# Moving Academic Conferences Virtual
## Analysis of Algerian EFL Participants' Perceptions

Imane Tiaiba, PhD
Mohammed El Bachir El Ibrahimi University, Bordj Bou Arreridj, Algeria

**Abstract**

As academic conferences have become an indispensable part of contemporary science, providing researchers with an opportunity to present the results of recent investigations, become familiar with the studies of other scientists, and build and expand a network for future collaborations, this paper aims at examining Algerian researchers' perceptions of virtual academic conferences with regard the scientific requirements of postgraduate students earning the required credits for their theses' defence and associate faculty members seeking promotion in their career. To this end, a questionnaire adapted from the relevant literature was compiled and sent to various Algerian researchers in the EFL field via their professional emails, with 40 replies being received. Data was analysed using numerals and percentage for closed items of the questionnaire, and thematic analysis for open-ended questions. Results of the study showed that the majority of participants are positive about virtual conferences, despite the technical challenges mainly associated with Internet accessibility and the decline in social interaction. The study concludes with a set of recommendations to raise stakeholders' awareness of technology support and future improvements to meet participants' needs.

**Keywords:** virtual conferences; perception; EFL participants; Algerian speakers

**Introduction**

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the world has witnessed unprecedented changes in people's lives and daily activities. In the academic environment, travel restrictions and social distancing regulations have resulted in most academic and professional activities moving to an online format. Likewise, academic conferences with little preparation time and previous experience were forced to move virtually (Hohlfeld et al., 2021). Today, after the pandemic recession, the virtual conference format continues to be a prominent method of organizing and conducting scientific and academic events in many institutions around the world. The case of Algeria is no exception to this global shift. Academic conferences have become an indispensable part of contemporary science, providing researchers with an opportunity to present the results of recent investigations, become familiar with the studies of other scientists, and build and expand a network for future collaborations (Oruc, 2022). Recently, it has been observed that Algerian researchers are increasingly encouraged to attend virtual

academic conferences for their professional and academic needs, as this would be the case for postgraduate students earning the required credits for their theses' defence as well as associate faculty members seeking promotion in their academic ranks. EFL researchers, particularly privileged with English as the world's spoken language, have been offered excellent opportunities to attend international conferences where a wider range of experts and high-level international speakers in the EFL field can easily attend. The academic scene was buzzing with webinars, workshops and conferences with renowned scholars (e.g. hosting Chomsky at El Oued University 2023 and Swales, the international webinar as part of the international workshop on Issues in ESP, 2023, chaired and moderated by Algerian researchers). Although virtual conferences have become very popular for Algerian universities and research labs; Still, there is little evidence of how participants rate their effectiveness compared to face-to-face conferencing. Given the relevance to the benefits and challenges of virtual conferences, understanding participants' experiences and perceptions could lead to recommendations for improving the organization and delivery of virtual conferences. Therefore, this investigation aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do Algerian participants, namely EFL speakers, perceive virtual conferences?
- What recommendations could be made for future improvements?

## Theoretical Framework

### Moving Academic Conferences Virtual

Broadly speaking a scholarly or scientific conference can be perceived as an event, where scientists and academics- comprising researchers and doctoral students - with similar research interests meet to share and disseminate scientific knowledge within a specific community (Burgess, 2019; de Vries & Pieters, 2007). More specifically, attending an academic conference provides researchers with a venue to meet other researchers and practitioners in the same field, to nurture networks among specialists to develop new research ideas and professional collaborations (Ogunmodede et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Wechsberg, 2020).

While scientific conferences have long been held in physical locations that require in-person attendance, recent events have led to necessary conference format changes, particularly during and after the COVID-19 crisis, resulting in many scientific conferences being canceled or postponed. Eventually, given the ongoing pandemic, organizers began to plan and conduct an increasing number of public gatherings, including conferences, as virtual rather than in-person events (Sarabipour et al., 2021).

Heller (2010) suggests that virtual conferences can be classified under two main categories. The first type consists of platforms that offer only one-way audio and video broadcast centrally from the meeting's moderator to an audience. The

second type combines audio and video communication and " provides features for two-way communication, shared desktop access, document and file sharing, simultaneous editing and other electronic forms of communication". The second type combines audio and video communications, providing capabilities for two-way communications, desktop sharing, document and file sharing, concurrent editing, and other forms of electronic communications that allow data to be to be mutually shared, edited and copied during the conference. Other features also include note-taking, instant messaging, and real-time incorporation with other broadcast platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, etc. Virtual conferences can be undertaken via different software, including Zoom, Teams, Google meet, Go ToMeeting, etc. (cited in Ogunmodede et al., 2022, p. 164).

