Before and After COVID-19: A Comparative Analysis of EFL Learning Responses Among First-year College Students

Chong, Cinthia M.
Assistant Professor, Department of Open Major, Liberal Arts College, Inje University, cmhchong@inje.ac.kr

Abstract

This study explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the perspectives and experiences of first-year college students in EFL learning. Employing a comprehensive research approach, the study utilizes three primary research tools: surveys, self-evaluations, and academic performance grades. The primary objectives are to understand the shifts in first-year college students’ levels of anxiety and confidence, attitudes, self-perceptions on English proficiency, and academic outcomes influenced by the pandemic and to contribute valuable insights to the field of EFL education after the pandemic era.

Through a comparative analysis, the study contrasts the responses of 62 first-year college students in 2018, unaffected by the pandemic during their secondary education period, with those of 69 first-year college students in 2023 who experienced the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Contrary to initial assumptions of a negative shift post-COVID-19, the study reveals predominantly positive sentiments in 2023, marked by a significant increase in positivity toward English learning. However, a polarized distribution in self-evaluations emerges, reflecting a significant divergence in students' opinions regarding their English proficiency.

The study further explores the academic performance of first-year college students, comparing those before and after the pandemic. An examination of their academic performance grades reveals that the number of first-year college students scoring 80 or higher did not significantly differ between the 2018 and 2023 classes. However, there appears to be a trend towards lower academic scores in 2023 compared to 2018. Concurrently, multiple factors may contribute, one being the observed increase in absenteeism among first-year college students of 2023. This suggests a lasting impact, influencing attendance scores, class attitudes and participation, assignment submissions, and even exam performance. The rise in lower academic scores in 2023, particularly those below 70 (D or below), highlights challenges faced by students in the post-COVID-19 era. This underscores the difficulties encountered by these students during the pandemic period. A clear contrast emerges between first-year college students in 2018 and 2023, as well as among 2023 first-year college students with well-adapted abilities and those facing difficulties.

Recognizing and addressing these distinctions is imperative for educators and institutions to provide effective support, acknowledging and nurturing the strengths while aiding students who require additional assistance. This study may contribute to bridging the gap in understanding these differences and challenges among students after the pandemic.

Key Words: COVID-19 pandemic, first-year college students, EFL learning, survey and self-evaluation, academic performance, educational challenges
1. Introduction

The year 2020 marked a significant transformation in the field of education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This disruption affected every aspect of academic life, leading to a rapid shift to online learning. First-year college students, in particular, faced a transformative experience as they navigated uncharted territory during their secondary education period. The impact of these changes and the attitudes towards online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction cannot be overstated. Simultaneously, the pandemic has left a significant imprint on EFL education worldwide, necessitating the suspension of in-person classes and a shift to online instruction. This shift, driven by the relentless impact of the pandemic, triggered extensive research into various aspects of online education. Researchers explored the challenges and opportunities brought about by this abrupt transition to online learning.

For instance, Kadir and Yunos (2021) undertook an extensive review of the impact of COVID-19 on English Language Teaching and Learning Process by analyzing studies published in prominent journals in 2020. Their review classified the studies into three main themes: remote English Language teaching and learning pedagogy, the role of stakeholders in English Language content management in various countries, and barriers faced by ESL teachers and learners. The challenges outlined in the review included technical issues, learning processes, learning environments, self-control, health concerns, learning materials, assignments, and learning effect and assessments.

In a more recent study, Yang and Xu (2023) assessed the e-readiness levels of both students and instructors. The study identified various impediments encountered in different phases of online EFL classes and highlighted the importance of teacher presence, teacher-student interaction, and problem-solving ability for successful online learning.

The transition to online EFL classes has presented a new set of challenges. Students’ concentration and participation tend to be lower in online classes compared to traditional face-to-face settings. Effectively conveying pronunciation and emotional expression posed challenges in the online learning environment. Additionally, students less familiar with technology may also encounter technical difficulties. Similarly, Mahyoob (2020) examined the challenges and obstacles confronted by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia, during their transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Technical obstacles, academic difficulties, and communication challenges emerged as primary concerns.

