, affect, and conation. The participants specified their degree of agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale: (1) for strongly disagree and (5) for strongly agree, with 3 as a neutral option that comes in between. The questionnaire was distributed among the students in the English department (freshmen, sophomores, and juniors) via Google Forms and shared in Telegram. About half of the total population responded to the invitation and completed the survey ($N = 122$).

Further, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect in-depth qualitative data. Twelve students from the English Department of Herat University were invited for a face-to-face interview, and only 10 students responded to the invitation. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) they are all students of the English department of Herat University, (b) they

| No | Years of schooling | Male | Female | Quantity | Years of using Telegram |
|----|-------------------|------|--------|----------|-------------------------|
| 1  | Freshmen          | 13   | 30     | 43       | Ranging 1 to > 3 years  |
| 2  | Sophomore         | 4    | 25     | 29       | Ranging 1 to > 3 years  |
| 3  | Junior            | 14   | 36     | 50       | Ranging 1 to > 3 years  |
| Total | | 31   | 91     | 122      |                         |

**Table 1.** The survey questionnaire participants’ demographic information.
have the experience of using Telegram particularly for educational purposes, and (c) they took and/or are taking distance courses via Telegram during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 2).

Data analysis

SPSS version 25 was utilized to analyze the data collected through a survey questionnaire from 122 students. Descriptive statistics made up of the mean number and standard deviation were calculated. Further, the two null hypotheses were tested by utilizing a one-way ANOVA and a T-test. The qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 students were analyzed thematically. The qualitative data collection and analysis concurred with the data collection process. In other words, each interview was analyzed upon the completion of the interview where the researchers found similar/same answers to their questions and decided to stop further interviews.

First, the researchers transcribed the interview recordings, and then the emerging themes and their frequency were identified through color-coding. A semi-structured interview protocol for qualitative data collection purposes was designed. Each interview took 30–45 min, varying from one interviewee to another. Each interview was transcribed using Microsoft Word, resulting in 15–25 pages, word format, single-spaced, Times New Roman. Keeping the research questions, theoretical framework, and the literature review in mind, the researchers color-coded the collected data. In other words, the relevant collected data were separated from the irrelevant data using different colors. Then, the relevant data were divided into themes based on the frequency of the interviewees’ repetition of the answers. Since the researchers aimed to explore the research questions seeking the participants’ reported experiences, thematic analysis was appropriate for analyzing the data in this research.

As a form of peer-review, the researchers employed team checking to ensure the accuracy of the themes. In addition, the analysis of each interview was sent to the interviewee to ensure data analysis accuracy.

Results

This section presents descriptive statistics about the students’ attitudes toward e-learning in general and Telegram in particular. It also shows whether there is a relationship between students’ attitudes toward e-learning, years of schooling, and Telegram use by testing the two hypotheses. Then, the themes that emerged from analyzing the qualitative data are presented.

Table 2. Interviewed participants’ demographic information.

| No | Name (pseudonym) | Year    | Gender | Year of using Telegram |
|----|------------------|---------|--------|------------------------|
| 1  | Raza             | Freshman| Male   | 5                      |
| 2  | Sayed Arash     | Sophomore | Male   | 4                      |
| 3  | Fatemah         | Junior  | Female | 2                      |
| 4  | Mohammad        | Junior  | Male   | 6                      |
| 5  | Shakiba         | Sophomore | Female | 3                      |
| 6  | Ahmad           | Freshman | Male   | 5                      |
| 7  | Farhad          | Junior  | Male   | 6                      |
| 8  | Zainab          | Freshman | Female | 2                      |
| 9  | Fawad           | Sophomore | Male   | 4                      |
| 10 | Tawab           | Sophomore | Male   | 3                      |
Students’ attitudes toward distance learning

The variable set included 24 items in the survey. The variables with the highest value included timely feedback preferences \( (M = 3.8) \), multimedia instruction preferences \( (M = 3.6) \), like to use audio instruction \( (M = 3.5) \), and like to use video instruction \( (M = 3.46) \). However, the variables of Internet satisfaction \( (M = 1.5) \), learning efficiency \( (M = 2.22) \), content usefulness \( (M = 2.25) \), and learning improvement satisfaction \( (M = 2.30) \) earned the lowest values. Therefore, the descriptive statistics in Table 3 confirm that the students prefer to receive timely feedback, effective multimedia, and audio instructions. Nonetheless, they also perceived the existing online learning via Telegram to be less efficient and the content less useful. Likewise, they were not satisfied with the existing pace of learning improvement.

