



## **Suitability of the Physical Classroom Environment in Libyan Higher Education: EFL Students' Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the suitability of the physical classroom environment in Libyan higher education from EFL students' perspectives. A mixed-methods study was carried out on a group of 30 undergraduate students majoring in English as a foreign language, as a case study. These students were studying fulltime in a college of education at a Libyan university. The aim of the study was to explore the views and experiences of Libyan EFL higher education students regarding the suitability of the physical classroom environment for the teaching and learning process. The study used a self-completed questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to gather data for analysis. Data analysis revealed that the physical classroom environment was relatively suitable for teaching and learning EFL, suggesting a traditional classroom environment lacks modern technology. The infrastructure was somewhat suitable; however, it lacks the necessary facilities. The furniture was not comfortable enough, the classrooms were somewhat

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crowded and the teaching aids were limited or nonexistent. In light of these findings, the study suggests creating a more suitable physical classroom environment in which tutors and students feel motivated and encouraged to boost their performance in the teaching and learning process.

**Key words:** physical classroom environment, teaching and learning, higher education

## Introduction

The process of teaching and learning language is usually influenced by many institutional factors. EFL tutors and students encounter difficulties in teaching and learning the language if any of these factors negatively influences them. Conversely, suitable classroom environment motivates them to make the effort to enhance their academic performance. Amongst these factors is the physical classroom environment, which is closely related to both the tutor's teaching practices and students' learning activities.

According to our own observations as teaching staff members in our college and in some other educational institutions and the discussions we have had with tutors and students, the physical classroom environment in Libyan higher education institutions has always been highlighted as one of the major obstacles that impede the tutor's teaching practices and students' learning activities. These observations and discussions motivated us to undertake this study to further



understand the suitability of the physical classroom environment in Libyan higher education for the teaching and learning process, through exploring the views and experiences of 30 Libyan undergraduate students majoring in English as foreign language, as a case study.

To accomplish this, the study employed a mixed methods approach of research through a self-completed questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Accordingly, the study aimed to explore the views and experiences of these Libyan undergraduate students' concerning the suitability of the physical classroom environment for the teaching and learning process. To achieve its aim, the study attempted to answer the following research question: How do Libyan EFL undergraduate students perceive the physical environment in their classrooms?

## Literature Review

This section presents arguments and discussions around the physical classroom environment. It specifically addresses how researchers in the field of education addressed this topic in respect to the teaching and learning process.

The topic of the physical classroom environment has been the focus of many researchers in the domain of education. These researchers highlighted the importance of establishing a motivating and encouraging classroom environment in educational institutions in order to help schoolteachers and university tutors to teach effectively and students to improve their learning performance. They specifically drew attention to the idea that the focus should be on the physical aspect of the classroom environment in the same way as the other aspects of education. Bellamy, for example, argues that: “the quality

of education has been reflected not only in the subjects taught and achievement levels reached but also in the learning environment” (Bellamy, 2016, p.9). Hannah (2013) also points out that unless managed properly, the classroom situation can be established in a manner that discourages creativity or the learning situation. Ali (2017) holds the attitude that the conditions of the educational environment and its related physical aspects can have an impact on learners’ behaviour as well as attitudes. Lodhi, Sahar, Qayyum, Iqbal and Shareef (2019) hold a similar attitude when they argue that the classroom environment is substantially vital in learning a foreign language. Language skills can be assimilated and used in a welcoming environment. Earthman and Lemasters (citing Anderson, 2004) state that: "any aspect of the physical environment that distracts teachers from the main emphasis of instructional activities influences the degree of their effectiveness" (Earthman and Lemasters, 2009, p. 323). Therefore, a productive teaching and learning process invariably requires an encouraging and stimulating physical classroom environment.

As defined by Suleman and Hussain, the physical environment is "the physical characteristics of the room." It may include "lighting, temperature, ventilation system, size of the room, floor, walls, desks, chairs, rugs, whiteboard, computers, etc." (Suleiman and Hussain, 2014, p.72). There are also non-physical characteristics which include “classroom regulations and rules, or even the sounds and light in the room” (Umar, 2017, p. 1). This study, however, focuses primarily on



the physical aspects of the classroom environment in relation to the teaching and learning process. The other aspects such as sound and air will only be addressed when they are of relevance to the physical aspects of the classroom environment.