As previously mentioned, there have been numerous studies on the effectiveness of online education during and after the COVID-19 period. However, comparative studies between the pre-COVID and post-COVID eras are relatively scarce. For example, Zhang et al. (2022) explored the impact of the pandemic on online learning behavior by comparing students’ online interactions before and after the pandemic. The results indicated that online learning interactions became more effective post-pandemic, raising questions about how students who experienced the pandemic during high school adapt to college-level education. In Alkhannani’s study (2021), an attempt was made to examine how the teaching and learning of EFL has evolved over time and the new opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented for the teaching and learning of English in Saudi Arabia. However, the study briefly addresses potential benefits and considerations related to online learning in a post-COVID-19 context rather than focusing on the actual research comparing the periods before and after the pandemic.

This study recognizes that online and offline EFL education coexisted before the pandemic but were reevaluated due to COVID-19. It focuses on first-year college students who encountered the COVID-19 pandemic during their high school years, facing the challenges of the pandemic during a crucial development phase. Such unique formative experiences might have significantly influenced their EFL learning outcomes and their perspectives on online EFL instruction. The implications
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are significant especially for students who received online English classes during the COVID era in high school and are now taking college-level English courses. This raises questions about whether these students may encounter challenges in adapting to in-person classroom learning, potentially affecting their anxiety, confidence, and the overall attitude. Additionally, students who have experienced online English classes in high school may have developed different learning styles or habits compared to students before the pandemic. This leads to a fundamental question: What disparities exist between students whose high school years were entirely impacted by COVID-19 and those whose education remained largely unaffected? Do these disparities manifest positive or negative manner in their college-level EFL learning experiences? In the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the pandemic’s effects on first-year college students after the pandemic, it is crucial to compare the responses of first-year college students in 2023, who endured the pandemic in high school, with those of first-year college students from 2018, who did not experience the pandemic during their secondary education period.

The sudden transition to online learning, along with social distancing measures and restricted school activities, has introduced significant challenges for EFL learners. These challenges are particularly magnified in conversational classes, where face-to-face interactions are traditionally considered more effective for language learning. These shifts in educational practices prompt questions about the potential psychological impacts on students’ EFL learning outcomes, especially among first-year college students starting their academic journey. The pandemic’s substantial impact on students’ mental health and well-being can affect their EFL learning outcomes. Students may experience increased anxiety and stress due to the pandemic’s uncertainty, ultimately affecting their motivation, confidence, and persistence in EFL learning. Despite the numerous studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the integration of EFL education with online platforms in various countries and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, there is a noticeable dearth of papers comparing EFL education before and after the COVID-19 era. Motivated by these concerns, the present study aims to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on EFL learning among first-year college students. Specifically, it explores the changes in students' anxiety levels, self-confidence, attitudes towards EFL learning, and learning strategies before and after the pandemic. By examining these psychological factors, the study seeks to provide insights into how the altered learning environment has affected students’ EFL learning outcomes.

The challenges faced by EFL learners during the pandemic highlight the need to investigate how first-year college students have adapted to EFL conversation classes within the general education curriculum, both before and after the pandemic. By comparing students’ self-evaluations in using English before and after the pandemic, this study aims to discern the impact of the shift to online instruction on EFL learning. The study addresses a gap in the existing literature by examining how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced first-year college students’ responses to EFL conversation classes, particularly exploring the differences between students affected by the pandemic during high school and those who were not.

Additionally, the study investigates whether these differences had a positive or negative impact on their EFL learning outcomes in college. To achieve this objective, the study employs a comprehensive research approach, utilizing a diverse range of methodologies, including surveys, self-evaluations, and actual academic performances. To address these questions, this study conducts a comparative analysis of first-year college students’ responses before and after the pandemic.