The descriptive statistics for the three attitudinal constructs in Table 3 revealed that the students have almost a negative attitude toward e-learning, particularly using Telegram as a learning management system. The cognitive and affective constructs earned relatively low values \( (M = 2.51, M = 2.63) \), while the Conative construct received an above average value \( (M = 3.23) \). This result illustrates that the students have better intentions to do distance learning if positive changes are applied to improve the quality of distance learning. Finally, the composite mean value of all constructs was 2.79, a little bit above average, which shows that the students had a negative attitude.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for each variable.

| Variable                                         | N     | Mini | Max | Mean  | SD    |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------|------|-----|-------|-------|
| Autonomy Boost                                   | 122   | 1    | 4   | 2.43  | 1.143 |
| Teacher as a Facilitator                        | 122   | 1    | 5   | 3.00  | 1.076 |
| T/S Interactions                                 | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.50  | 1.062 |
| Content Usefulness                               | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.25  | 1.065 |
| Thinking Skills Improvement                      | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.78  | 1.168 |
| Emotional Investment                             | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.51  | 0.981 |
| Learning Efficiency                              | 122   | 1    | 4   | 2.22  | 0.966 |
| Performance Improvement                          | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.43  | 1.036 |
| Learning Improvement Satisfaction                | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.30  | 1.135 |
| Internet Satisfaction                            | 122   | 1    | 5   | 1.51  | 1.046 |
| Content Sharing Satisfaction                     | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.68  | 1.228 |
| Confidence in Using Online Tools                 | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.50  | 1.130 |
| Confidence Using the Functions                   | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.49  | 1.038 |
| Confidence in Using the Content                  | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.61  | 1.000 |
| Like to use Audio Instruction                    | 122   | 1    | 5   | 3.52  | 1.123 |
| Like to use Video Instruction                    | 122   | 1    | 5   | 3.46  | 1.207 |
| Future Intention Use                             | 122   | 1    | 5   | 3.07  | 1.104 |
| Multimedia Use to Improve Learning               | 122   | 1    | 5   | 3.30  | 1.190 |
| More Learner Autonomy by e-Learning              | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.84  | 1.131 |
| Follow Multimedia Instructions                   | 122   | 1    | 5   | 3.18  | 1.029 |
| Thinking Skills Preferences                      | 122   | 1    | 5   | 2.72  | 1.108 |
| Multimedia Instructions Preferences              | 122   | 1    | 5   | 3.61  | 1.088 |
| Tools to Express Thoughts Preferences            | 122   | 1    | 5   | 3.34  | 1.080 |
| Timely Feedback Preferences                      | 122   | 1    | 5   | 3.80  | 1.073 |
| Valid N (listwise)                               | 122   |      |     |       |       |
The study also examined the embedded factors inside the attitudinal model. **Multimedia instruction** and the behavioral intentions and preferences scored a relatively high value (M = 3.48; M = 3.48), whereas distance learning satisfaction and distance learning effectiveness received the lowest mean value (M = 2.16; M = 3.38). The descriptive statistics in Table 4 confirm that university students intend to participate in the online learning process if such an engagement leads to positive perceptions, satisfaction, effective learning, and high pertinent self-efficacy.

**Hypothesis testing**

The study examined two hypotheses to identify whether there is any relationship between students’ attitude toward e-learning and their years of Telegram use and years of schooling, respectively. The first hypothesis is as follows:

N1: There is no significant relationship between students’ attitudes and the number of years they used Telegram.

First, Telegram use years were categorized and labeled as 2 years and more than 2 years. A t-test was run between the two groups to examine the connection between students’ attitudes and years of using Telegram. According to t-test group statistics, the group with more than 2 years’ experience reported a high score (M = 3.3) while the 2-year group scored similarly (M = 3.1) in conative construct. The t-test showed that the first null hypothesis turned out to be true and there was no significance value below 0.05 in any constructs (see Table 5). Table 5 indicates that there is no significant relationship between students’ attitude toward e-learning and years of Telegram use (Table 6).