Bellamy (2016, citing Komendat, 2010) argues that the desks in a classroom should be arranged in a way that suits teamwork and the Problem Solving strategy of learning and motivates students' creativeness. This means that the desks or chairs used in a classroom should be adjustable to suit the learning activities initiated by the tutor and performed by students, since the way the classroom is organized has a direct influence on what the tutor can do and how he does it (Scrivener, 2012). Such a type of furniture helps both the tutor and students to employ a variety of teaching and learning activities in class. According to Nzowa and Ngussa (2019, citing UNISCO, 2018) teaching activities are performed better in classrooms with a manageable number of learners. In such a classroom situation, the tutor might benefit from activities such as group work to promote students' learning performance and students find it easier to focus attention on learning tasks. Al-Ashab and Lakshmi (2013) state that employing teaching aids is vital in language classes. They provoke and keep learners' interest by performing various learning activities. Thus, providing the classroom with suitable teaching aids helps the tutor in delivering the lesson and creates a stimulating environment for students. Bellamy (2016) postulates that having sufficient light and a comfortable temperature is essential to the attention and engagement of learners. Thus, the classroom should be equipped with suitable facilities in order to create a comfortable atmosphere in which the



tutor and students are motivated to put more energy into the teaching and learning process.

Motivated by the importance of the classroom environment, some researchers have sought to examine its physical aspect in respect of the teaching and learning process. Amongst these researchers, Turano (2005) who conducted a study, in Southern New Jersey USA, to explore how the classroom environment affects learning and found that the two teachers had favourable classroom environments for learning. In Malaysia, Ramli, Ahmad and Massri (2013) carried out a study in order to explore classroom users' view regarding their classroom and how they see the favorite classroom physical environment. The study showed that the majority of the classroom users were of the opinion that changes should be implemented in their classroom environment. In Pakistan, Suleman and Hussain (2014) conducted a study to explore the influence of the physical classroom environment on the accomplishment scores of secondary school learners and concluded that an encouraging classroom environment has a substantial positive influence on the learners' accomplishment scores. In Malaysia, Puteh, Ahmad, Noh and Adnan (2015) carried out a study to identify the relationship between the physical aspects of the classroom environment and the relaxation level in the teaching and learning process. In their study, the researchers found that there is a connection between the physical classroom environment and the level of relaxation in the teaching and learning process. Ahmad and Amirul (2018) conducted a study, in Malaysia, to examine the



appropriateness of the physical classroom environment and its influence on the health, pleasure and learning of students. The results of the study indicated that learners perceived the suitability of the physical classroom environment to be at a high level for furniture, facilities, and lighting components, whereas moderate regarding air quality, space, and colour. Results also showed that learners regarded the physical classroom environment to have moderate impact on the health, pleasure, and learning of students. Further analysis specified that the physical classroom environment has a substantial influence on learners' health, pleasure as well as learning.

According to recent methods of teaching, the ultimate goal of teaching language is to develop students' capability to communicate through language, not merely to master structures, since knowing these language forms per se is not sufficient for achieving appropriate communication (Littlewood, 1981; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). This study draws on these arguments and discussions and contends that teaching and learning English as a foreign language requires a lot of classroom work. This in turn needs a suitable physical classroom environment in which the tutor can perform the teaching practices effectively and students make the effort to practise the language in varied uses.

## Methodology

To explore Libyan EFL higher education students' views and experiences concerning the suitability of the physical classroom environment for the teaching and learning process, this study employed a mixed methods approach of research as a methodological framework. This research approach enabled us to examine the





phenomenon investigated from students' perspectives through exploring their views and experiences (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011) regarding the circumstances surrounding the teaching and learning activities. Therefore, this research approach suits the study with regard to the social nature of the topic examined and the context of the study, which represents a group of people in a certain setting, being a group of Libyan EFL higher education students.