## Merits of Virtual Academic Conferences

The literature suggests that the benefits of holding conferences virtually are multiple. The prime advantage is probably "cost effectiveness" for all the stakeholders -organisers, presenters and attendees- since travel and accommodation costs are eliminated. Besides that, registration fees for virtual conferences are relatively cheap or in most cases free. Consequently, the number of participants is increased markedly (Bottaneli et al., 2020). Actually, virtual conferences are proven to be more inclusive for those who are incapable to travel, like disabled persons, and members of under-developed scientific research communities (Viglione, 2020). Also, virtual conferencing provides a likelihood to invite high-profile scholars, without the organisers incurring travel costs besides speakers from distant locations and this ameliorates the quality and diversity of the program (Sharma, 2021). Flexibility in virtual conferences stands as a high point: conference sessions are available in real-time on online electronic media and can be retrieved later by those who missed the live presentations thanks to the recordings accessible on some platforms such as Youtube (Ogunmodede et al., 2022, p 165).

## Barriers of Virtual Academic Conferences

In spite of the merits of virtual conferences, previous studies reported a multitude of challenges (Kim et al., 2022; Hohlfeld et al., 2021; Ogunmodede et al., 2022; Wechsberg,2020). The first and foremost challenge of virtual conferences, mainly in rural areas and developing countries revolve around poor speed and quality of internet services in addition to technical problems (Ogunmodede et al., 2022). In international conferences, a synchronous online session can very often be a hurdle for some participants spread across different time zones. As such, there are limited opportunities to interact with moderators in real time (Houston, 2020). Additionally, it is often difficult to maintain participants' undivided attention in an online setting (Sethi et al., 2020) as virtual conferences lack traditional professional networking and social

interactions (Kim et al., 2022). Besides that, it was reported that non-verbal communication, and mutual rapport, which are cardinal strands of in-person communication, cannot be replaced conveniently by online format and are deemed veritable drawbacks of virtual conferencing. (Bozelos & Vogels,2021; Ogunmodede et al., 2022). Unlike the physical environment, the virtual environment may have fewer sponsorship options and deprive some participants of tourism opportunities (Sharma, 2021). In addition, it is sometimes difficult to host hands-on training and workshops in virtual conferences (Sharma, 2021).

## Method

To answer the research questions, the current study employed an exploratory descriptive design using an online questionnaire created in Google forms. Items of the questionnaire were adapted from the relevant literature namely (Kim et al.,2022; Hohlfeld et al.,2021; Wechsberg, 2020). Sampling in this enquiry is purposive and addressed academics who usually attend conferences as part of their scientific requirements. The subjects of the study were Algerian participants in the EFL field. The questionnaire was sent to different participants via their professional emails where 40 answers were received. Ethical considerations were ensured by keeping participants' personal information anonymous and using data for research purposes only. Data was analysed used numerals and percentage for closed questions and thematic analysis for open-ended questions.

### Description of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire is divided into four sections. The first section consists of the participants' background data: their academic rank, teaching experience, area of expertise and exposure to virtual conferences. The second section of the questionnaire addresses participants' attitudes of virtual conferences using a four-point Likert scale (from stongly agree- agree-disagree- strongly disagree) with reference to eight items namely cost effectiveness, time commitment, free registration cost, international speakers, instant and delayed chat and debate, and easy recording and reviewing. While the third section asked attendees about their virtual conferencing challenges, the final section consists of attendees' suggestions for future improvements.

### Informants' Profiles

In this study 40 Algerian EFL faculty members answered the questionnaire. Their academic ranks include 22.5% doctoral students, 22.5% assistant professors, 12 associate professors (MCB), 17.5% associate professor (MCA) and 3 Professors. For their field of expertise, 80% of the informants were specialized in language studies while 20% of them were specialized in literature and civilization. With regard to teaching experience, 17.5% of the informants were less than five years, 42% of them

were between 5-10, 30% were between 10-15 and 10% were more than 20 years. As for informants exposure to virtual conferences, 92.5% of them undergoes virtual conferences, while 7.5% of them had never experienced virtual conferences.