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics for attitudinal constructs and its composite value.

|             | Cognitive | Affect | Conative | Composite value |
|-------------|-----------|--------|----------|-----------------|
| N Valid     | 122       | 122    | 122      | 122             |
| Missing     | 0         | 0      | 0        | 0               |
| Mean        | 2.51      | 2.63   | 3.23     | 2.79            |
| Median      | 2.50      | 2.62   | 3.37     | 2.75            |
| Std. Deviation | 0.756    | 0.760  | 0.839    | 0.703           |
| Range       | 3.38      | 3.38   | 3.88     | 3.33            |
| Minimum     | 1.00      | 1.00   | 1.00     | 1.00            |
| Maximum     | 4.38      | 4.38   | 4.88     | 4.33            |

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics for sub-constructs of attitudinal model.

|                               | N  | Min | Max | Mean | SD       |
|-------------------------------|----|-----|-----|------|----------|
| Behavioral Intentions and Preferences | 122| 1.00| 5.00| 3.45 | 0.86443  |
| E-learning Effectiveness     | 122| 1.00| 4.33| 2.38 | 0.81239  |
| E-learning Satisfaction      | 122| 1.00| 4.67| 2.16 | 0.83677  |
| Perceived Self-Efficacy      | 122| 1.00| 4.33| 2.53 | 0.93160  |
| Perceived Usefulness         | 122| 1.00| 4.25| 2.49 | 0.87015  |
| Multimedia Instruction       | 122| 1.00| 5.00| 3.48 | 1.0374   |
| Valid N (listwise)           | 122|     |     |      |          |
The second hypothesis is as follows

N2: There is no significant relationship between students’ attitudes on e-learning and their years of schooling. Subsequently, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted between three groups to measure whether relationships exist between students’ attitudes and schooling years. Based on group statistics in Table 7 and significance values in Table 8, the groups reported high scores in the conation construct: Freshmen (M = 3.28), sophomore (M = 3.34), and juniors (M = 3.11). However, they reported pretty low values in other attitudinal components. As the statistics passed the Test of Homogeneity of Variances, the one-way ANOVA test revealed that the second null hypothesis proved to be true and no significance value appeared to be below 0.05 except for the cognition construct (p = 0.04). It generally showed that no significant relationship existed between students’ attitudes toward e-learning and their years of schooling (Tables 9 and 10).

The findings revealed that face-to-face classes are preferred, and the participants showed a negative attitude toward learning on Telegram. This is particularly in line with the findings of the survey completed by 122 students of this department. The challenges and opportunities to learn on Telegram from the English department students’ perspectives are presented in this section (Table 11).

Challenges of distance learning on Telegram

The findings showed that low-speed internet constrains the process of learning on Telegram, as Farhad stated, “I had to submit an assignment before 12:00 pm; I struggled till 4:00 am when the internet speed got faster, and I was able to upload my paper while standing on the roof.” Likewise, Shakiba stated that she lost the answers to her test because she lost connection to the internet. According to the participants, low-speed internet is not the only issue, but also a dearth of internet access in rural villages is problematic. Some students originally come from villages, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, they went home to take shelter with their families. They can register for these classes, but they cannot participate in class or complete their coursework online. Tawab mentioned, “We have classmates who are not even aware of having classes on Telegram because they live in areas where they do not have access to the internet.”

Furthermore, the high cost of internet service is another impediment that prevents students from taking distance courses. The findings revealed that as compared to the neighboring countries, internet packages are expensive in Afghanistan. On the other hand, most people live under the poverty line, especially since the spread of COVID-19, which caused tremendous joblessness; given

| Years of telegram use | Cognitive | N | Mean | SD  | Std. error mean |
|-----------------------|-----------|---|------|-----|-----------------|
| 2 years               | 71        | 2.5018 | 0.71073 | 0.08435 |
| More than 2 years     | 51        | 2.5368 | 0.82322 | 0.11527 |
| Affect                |           |       |      |     |                 |
| 2 years               | 71        | 2.6338 | 0.75039 | 0.08906 |
| More than 2 years     | 51        | 2.6348 | 0.78216 | 0.10952 |
| Conative              |           |       |      |     |                 |
| 2 years               | 71        | 3.1320 | 0.80564 | 0.09561 |
| More than 2 years     | 51        | 3.3676 | 0.87515 | 0.12255 |

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Table 7. Independent samples test.