Stating the context of the study leads to the sampling procedures. Silverman (2005) proposes two types of sampling. These are theoretical sampling and purposive sampling. He specifically (2006) suggests that purposive sampling helps the researcher to choose a case as it exhibits some feature or process of the phenomenon he/she is examining. As it is not possible to access all the student population targeted in this small-scale study, a purposive sample of 30 EFL undergraduate students was selected as a case study demonstrating the characteristics of Libyan higher education students.

Bearing in mind the students' experiences with the physical classroom environment, the sample consisted of 6 students from the second semester, 7 students from the third semester, 8 students from the fourth semester and finally 9 students from the fifth semester. First semester students were not included as they were considered new entrants and with short experience of the physical classroom environment in higher education. In addition, during the time of data collection, there were no other students at a higher level than the fifth semester studying English, as their major, in the targeted college. It is





also worth noting here that our intention is not to generalise from this small sample, but to provide an account of the circumstances surrounding the teaching and learning process in these students' classrooms.

As the gender variable was not targeted in the study, all the students were female, of Libyan nationality and native speakers of Arabic. Their average age was 21–22 years old. They graduated from some secondary schools and were now studying fulltime in English department of a college of education at a Libyan university during the academic year 2020/2021. By the time of the research programme, these students had been learning English, as their major, for at least 3 months. This meant that they had experienced the impact of the classroom physical environment on their learning performance. As participants, these students self-completed a questionnaire regarding their views and experiences with the physical environment in their classrooms. In addition, 6 of these students were interviewed to further discuss and elaborate on the issues highlighted in the questionnaire.

Regarding ethical considerations, according to Silverman (2005) and BERA Guidelines for Educational Research (2011), we had obtained consent from the students who participated in the study. Before they participated in the research programme, we had clarified to them the aim of the study and the importance of their participation. We had also clarified to them that the information they would provide would be treated confidentially and used for research purposes only. In the findings section, we refer anonymously to the university, the college, officials, educators and the participants are given numbers or aliases to conceal their identities.

For data collection, a self-completed questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used. Stating the purpose of the questionnaire, Marshall and Rossman point out that: “researchers administer questionnaires to some sample of a population to learn about the distribution of a characteristic or set of characteristics” (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p.83). The aim of using the questionnaire in this study was to get a broader picture of the topic researched through learning about the students' perceptions of the suitability of the physical environment in their classrooms.

To obtain sufficient data for analysis, we divided the questionnaire into two parts, namely a multiple-choice questionnaire and an open-ended format (Chamot, Barnhard and Dristine, 1998). In the first part, the participants were offered options to choose from. In part two, however, they were given spaces to comment on their choices.

Linked to this, Oppenheim (1992) recommends that a questionnaire should be consisting of certain specified question sections. In preparing a questionnaire, a researcher needs to consider the arrangement of the question sections that will appear as a final format. Accordingly, in preparing the questionnaire of this study, we took these procedures: Based on the research question guiding the study, the questions of the questionnaire were carefully prepared in English and ordered into question sections. Then they were translated into the participants' L1, i.e. Arabic and back translated into English. As a result of the translation process, some questions were rephrased to clarify any ambiguous structures. After that, the questionnaire was



given to a colleague of ours for review and some parts were rephrased according to this review. The resulting format was piloted through distributing some copies of it to a group of English students other than the targeted group and accordingly some questions were rephrased to eliminate ambiguity.

The final version was administrated in the participants' L1 i.e. Arabic. This was to offer them a chance to report easily, avoiding any language difficulties that might face them in the process of self-completion. The instruction employed in the questionnaire was circling. This procedure was taken to avoid the likelihood of misunderstanding the participant's choice.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted to supplement the questionnaire data and get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon investigated. Supporting this type of interview, Bloom and Crabtree point out that: "semi-structured interviews are often the sole data source for qualitative research project" (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p. 315). This type of interview is used because it can reconcile between the researcher and the interviewees as it offers a chance for the interviewees to reveal the details of their perspectives (Hammersley, 2008). Thus, 6 of the participants were interviewed to further discuss and elaborate on the aspects dealt with in the questionnaire. For the interviews, based on the research question guiding the study, some questions were prepared in English. Then, they were translated into the participants' L1 i.e. Arabic and back translated into English to eliminate ambiguity. The interviews were conducted in the participants' L1 i.e. Arabic, using the Arabic version. This was to offer them a chance to provide as much information as possible.