Furthermore, this study delves into an examination of academic performance grades to understand how students’ self-evaluations align with their actual academic performance in EFL courses. The research sample consists of 131 first-year college students who began their university journey in the spring semester before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection involves the
use of survey questionnaires, self-evaluation measures, and the collection of end-of-semester grades, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and perspectives.

The study is framed by the following research hypotheses and questions:

Research Hypothesis:
An initial assumption in this study posited that students' responses to EFL learning post-COVID-19 would predominantly lean towards negativity, characterized by a more passive approach to learning compared to their pre-pandemic counterparts. Additionally, it was expected that their attitudes towards self-evaluating their English language proficiency would tend towards the less positive end of the rating scales.

Research Questions:
1. Do significant differences exist in the attitudes towards survey responses related to EFL learning between the pre-COVID and post-COVID groups of first-year college students?
2. Are there notable variations in the attitudes towards self-evaluating English language proficiency between the pre-COVID and post-COVID groups of first-year college students?
3. Is there a noteworthy difference in the actual academic performance of first-year college students when comparing end-of-semester grades in EFL classes between the pre-COVID and post-COVID groups?

The aim of this research is to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on first-year college students' EFL learning. By examining the differences in anxiety, confidence, and attitudes towards self-evaluation in using English between the pre-COVID and post-COVID groups, this study seeks to provide insights into the effects of the pandemic on EFL learning and contribute to the development of effective language education strategies for students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Anxiety, Confidence, and Self-assessment in EFL Learning

EFL learning can be a challenging task, involving various factors that significantly affect the outcomes of students. These factors include motivation, age, learning style, language aptitude, and the degree of language exposure. Notably, anxiety and confidence are recurring themes in studies exploring EFL learning. Anxiety, often described as a feeling of tension and unease related to the language learning process (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), consistently emerges as a determinant in EFL learning outcomes (Chong, 2019, 2021, 2022; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Tsang, 2022). Matsuda and Gobel (2004) explored the relationship between language anxiety and reading comprehension among EFL learners and found that anxiety negatively affected reading comprehension, and that learners with high anxiety tended to avoid reading in English. High levels of anxiety can hinder students' ability to learn and use the language effectively, especially in speaking, reading, and writing (Tsang, 2022; Yu, 2022). Conversely, high confidence levels have consistently demonstrated a positive correlation with proficiency, particularly in speaking (Chong, 2019, 2021, 2022; Yu, 2022). In the studies of Chong (2019, 2021) reveal that reading aloud activities significantly enhance the self-confidence of EFL learners in spoken English. Particularly, learners without any overseas English learning experience exhibited positive reactions, highlighting the effectiveness of the activity in building confidence. Additionally, the practice of reading aloud is recommended as an effective method for translation learners to refine their language proficiency, enhance language skills, and bolster confidence in using the target language.

Self-assessment, which involves learners evaluating their language abilities, stands out as a critical aspect of language learning. It not only enables learners to monitor their progress but also encourages them to take greater

For instance, Lee and Oxford (2008) investigated the relationship between self-assessment and language learning strategies discovering that learners engaged in self-assessment tended to use more effective learning strategies, which led to better language learning outcomes.

Moreover, the need for self-assessment of various English skills, such as listening, reading, reading aloud, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, is implicitly suggested within the broader context of self-assessment’s positive impact on EFL learning outcome. For example, the studies conducted by Chong (2021, 2022, 2023), it was reasonably posited that self-evaluation transforms students into active participants in their own evaluation. This transformative process allows them to critically assess their own English language competence, identify areas for improvement, and gain valuable insight into their language learning progress. Additionally, self-evaluation serves as a method for students to gain awareness of their language competence during the self-evaluation process. The ability to assess specific language skills becomes crucial for students to develop a comprehensive understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, facilitating targeted improvement efforts.

2.2. COVID-19 and Language Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has made a significant impact on language learning worldwide. Educational institutions have been compelled to rapidly transition to online teaching, creating significant challenges for language learners. Online teaching methods often fall short in replicating the immersive environment of face-to-face language learning, and technical barriers can hinder access to online resources. Moreover, the pandemic has escalated stress and anxiety levels among students, further complicating language learning outcomes.