|                         | Levene’s test for equality of variances | t-test for equality of means | 95% confidence interval of the difference |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------|
|                         | F           | Sig          | t            | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean difference | Std. error difference | Lower  | Upper  |
| Cognitive               |             |              |              |         |                |                  |                        |        |        |
| Equal variances assumed | 2.32        | 0.130        | -0.251       | 120  | 0.802          | -0.03500        | 0.13943                 | -0.3110| 0.2410 |
| Equal variances not assumed | -0.245  | 97.8         | 0.807        | 120  | -0.03500       | 0.14284         | -0.3184                 | 0.2484 |
| Affect                  |             |              |              |         |                |                  |                        |        |        |
| Equal variances assumed | 0.232       | 0.631        | -0.007       | 120  | 0.994          | -0.00100        | 0.14020                 | -0.2785| 0.2765 |
| Equal variances not assumed | -0.007  | 105.1        | 0.994        | 120  | -0.00100       | 0.14116         | -0.2808                 | 0.2788 |
| Conative                |             |              |              |         |                |                  |                        |        |        |
| Equal variances assumed | 0.141       | 0.708        | -1.53        | 120  | 0.127          | -0.23560        | 0.15332                 | -0.5391| 0.0679 |
| Equal variances not assumed | -1.51  | 102.3        | 0.133        | 120  | -0.23560       | 0.15543         | -0.5438                 | 0.0726 |
| Composite value         |             |              |              |         |                |                  |                        |        |        |
| Equal variances assumed | 1.02        | 0.314        | -0.699       | 120  | 0.486          | -0.09054        | 0.12948                 | -0.3469| 0.1658 |
| Equal variances not assumed | -0.690  | 102.1        | 0.492        | 120  | -0.09054       | 0.13130         | -0.3509                 | 0.1698 |
### Table 8. Group descriptive statistics for second hypothesis.

|          | N  | Mean   | SD    | Std. error | Lower bound | Upper bound | Min  | Max  |
|----------|----|--------|-------|------------|-------------|-------------|------|------|
| Cognitive |     |        |       |            | Lower bound | Upper bound |      |      |
| Freshmen | 43 | 2.552  | 0.77452 | 0.1181   | 2.3140      | 2.7907      | 1.00 | 4.00 |
| Sophomore| 29 | 2.771  | 0.71423 | 0.1326   | 2.4999      | 3.0432      | 1.63 | 4.38 |
| Junior   | 50 | 2.337  | 0.73203 | 0.1035   | 2.1295      | 2.5455      | 1.00 | 4.13 |
| Total    | 122| 2.516  | 0.75668 | 0.0685   | 2.3808      | 2.6520      | 1.00 | 4.38 |
| Affect   |     |        |       |            | Lower bound | Upper bound |      |      |
| Freshmen | 43 | 2.723  | 0.73778 | 0.1125   | 2.4968      | 2.9509      | 1.00 | 4.38 |
| Sophomore| 29 | 2.831  | 0.82462 | 0.1531   | 2.5182      | 3.1456      | 1.38 | 4.25 |
| Junior   | 50 | 2.442  | 0.71125 | 0.1005   | 2.2404      | 2.6446      | 1.00 | 4.00 |
| Total    | 122| 2.634  | 0.76063 | 0.0688   | 2.4979      | 2.7706      | 1.00 | 4.38 |
| Conative |     |        |       |            | Lower bound | Upper bound |      |      |
| Freshmen | 43 | 3.282  | 0.88560 | 0.1350   | 3.0094      | 3.5545      | 1.00 | 4.88 |
| Sophomore| 29 | 3.349  | 0.78588 | 0.1459   | 3.0502      | 3.6481      | 1.88 | 4.50 |
| Junior   | 50 | 3.117  | 0.83277 | 0.1177   | 2.8808      | 3.3542      | 1.00 | 4.75 |
| Total    | 122| 3.230  | 0.83999 | 0.0760   | 3.0800      | 3.3811      | 1.00 | 4.88 |
| Composite value |     |        |       |            | Lower bound | Upper bound |      |      |
| Freshmen | 43 | 2.852  | 0.73172 | 0.1115   | 2.6275      | 3.0779      | 1.00 | 4.33 |
| Sophomore| 29 | 2.984  | 0.67383 | 0.1251   | 2.7279      | 3.2405      | 1.83 | 4.33 |
| Junior   | 50 | 2.632  | 0.67394 | 0.0953   | 2.4410      | 2.8240      | 1.08 | 3.92 |
| Total    | 122| 2.793  | 0.70393 | 0.0637   | 2.6675      | 2.9199      | 1.00 | 4.33 |