For data analysis, we took into consideration the research question guiding the study. Supporting this, Basit (2010) recommends that in the analysis process, the job of the investigator is to get accounts from descriptions. He/she uses his/her skills to identify and analyse data in light of the research questions. For the current study, the numerical data were addressed through calculating percentages. The qualitative data were, however, categorised and coded by content (Dawson, 2009). Then, the data were interpreted in light of the research question guiding the study. These procedures were taken to arrive at an insightful account of the phenomenon investigated—that is, suitability of the physical classroom environment in Libyan higher education.

## Findings and Discussion

In reporting the findings of the study, the participants' comments are italicized. To conceal their identities, the questionnaire respondents are given numbers and the interviewees are given aliases. The numbers represent percentages are rounded up or down and the exact numbers are given in tables.

Considering the research question guiding the study and through immersing in the data, the following themes emerged. These are infrastructure, furniture, class size and teaching aids.



## Infrastructure

Table (1) shows number of respondents who think that the infrastructure of their classrooms is suitable for teaching and learning EFL.

Rubric	Very much suitable	To some extent suitable	Neural	A little suitable	Never suitable	Total
Number of respondents	3	7	5	12	3	30
Percentage (%)	10	23.33	16.66	40.00	10	100

As table 1 shows, 40% of the students considered the infrastructure of their classrooms to be a little suitable, 17% were neutral, and 10% did not consider it suitable. However, 23.5% believed that it was to some extent suitable and 10% thought that it was very much suitable. These percentages suggest that the infrastructure of the classrooms of these higher education students is relatively suitable for teaching and learning

EFL, as half 50% either found it a little suitable or never suitable and only a third 33.5% found it either to some extent suitable or very much suitable.

This attitude was also noted in the participants' comments in response to the questionnaire, as most of them believed that the infrastructure of their classrooms was not suitable enough for teaching and learning the language. A student (27) commented: *Learning language needs a quiet place and here there are problems with the doors and windows. Because of these problems, the classrooms are not quiet.* The same point was emphasised in the interview data. Khulud stressed: *We suffer from shortage in the facilities and this makes the environment unsuitable for the teaching and learning. There are*

*problems such as noise in the corridors that affects our understanding of the lessons.* These comments suggest that the students targeted in this study are still learning the language in a traditional physical classroom environment where the necessary facilities are not usable or lacking. Language tutors and learners need to be provided with the suitable environment in which they feel encouraged to boost their academic performance and develop. A quiet classroom, if found, would create a more suitable classroom situation for the tutor and students. Conversely, teaching and learning in such a traditional environment would not be expected to produce competent language users.

## Furniture

Table (2) shows number of respondents who think that the classroom furniture is suitable for teaching and learning EFL.

Rubric	Very suitable	To some extent suitable	Neutral	A little suitable	Never suitable	Total
Number of respondents	3	3	6	9	9	30
Percentage (%)	10	10	20.00	30.00	30.00	100

As table 2 illustrates, 30% of the students believed that the classroom furniture was never suitable, while 30% thought that it was a little suitable and 20% were neutral. However, 10% of them thought



that it was to some extent suitable and 10% considered it very much suitable. These percentages suggest that the classroom furniture in these students' educational institution is somewhat suitable for teaching and learning EFL as over half 60% regarded it either a little suitable or never suitable. However, fewer than a quarter 20% found it to be either to some extent suitable or very much suitable.