Numerous recent studies have investigated the consequences of online learning during the pandemic (Chong, 2022; Kadir & Yunos, 2021; Kim, 2021; Lee, 2020; Mahyooob, 2020; Yang & Xu, 2023; Zapata-Cuervo et al., 2022). In a study led by Zapata-Cuervo et al. (2022), students’ motivation, self-efficacy, and anxiety were investigated as key factors influencing their engagement and outcomes in online learning. Their self-administered online survey included college students from three countries: the U.S., South Korea, and Colombia. The findings indicated that students’ self-efficacy and anxiety significantly affected their engagement and learning outcomes. Despite high engagement in online learning, students perceived it as less effective and rigorous compared to face-to-face instruction.

Lee (2020) explored the challenges faced by college students in adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of the college English program. The study identified difficulties related to low-quality voice recordings, self-directed learning, and communication gaps. Nonetheless, students expressed satisfaction with the learning experience attributed to iterative listening, appropriate organization and materials presentation. Preferences regarding post-COVID-19 college English program, especially in the context of general education, were divided, with students cautiously considering online-only or hybrid classes. Notably, they exhibited a preference for blended classes, combining online and in-person elements.

The study conducted by Yang and Xu (2023) provided insights into the e-readiness levels of both students and instructors. It identified impediments encountered by them in various phases of online EFL classes and provided recommendations for enhancing e-learning success. The results demonstrated that both students and instructors had e-readiness levels slightly below the ready level. The study emphasized the crucial roles of teacher presence, teacher-student interaction, and problem-solving abilities in ensuring the success of online language learning.

Chong’s (2022) investigation into the potential impact of online college EFL learning on cultural awareness and
interest highlighted the significant role of interactions with professors. The study found that such interactions had the most substantial impact on students' cultural understanding and interest, followed by pre-existing interest in the subject and language skills.

Kadir and Yunos (2021) conducted a comprehensive review of the impact of COVID-19 on English Language Teaching and Learning Process, drawing from studies published in prominent journals in 2020. The challenges reported by ESL teachers and learners include technical difficulties, adjustments in learning process, adapting to new learning environments, managing self-control, addressing health concerns, modifying learning materials and assignments, and reevaluating the effectiveness of learning and assessments.

Mahyoob (2020) examined the challenges and obstacles confronted by EFL learners at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia during their transition to online learning in the second semester of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges spanned technical hurdles, academic impediments, and communication challenges. The study results indicated that most EFL learners were dissatisfied with the continuation of online learning, as it did not align with their expectations for progress in language learning. The noticeable lack of progress in language learning during this transition period is noteworthy concern.

There have been discrepancies in the effectiveness of online learning in comparison to in-person instruction. While some studies suggest that face-to-face instruction is more effective for language learning, others contend that online learning can be equally effective, particularly when certain strategies and tools are used (Chen & Chen, 2020; Jiang et al., 2023; Oraif & Elyas, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). For example, Chen and Chen (2020) found that online instruction using interactive multimedia materials was just as effective as face-to-face instruction for EFL reading comprehension.

Oraif and Elyas (2021) explored learners’ levels of engagement in online courses using a designated school platform within the context of Saudi Arabia. Their results also revealed high levels of engagement among EFL Saudi learners. Jiang et al. (2023), delved into the effects of online learning on EFL learners’ motivation, anxiety, and attitude, with findings indicating that online learning positively affected the participants’ motivation, reduced anxiety, and fostered positive attitudes toward L2 learning.

Additionally, Zhang et al. (2022) examined the impact of the pandemic on online learning behavior by comparing students’ online learning behavior before and after the outbreak. The study sample consisted of students from China’s massive open online course platform, revealing that only a small number of courses witnessed an increase in online interaction, suggesting that the pandemic’s role in promoting the scale of courses was not significant. During the pandemic, online learning interaction became more frequent among course network members whose interaction scale increased. After the pandemic, although the scale of interaction declined, online learning interaction became more effective.