### Table 9. One-way ANOVA.

|          | Sum of squares | df  | Mean square | F      | Sig  |
|----------|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|------|
| Cognitive | Between groups | 3.544 | 2  | 1.772 | 3.208 | 0.044 |
|          | Within groups  | 65.736 |   | 0.552 |       |       |
|          | Total          | 69.280 | 119 |       |       |       |
| Affect   | Between groups | 3.316 | 2  | 1.658 | 2.959 | 0.056 |
|          | Within groups  | 66.689 |   | 0.560 |       |       |
|          | Total          | 70.005 | 119 |       |       |       |
| Conative | Between groups | 1.161 | 2  | 0.580 | 0.820 | 0.443 |
|          | Within groups  | 84.215 |   | 0.708 |       |       |
|          | Total          | 85.376 | 119 |       |       |       |
| Composite value | Between groups | 2.501 | 2  | 1.251 | 2.590 | 0.079 |
|          | Within groups  | 57.456 |   | 0.483 |       |       |
|          | Total          | 59.958 | 119 |       |       |       |
this fact, students cannot afford the internet. In this regard, Raza stated, “The internet is [more] [sic] expensive in Afghanistan than the neighboring countries; I was in Iran where I used to get quality internet in low prices, but here it is the opposite.”

The findings demonstrated that technical issues are another factor that constrains the process of distance learning on Telegram. The participants pointed out that they struggle with technical problems, especially while taking tests and opening the files. Two of the interviewed juniors mentioned that they took a test where only a few of their classmates could open the link, while for the rest of the class, the link did not work at all. The files that are shared by the instructors, in most cases, do not open because the devices do not support the necessary file formats. To open the files, students need to update their Telegram app and/or install other applications. According to the sophomores, with low-speed and expensive internet, students cannot update and/or install applications to download and access the files.

| Table 10. Robust tests of equality of means. |
|---------------------------------------------|
|                                            |
| Statistic | df1 | df2 | Sig |
| Cognitive  |      |     |     |
| Welch      | 3.358 | 2 | 71.084 | 0.040 |
| Brown-Forsythe | 3.241 | 2 | 108.378 | 0.043 |
| Affect     |      |     |     |
| Welch      | 2.912 | 2 | 67.939 | 0.061 |
| Brown-Forsythe | 2.836 | 2 | 95.138 | 0.064 |
| Conative   |      |     |     |
| Welch      | 0.855 | 2 | 71.715 | 0.429 |
| Brown-Forsythe | 0.836 | 2 | 110.231 | 0.436 |
| Composite value |      |     |     |
| Welch      | 2.702 | 2 | 70.675 | 0.074 |
| Brown-Forsythe | 2.603 | 2 | 107.273 | 0.079 |

Asymptotically F distributed.

| Table 11. Students’ perspectives on distance learning. |
|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Challenges                                             |
| Low-speed internet                                     |
| High internet packages prices                          |
| Technical issues                                       |
| Medical issues                                         |
| Technological tools shortage (smartphone and laptop)   |
| Workload and pressure                                  |
| Opportunities                                          |
| Quick access to feedback                               |
| Telegram less internet consumption                     |
| Easy files uploading and downloading                   |
| Telegram safe and secure messaging platform            |
| Telegram texting, calling, and video/audio sharing features |
| Telegram collaborative atmosphere                       |
| Recommendations for the administrators                 |
| Online learning cancellation                           |
| Free internet packages to students                     |
| Well-planned online programs and need analysis implemen|
| tation                                               |
| Recommendations for the instructors                    |
| Work collaboratively                                   |
| Understanding students’ difficult situations           |

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Further still, some students have medical conditions and cannot follow the online instructions accurately. Participants mentioned eye and migraine problems as some of the challenges that make learning on Telegram problematic. Raza explained “I struggle with a severe type of migraine; my doctor advised me not to use the screen for longer than ten minutes; it is difficult for me to learn online.” Similarly, Sayed Arash mentioned that he struggles with eye issues and cannot look at the screen. Furthermore, Fatemah stated that teachers need to understand students’ difficult situation where almost either students themselves or at least one of their family members struggles with the COVID-19. According to the interview data, mental and psychological influences put students under severe pressure as well.