In their comments, in response to the questionnaire, the majority of the students were critical of the furniture in their classrooms. The furniture, they believed, was not generally conducive to teaching and learning the language. One of them (5) noted: *Most of the desks and chairs need to be repaired or replaced with new ones.* The same sentiment was reflected in the interview data. Nura commented: *The design and size of the desks are not suitable for the students, especially when the room is crowded. It is difficult to move between the rows. This makes me feel bored and unable to understand the lesson.* These comments suggest that the furniture in these students' classrooms is inadequate and this would deter the tutor from using appropriate teaching strategies and students from performing productive learning tasks. The students targeted in this study did not feel that they learnt the language in a suitable physical classroom environment. Creating a comfortable classroom environment would help the tutor to vary the teaching strategies and students to do their learning activities usefully.



## Class Size

Table (3) shows number of respondents who think that the class sizes are suitable for teaching and learning EFL.

Rubric	Very suitable	To some extent suitable	Neutral	A little suitable	Never suitable	Total
Number of respondents	4	7	2	8	9	30
Percentage (%)	13.33	23.33	6.66	26.66	30.00	100

As table 3 indicates, 30% of the students thought that the class sizes were not suitable in their classrooms, while 26.5% believed that they were a little suitable and 6.5% were neutral. However, 23.5% believed that they were to some extent suitable and 13.5% considered it very much suitable. These percentages indicate that the class sizes in the classrooms of these university students are somewhat suitable as over half 56.5% regarded them either a little suitable or never suitable. However, fewer than half 37% considered them either to some extent suitable or very much suitable.

In their responses to the questionnaire, many of the students expressed resentment regarding the class sizes in their classrooms. A student (10) commented: *The class sizes are large and this reduces the opportunity for participation in lessons.* The same point was highlighted in the interview data. Iman emphasised: *There is no quietness in the rooms because they are crowded. In crowded rooms,*



*it is difficult to listen to the tutor, especially if a student happened to sit at the back of the room.* These comments suggest that the students felt the negative influence of the large classes in their classrooms. They felt that they were deterred from listening to the tutor's explanation appropriately and unable to participate in classes. This situation would probably result in a lack of productive teaching and learning. Large classes, if divided, would provide the tutor with an opportunity to initiate more learning activities and create a more inclusive classroom environment for students to participate in classes more effectively.

### Teaching Aids

Table (4) shows number of respondents who think that the teaching aids are sufficient for teaching and learning EFL.

Rubric	Very sufficient	To some extent sufficient	Neutral	A little sufficient	Never sufficient	Total
Number of respondents	3	9	4	5	9	30
Percentage (%)	10	30.00	13.33	16.66	30.00	100

As table 4 shows, 30% of the students thought that the teaching aids in their classrooms were never sufficient and 30% believed that they were to some extent sufficient. However, 16.5% thought that they were a little sufficient, 4% were neutral and 10% believed that they were sufficient a lot. These percentages suggest that the teaching aids in the students' classrooms are reasonably sufficient as fewer than half



46.5% thought that the teaching aids were either a little sufficient or never sufficient. Also, fewer than half 40% believed that they were either to some extent sufficient or sufficient a lot.

Responding to the questionnaire, the students highlighted limitations in the teaching aids in their classrooms. A student (11) demanded: *We need good blackboards and data show to help us learn the language and use it in many ways.* A similar point was reiterated in the interview data. Muna claimed: *There is no internet access and the equipment is old and does not operate well, especially for some courses such as listening, speaking and phonetics, which rely a lot on equipment.* These comments indicate the inadequacy and lack of the suitable teaching aids in these students' classrooms. This drawback of the physical classroom environment would distract initiating useful learning activities and language practices. Modern teaching aids, if provided, would help the tutor to create a more engaging learning environment and provide students, as non-native speakers of the language, with an opportunity to practise the language in varied uses.

## Conclusion

Data analysis revealed that the physical classroom environment in Libyan higher education was relatively suitable for teaching and learning EFL, suggesting a traditional classroom environment lacks modern technology. The students targeted in this study did not appear to be learning the language effectively owing to lack of a supportive physical classroom environment. In their comments, they were critical of the infrastructure of their classrooms emphasizing a lack of



the necessary facilities. They also expressed resentment regarding the furniture in the rooms, which, it seemed, created an uncomfortable classroom situation for the tutor and students. Large classes were also highlighted as one of the obstacles that hinder performing teaching and learning activities as well as classroom participation. The participants also emphasised limitations and lack of teaching aids in their classrooms, a situation seemed to have posed challenges in utilising the language productively.