In this study, though the sample was conveniently selected, yet it covers multiple academic members profiles that would yield a broader view of the on-going issue. Table 1 summaries Participants' Profiles.

| Category | | Number | Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| Academic Rank | Doctoral student | 09 | 22.5% |
| | Assistant professor | 09 | 22.5% |
| | Associate professor b | 12 | 30% |
| | Associate professor | 07 | 17.5 |
| | Professor | 03 | 7.5% |
| Field of specialism | Literature & civilization | 08 | 20% |
| | Language sciences | 32 | 80% |
| Teaching experience in years | From 0-5 | 07 | 17,5% |
| | 5-10 | 17 | 42% |
| | 10- 15 | 12 | 30% |
| | More than 20 | 04 | 10% |
| Virtual Conferences Participation | Yes | 37 | 92% |
| | No | 03 | 7.5% |

*Table 1. Participants' Profile*
*Source: Author*

## Data Analysis

### Participants' Experience and Perceptions of Virtual Conferences

In this section, participants were asked about their perspectives of how much confortable they feel with virtual conferences on a four-point Likert scale (from strongly agree- agree-disagree- strongly disagree). The first point concerns the ease of recording and reviewing virtual conferences. The majority of participants agreed (57.5%) and (27.5%) strongly agreed, while (12.5%) of them disagreed and (2.5%) totally disagreed. The second point on the scale takes into account instant and delayed chats and debates. Almost the participants agreed, (52.5%) and (25%) strongly agreed, while 17.5% disagreed and (05%) totally disagreed. Regarding the third item, the possibility to invite international speakers, (52%) agreed, (25%) strongly agreed, and (10%) disagreed. For the fourth item, related to unnecessary institutional approval to attend virtual conferences, (37.5%) of participants strongly agreed, (40%) agreed, (15%) disagreed, and (7.5%) totally disagreed. The same scores were recorded

for the fifth point related to convenience and accessibility in virtual conferences. In the sixth item that consists of free registration costs, the majority (50%) strongly ageed, (37%) agreed and 12.5% disagreed. With regard to applicants' views of time commitment during virtual conferences, (42.5%) strongly agreed, 47.5% agreed and 10%. With respect to the last item that relates to cost effectiveness, 50% strongly agreed, (42.5%) agreed, (5%) disagreed and (2.5%) strongly disagreed. Figure.1 displays participants' perspectives of virtual conferences.
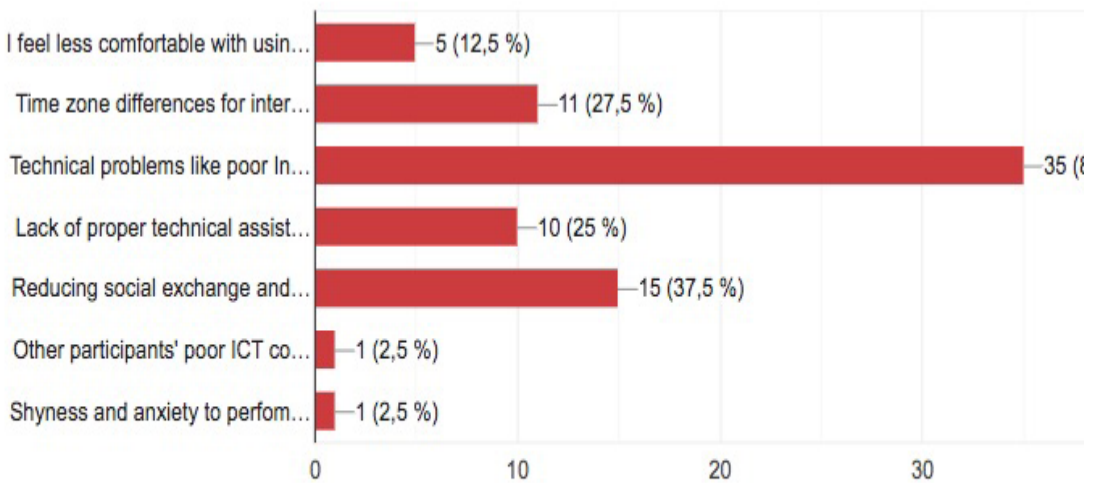


*Figure 1. Participants Perspectives of Virtual Academic Conferences*
*Source: Author*