To take distance courses, the internet is not the only essential item, and students need to have access to electricity, smartphone, and laptop as well. Some students do not have smartphones let alone laptops, according to the participants. Mohammad mentioned that he has classmates who cannot afford the required textbooks; thus, they cannot procure the essential equipment to take online courses. He added, “I have classmates who live in poverty; they do not have smartphones and laptops to attend distance courses.”

The findings indicated that instructors cannot provide enough clarifications through online platforms. Students require elaborations to understand a concept, but on Telegram, students do not receive enough feedback. On the other hand, distance courses lack diversity; instructors mostly share PowerPoint presentations while video and audio recordings are used sparsely. Some students are visual and/or aural learners; therefore, mere use of presentations does not meet the needs of students with varied learning styles. Shakiba stated, “When we heard about distance learning on Telegram, we thought it was going to be interesting; once we started our classes, we realized that it is not what we expected.” Furthermore, in distance courses, students are afraid of making mistakes when writing their questions.

According to Ahmad, Afghan students are used to face-to-face classes, and it is difficult to convince them to attend online courses. He added, “Afghan students are not motivated to study in face-to-face classes where instructors have strong control over the class, let alone in online courses.” The findings also showed that students are not willing to lead their learning process; they need a facilitator and, in some cases, a person who can force them to study. Moreover, teachers on Telegram cannot reach students as it occurs in face-to-face classes.

**Opportunities of distance learning on telegram**

The findings revealed that there are a series of advantages associated with distance learning on Telegram. Seven out of the 10 students pointed out that they receive quicker feedback on Telegram as compared to face-to-face classes. Fatemah mentioned, “Those students who take an active part and submit their assignments on time receive feedback from the instructors.” Similarly, Farhad added, “receiving feedback on Telegram helps students figure out their mistakes and weaknesses.” Students leave messages and share their questions with their instructors, and the apps enables them to receive responses back sooner.

A dearth of high-speed internet limits students’ access to larger-sized files, as the students argued. According to the participants, a working affordance of Telegram is that it works well with low-speed internet. Ahmad mentioned, “Interestingly, you can upload and download files easily on Telegram.”

The participants stated that Telegram’s security is one of the most interesting features that students enjoy. Students can easily save and store data on Telegram. Fatemah held that she likes learning on Telegram specifically for its secure texting and calling feature. She added, “I am glad when I see all my files are saved on my Telegram account [and] that if I lose my device, I will not
lose my files.” Farhad stated, “It is not only about my assignments that I have access to, but students can see and use their peers’ papers, too.”

Students talked about the collaborative atmosphere provided by Telegram. They mentioned that Telegram introduces students to a collaborative atmosphere. Zainab stated that whenever a student shares a question and seeks an answer from the teacher, other students try to help. This is particularly interesting, as it appears to develop a sense of responsibility in students. Further, Telegram provides students with ample opportunities to attend discussions and exchange their thoughts. Fatemah added that as time is not limited for discussions and exchanging knowledge, students can share relevant thoughts as much as they want on Telegram, which is not possible in large face-to-face classes.

Students’ recommendations for the instructors and the administrators

The findings also indicated that workload and pressure on students in online courses is overwhelming. Students suggested that their instructors should design their plans considering the workload on students across different courses. They stated that instructors need to work collaboratively to avoid the pressure and stress on students. Furthermore, students’ problems in this underresourced context need to be acknowledged. One student noted that some students do not have access to the internet and the required equipment; hence, instructors can better understand students’ situations and adapt their plans accordingly.

Furthermore, one student pointed out that some students may not be able to concentrate on their lessons because they struggle with COVID-19. She recommended that distance courses be self-paced with flexible deadlines. Another student asserted that administrators can revise their distance learning policies and provide the necessary facility and infrastructure for both teachers and students.

Discussion

The descriptive statistics as well as the findings from the interviews showed that college students maintained a negative attitude toward e-learning despite their intentions and preferences. This finding is in contrast with Abu-Ayfah (2020) who found that EFL college students perceived Telegram as a beneficial social networking medium for English language learning. Besides, Aghajani and Adloo (2018) found that students of a cooperative writing group on Telegram showed slightly higher scores than students of face-to-face cooperative writing groups. The students also adopted a positive attitude toward Telegram as a cooperative writing tool.