These findings might have the following implications for improving the physical classroom environment in Libyan higher education institutions:

Officials and educators in Libya need to reconsider their view of the physical classroom environment. They are recommended to support the higher education sector by improving the physical classroom environment in the educational institutions. Suitable infrastructure, comfortable furniture, suitable class sizes and modern technology, if found, would encourage tutors to employ recent teaching methods and motivate students to have a more active role in the teaching and learning process.

Regarding the limitations of the study, these points can be made:

The study used a self-completed questionnaire to gather data for analysis. Although we made the effort to avoid misinterpretation, some words in the process of translation or in the participants' self-completion of the questionnaire might not have had their intended meanings. Semi-structured interviews were also employed for data collection. The process of translating the questions and the actual interviews might have influenced the participants' answers.



The data of the study were collected in the participants L1, i.e. Arabic. Then it were transcribed and translated into English. Although we exerted every effort to convey the intended meaning of every word as precisely as possible in English, there might be misunderstanding of some words during the process of translation.

For further research, the following are some recommendations:

This is a small-scale study targeted a group of Libyan higher education students. More studies are suggested to be carried out in order to replicate its results and extend knowledge of this topic. They would also enable policy makers and educators to adopt a broader perspective that might help them to create a more suitable physical classroom environment in higher education institutions.

The study examined suitability of the physical aspect of the classroom environment to teaching and learning EFL. Other aspects of the classroom environment are also recommended to be examined.

The study explored the topic of the physical classroom environment from students' perspectives. Further research is suggested to examine the topic from tutors' perspectives.

This study investigated the topic of the physical classroom environment in Libyan higher education institutions. More studies might be undertaken to explore the topic in the general and private sectors of education.

Finally, the physical classroom environment in Libyan higher education is a broad topic and requires a lot of research. This small-



scale study attempted to shed light on this aspect of the classroom environment and provide some useful insights for officials and educators in Libya. We believe that improving the teaching and learning conditions in general and the physical classroom environment in particular is imperative in order to create a better classroom environment for tutors and students in Libyan higher education institutions.

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## ملاءمة البيئة المادية بالقاعات الدراسية بالتعليم العالي في ليبيا:

من وجهة نظر طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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### الملخص:

تبحث هذه الورقة في مدى ملاءمة البيئة المادية بالقاعات الدراسية بالتعليم العالي في ليبيا من وجهة نظر طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. استخدمت الدراسة أسلوب الطرق المختلطة على عينة تكونت من 30 طالبة متخصصة في دراسة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، كدراسة حالة. هذه المجموعة تدرس بدوام كامل في كلية التربية بإحدى الجامعات الليبية. وكان هدف الدراسة هو: استكشاف آراء وتجارب طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بالتعليم العالي الليبي فيما يتعلق بملاءمة البيئة المادية بالقاعات الدراسية للعملية التعليمية. استخدمت الدراسة في جمع البيانات استبياناً ذاتي التعبئة ومقابلات شخصية شبه مركبة. أظهر تحليل البيانات أن البيئة المادية بالقاعات الدراسية ملائمة بشكل نسبي لتعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، مما يدل على أن البيئة بالقاعات الدراسية تقليدية تفتقر إلى الوسائل التقنية الحديثة. كما أظهرت الدراسة أن البنية التحتية مناسبة نوعاً ما، إلا أنها تفتقر إلى الوسائل الضرورية. أما الأثاث فهو غير مريح بالدرجة المطلوبة، زد على ذلك أن القاعات مكتظة نوعاً ما، أما الوسائل التعليمية فهي إما محدودة الأداء أو غير متوفرة. في ضوء هذه النتائج توصي الدراسة بخلق بيئة مادية أكثر ملاءمة للعملية التعليمية وذلك لتحفيز الأساتذة والطلاب وتشجيعهم على الرفع من أدائهم في العملية التعليمية.

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