These findings raise concerns about the potential impact on first-year college students who have experienced online English classes during their high school years. This group may encounter challenges when transitioning to in-person college-level English classes, potentially affecting their participation and learning outcomes. Additionally, they may have developed distinct learning styles and habits compared to students accustomed to traditional classroom-based English teaching methods.

The significant concern regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on English language learners necessitates further exploration. This study aims to address this concern by examining the responses of first-year college students to English conversation classes in general education curriculum, both before and after the pandemic. Through this analysis, this study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the effects of the pandemic on EFL learning, self-evaluation, anxiety, and confidence.
3. Methods

This study employs a comparative research design to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on EFL learning experiences. The research compares two groups of first-year college students from different time periods, specifically those enrolled in EFL conversation classes in the spring of 2018 and 2023. This design allows for the examination of potential variations in students’ learning experiences before and after the onset of the pandemic.

3.1. Research Participants

The target population for this study consists of first-year college students who have enrolled in English classes during their first semester in the spring. The university’s regulations mandate that all students complete a minimum of 4 credits in English courses as part of their general education curriculum to graduate. The majority of students opt to take these courses during their first year of studies. For this study, surveys, self-evaluations, and academic performance data were administered to students in three sections of English conversation classes, which were randomly selected from English classes in the general education curriculum for both the years 2023 and 2018, resulting in a total of 131 participants, as presented in Table 1.

Within these groups, 69 students were first-year college students who enrolled in English conversation classes in 2023 after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, there were 72 students in the three English conversation classes for the random samples of the spring semester of 2023. However, it’s important to note that three of these students were seniors retaking the class to meet their graduation requirements. As a result, these three students were excluded from the research survey, self-evaluation, and academic performance analysis. The analysis was conducted using data from the remaining 69 first-year college students for the 2023 samples to maintain objectivity in the study. It is essential to mention that there were students absent at the time of conducting surveys and self-evaluations in each class, and the total number of participants for data collection was 61, which is eight fewer than the initially recorded total number of participants.

Additionally, three English conversation classes from the year 2018 were randomly chosen for comparison, comprising a total of 62 students who had enrolled before the pandemic’s outbreak. However, one student did not complete the self-evaluation, resulting in the survey and academic performance analysis being conducted with 62 participants and the self-evaluation with 61. The author consistently conducted various studies focusing on EFL university students over the extended period. During the spring semester of 2018, data was collected through surveys and evaluations to examine both the affective and linguistic aspects of EFL first-year college students. Importantly, the data from 2018 has not been utilized in any research publications due to the unexpected pandemic. This data has consequently become available for use in comparative research involving first-year college students from a different time period following the onset of the pandemic.

The collected data represents responses obtained from randomly selected samples of students, ensuring that the target population, consisting of first-semester first-year college students, is well represented. This careful selection process significantly enhances the generalizability of the research findings, as the participants chosen mirror the broader population of first-year college students, affording the research conclusion greater representativeness and validity despite the relatively modest sample size.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Research Participants’ Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For survey</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For self-evaluation</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For academic performance analysis</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This method facilitates a meaningful comparison between students who experienced EFL learning before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the goal of uncovering differences in their EFL learning experiences and attitudes.

3.2. Research Materials and Processes

The primary data collection for this study employed a comprehensive approach, incorporating surveys, self-evaluations, and academic performance grades. Administered during the 2nd to 3rd weeks of the semester, the survey comprised of nine questions, using five-level Likert scales. It focused on aspects of students’ anxiety, confidence, and attitude toward EFL learning (see Table 2). The construction of these survey questions drew inspiration from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) identified by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). Nine questions were extracted from the FLCAS, and additional vocabulary was incorporated to align with the specific goals of this study.

Concurrently with the survey, students engaged in self-evaluation, assessing their proficiency across eight English language skills on a numerical scale ranging from zero (indicating the lowest proficiency) to ten (indicating the highest proficiency). This numerical scale provides a familiar grading system (such as perfect scores of 10 or 100), facilitating a more comprehensive and objective self-evaluation for students. The detailed self-evaluation questions and the corresponding numerical scale are outlined in Table 3.