The t-test and one-way ANOVA analyses as well as the results of interviews revealed no significant relationship between the students’ attitudes toward e-learning, years of Telegram use, and years of schooling in the present study. According to our participants, teachers failed to effectively teach English language using Telegram due to inadequate instructions. This finding aligns with Adnan and Anwar’s (2020) findings. While comparing distance learning with face-to-face learning, 78.6% of students mentioned that face-to-face contact with their teachers was significant for quality learning, in comparison to distance learning. In addition, they asserted that educational institutions need to design practical and effective content, manage effective delivery systems, and offer digital literacy programs to the instructors so that effective learning outcomes can be achieved. In a similar vein, most students did not have access to a high-speed internet connection (Jami, 2020); and they were unfamiliar with e-learning and Telegram, and faced technical difficulties (Golzar, 2019). The students, therefore, reported negative attitudes toward distance learning that resulted in an insignificant relationship between the variables.
In contrast to these findings, Vahdat et al. (2018) argued that Telegram-based instruction provides opportunities for EFL teachers to integrate technological advances to improve their students’ language learning. They suggested that teachers invest more time to provide online instructions, attach significance to current technology use, and consider the advantages of Telegram use. Both teachers and parents need to rethink their attitude toward Telegram use and serve as facilitators, collaborators, and supervisors to provide enough scaffolding and ensure students’ quality education.

Our participants recounted the low-speed internet, high cost, and lack of internet access, especially in villages and in socio-politically agitated regions. The challenges related to internet accessibility and quality mentioned by the participants of this study are particularly in line with Khalid’s (2020) findings in which he discussed low-quality, high-cost internet as an obstacle to the process of e-learning in Afghanistan. Similarly, Jami (2020) associated the low internet speed and lack of accessibility with electricity and equipment impediments in integrating social media networks into academic writing classes in Afghan universities.

The participants also reported that there are not enough instructions for course contents, an issue exacerbated by low degrees of diversity and novelty in distance courses. The findings also showed that teachers only share PowerPoint presentations, which do not provide enough clarification. In other word, students of different learning styles need tailored contents. In fact, such pedagogical barriers seem to have resulted in a lack of variations and dynamics in Telegram distance learning. The descriptive statistics also confirm that students prefer to receive timely feedback, effective multimedia, and audio instructions. Nonetheless, they also perceived the existing online learning via Telegram as less efficient and the content less useful. In contrast, Xodabande (2017) stated that language teachers can employ social media networks to share various contents such as pictures, videos, texts, and audio files with a full package of instructions, details, and examples.

Furthermore, not all the students can share their thoughts and concerns with the instructors on Telegram as compared to face-to-face courses. This point is notably paralleled to Bawa’s (2016) study. The researcher emphasized that there are several communication options in online setups. Students do not use them extensively because the usage is mainly dependent on students’ initiative and creativity. In a similar vein, Aghajani and Adloo (2018) stated that student participants in their study argued that they were unable to interact effectively with their peers on Telegram. It was not easy to write their ideas or make explicit comments because of either texting limitations on Telegram message bar or their limited English ability.

The findings also revealed technical issues as obstacles to successful distance learning on Telegram. Çakiroğlu et al. (2016) discussed technical and connection issues during online courses as impediments for learning a programming language. Their study indicated that students had difficulties understanding the existing problem when technical and connection problems occurred in an online environment.

The findings also revealed several opportunities brought forth by Telegram-based education. According to the participants, students receive feedback from their instructors and peers quicker as compared to face-to-face classes. This is particularly in line with Xue and Churchill (2019) who argued that mobile affordances can be used to deliver feedback to obtain evaluation. Furthermore, this vital feature allows instructors to recognize students’ accomplishments and guide their learning progress. In a similar vein, Saad et al. (2015) stated that computer technology provides learners with errorless learning, instant constructive and instant feedback, and self-paced independent learning.

One of the preferred learning features on Telegram discussed by the participants is its secure platform. The students mentioned that they can save their files on their account without an intrusion of their privacy. Furthermore, texting, sending videos and voice memos, uploading, and downloading files are among other activities that can be easily performed on Telegram without the
concern of losing them, according to the participants. This is congruent with Yinka and Queendarline (2018) who considered Telegram as a confidential and trustworthy platform that enables students to secure files, texts, and share videos and files.