## Participants' Challenges with Virtual Academic Conferences

While the previous section dealt with participants' perspectives of virtual conferences merits, this section of the questionnaire reports attendees' challenges with virtual conferences. According to their answer, the prime problem lies with technical problems namely poor Internet connection (87.5%). The second drawback was the decline of social exchange and interaction among attendees (37%). Time zone differences were another barrier according to 27% of the attendees. Other handicaps were lack of technical assistance 25% and feeling less confortable with using technology (12.5%). One participant added "shyness and anxiety to perform" while another stated "poor ICT commend". Fig 2 displays Participants' Challenges with Virtual Academic Conferences.
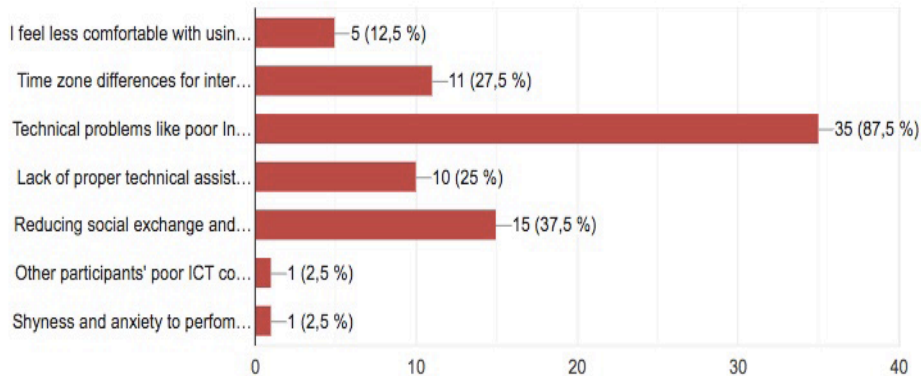
*Figure 2. Participants' Challenges with Virtual Academic Conferences*
*Source: Author*

## Participants' Suggestions to Improve Academic Virtual Conferences

The last section of the questionnaire consists of an open-ended question and addresses participants' suggestions to improve academic virtual conferences within the Algerian context. Answers of the participants were thematically analysed and summarized in the following notes.

o        Participants suggest that virtual conferences should be recorded and shared (on other platforms and channels like YouTube for example) for more benefits.
- The Internet connection should be widely available and affordable.
- Participants should be prepared and trained before the presentation.
- Enlarge the number of audience by encouraging students, teachers. and language inspectors to attend to share the benefits of research findings.
- Visual conferencing should be interactive and creative (like using fun).
- More technical assistance should be provided to participants who feel less comfortable with virtual conferences at the level of their institutions.
- Using more effective platforms like Zoom that allow more control.
- Providing training for novice researchers and speakers.
- Provide training for conference organizers.
- Share speakers' contacts (emails & affiliations).
- Provide more time for discussion.
- Train the speakers to adhere time allotted for their presentation.

## Discussion

In this section, results of the study are presented in the light of the research questions. From the analysis above, key findings demonstrated that:

a) Overall, Algerian EFL participants' perspectives of virtual academic conferences are positive particularly regarding the possibility to invite international speakers and interaction during instant and delayed chat (52,5%), in addition to cost effectiveness and free registration charges (50%). These results are directly in line with previous findings namely for providing a chance likelihood to invite high-profile scholars, without the organisers incurring travel costs besides the flexibility (Sharma, 2021; Ogunmodede et al., 2022).

b) Despite the merits of virtual conferences, it was found that participants share the problem of poor internet connection and the need for technical assistance (87.5%). It seem that these problems are also shared with some developing countries as indicated by (Ogunmodede et al., 2022).

## Conclusion

In a word, this paper major aim was to examine Algerian EFL participants' perceptions of virtual academic conferences. It has been found that while virtual conferences provide a number of benefits for Algerian scientists, namely the invitation and interaction with a wider range of experts and high-level scientists around the world and cost effectiveness for both participants and organisers, some level of support is required for many researchers. In light of the findings, a number of recommendations could be made to the stakeholders to improve virtual conferences namely:

- improving Internet quality and making it accessible & affordable for all researchers
- providing assistance in technology use and in online interaction.
- thinking of a blend of asynchronous and synchronous delivery methods to meet the varied needs of participants.
- making virtual conferences open for EFL students and teachers of middle and secondary schools
- collaborating with educational technologists to develop a national platform for all events, in order to keep records of research and protect the copy right of presenters; besides using those records as resources for teachers and students
- focusing on quality and originality of work
- training participants to manage the time of their presentation
- It is essential to have conference equipment or at least conference room for researchers at the level of each department.

Finally, this study is limited in terms of the small scope of participants; further research might consider using large study-scale from different subject areas to get a broader view of virtual conferences. Other stakeholders could be involved, namely educational technologists and conference chairs and organisers. Future studies may also consider the investigation of related topics such as instructional webinars and their effect on higher education teachers' professional development. Also, integrating virtual conferences in English for academic purposes (EAP) courses for postgraduates may constitute an interesting topic of investigation to cope with the demands of the new digital era.

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## Appendix

## Questionnaire Link

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf1N_ LarDYVdYoQW7XAz2kN6yrtxaLXiRIAhD_1hlSzHPXMQw/viewform?usp=sf_link