Further, the findings revealed that Telegram provides students with a collaborative atmosphere where they exchange knowledge as well as give and receive feedback. For example, peer interaction results in collaborative learning on Telegram. Çakiroğlu et al. (2016) stated that instructors can prepare online discussion activities to foster comprehension, exchange knowledge and ideas, or enable learners for collaborative work. In a similar vein, Zhai et al. (2017) mentioned that learners with rich experience of internet-based classes perceived higher capability and appeared to be interested in collaborative activities. Participants also talked about the significant role of Telegram in students’ socialization and self-confidence. Wu et al. (2010), regarding Web 2.0 tools, stated that online education introduces new concepts and types of communication. Such tools also provide opportunities for social interactions focused on knowledge generation, collaborative learning, and the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and resources.

Moreover, the findings indicated that students enjoy the questions their teachers design and share on Telegram where the percentage of the respondents and the correct options can be visible to everyone. Participants spoke of the “poll” option on Telegram, enabling both teachers and students to vote on an issue and follow the results. In a similar vein, Bello and Dange (2017) argued that Telegram could be used as a helpful teaching tool through which English language instructors can provide valuable and helpful instructions and the researchers recommended all English language teachers to integrate Telegram into their language classrooms.

Although distance learning on Telegram introduces students to ample opportunities such as (1) getting feedback from their instructors and peers quicker, (2) learning collaboratively, (3) securing files, and (4) using Telegram features for taking quizzes and voting over an issue, students have shown a negative attitude toward their experience of Telegram-based learning. In other words, students struggle with poverty, lack of access to the Internet and electronic devices, and medical and mental issues brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, which constrain the process of online learning for Afghan learners.

**Conclusion**

The pandemic provided world education systems with both an opportunity to examine distance learning and a challenging test to prove their capability for successfully conducting distance courses. Since the beginning of the global crisis, some Afghan universities, including our research site, have started distance learning on Telegram. The findings indicated that students are not satisfied with distance learning because learners struggle with problems such as lack of access to the required tools. The majority of learners live in poverty and cannot afford internet, computers, and smartphones. Therefore, from a dearth of internet to a lack of tools and devices, issues constrain the process of distance learning in an Afghan context.

The findings suggest that if distance learning is continued, it will be more effective if universities provide students with free internet access and devices. Further, policymakers could design practical distance learning programs considering the needs posed by the Afghan context and the availability of resources. The study also suggests that instructors consider the amount of students’ workload as it relates to a dearth of internet access and electronic devices; they might thusly employ flexibility in assignment quantity and due dates. Furthermore, it will be more effective if instructors listen to students who struggle with depression and anxiety resulting from this global crisis and incorporate their voices into instructional and curricular considerations. Seeking the researchers’ positionality,
they believe that administrators in higher education are better to do needs analysis of the context, especially the availability of resources before they implement distance learning programs. An effective mechanism, in which the program implementation rules and regulations are well clarified, is needed to be able to practically implement distance education programs in the Afghan context. Moreover, instructors can deliver more effective lessons if they try to develop student-centered classes on Telegram where students of different levels and learning styles can benefit from the class.

Further research can be conducted investigating instructors’ attitudes toward distance learning, particularly using Telegram through a different research design such as action research and case study. Moreover, administrators’ and policymakers’ perspectives toward implementing distance education programs are worth exploring. Additionally, public and private universities could be compared in terms of the availability of facilities and the quality of their online programs.

There are different methods to measure students’ satisfaction in conventional face-to-face classes in an Afghan context, but unfortunately there are not any instruments designed by educational institutions to measure students’ satisfaction and attitude in an online environment. Administrators need to design and propose instruments to measure students’ satisfaction in distance classes to ensure both the quality of coursework and fulfillment of students’ needs.

Since the world has experienced global lockdown for the first time in the current technological era and world education systems have been adversely influenced by the pandemic, exploring the challenges and opportunities caused by COVID-19 into education systems help the instructors, students, policymakers, and officials to make necessary preparations during such ordeals. Further, EFL teachers in similar contexts would benefit from the findings of this study.

**Limitations of the study**

The small sample size and non-random selection of participants are some of the main limitations of this study. In other words, the non-random selection of the participants limits the generalizability of the results. Further, results of this study are based on students’ perspectives where the inclusion of instructors’ opinions in future studies helps to better understand distance learning opportunities and challenges. Moreover, this study was conducted at one of the five major public universities in Afghanistan; studying the universities with less access to technological resources would help to attain more accurate results in future research.

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