The academic performance grades, constituting the third component of data collection, were obtained after each semester’s final evaluation. This tripartite approach facilitated the exploration of first-year college students’ EFL learning experiences. Table 4 illustrated the weightings for each evaluation method, breaking down the contribution of attendance, class attitude and participation, assignments, midterm exam, and final exam to the overall academic achievement.

For this study, Cronbach’s alpha was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the surveys and Table 3

### Survey Questions Regarding English Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>Survey rating scale</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I worry about making mistakes when using English in class</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I feel anxious and frustrated when I use English in class</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have confidence in English writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I have confidence in English speaking</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I have confidence in English presentation</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I feel positive about taking English lectures or learning English</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I will continue learning English</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I will continue using English</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I know methods of English learning and making outputs</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SD-Strongly Disagree, D-Disagree, N-Neither Agree nor Disagree, A-Agree, SA-Strongly Agree
A higher Cronbach’s alpha value, as presented in Table 5, typically above 0.7, indicates a greater internal consistency among the items. This suggests that the items reliably measure the same construct. The reliability analysis, utilizing Cronbach’s alpha, ensures that the questions in the surveys, self-evaluations, and academic performance gradings within this study serve as reliable measures of the respective constructs they aim to assess. This enhances the validity and reliability of the research findings in the study.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The data collected from the surveys, self-evaluations, and academic performance gradings were analyzed to obtain a comparative and comprehensive understanding of English language learning among first-year college students, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study initiated the analysis using EXCEL 2019 for descriptive statistics, summarizing students’ responses, examining central tendencies, and discerning variations in the data. This process involved calculating reliability values, means, medians, standard deviations, percentiles, and frequency distributions for survey items, English proficiency self-evaluation scores, and actual academic performance grades.

Subsequently, independent samples t-tests were employed for comparative analyses to evaluate differences in anxiety, confidence, and attitudes toward EFL learning between the pre-COVID and post-COVID groups for each item, with reported $t$ and $p$ values. Moreover, independent samples t-tests were applied to explore variations in academic performance grades between these two groups.

### 4. Results and Discussion

An initial assumption of this study was that students’ responses to EFL learning post-COVID-19 would lean towards a predominantly negative outlook, reflecting a more passive approach compared to their pre-pandemic counterparts. Surprisingly, an analysis of the survey and self-evaluation responses of first-year college students regarding EFL learning after COVID-19 revealed predominantly positive sentiments. However, a closer examination of the data unveiled a wide range of responses, highlighted by high standard deviations across survey and self-evaluation items. This suggests a considerable disparity between students who responded positively and those who reported negative experiences in EFL learning environment during the pandemic.

#### 4.1. Survey Responses

Table 6 displays the outcomes of the data analysis for first-year college students survey responses in 2018 and 2023, focusing on worry, anxiety, confidence, and attitude.

The comparison of survey responses between 2018 and 2023 unveils crucial insights into the evolving perceptions and attitudes of first-year college students regarding English language learning, particularly in the post-COVID-19 period. Similar patterns of responses were noted for anxiety, and confidence in some English skills between first-year college students from 2018 and 2023.
However, several survey questions (5, 6, 7, 8, and 9) revealed statistically significant differences, indicating noteworthy shifts in students’ perspectives and behaviors.

Regarding the survey question addressing positivity in English learning (#6), a significant increase in positivity towards English learning was observed from 2018 ($M = 3.403$) to 2023 ($M = 4.025$), marking a noteworthy finding ($p < 0.001$). This substantial increase implies that students, despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, have developed a more favorable perspective on their English learning experiences. This shift can be attributed to various factors, including adaptation to online learning methodologies.

For the questions addressing continuous learning and using of English (#7 & 8), a notable increase was observed. Scores significantly increased from 2018 ($M = 2.000$) to 2023 ($M = 2.672$) ($p < 0.001$) for the survey question 7 and from 2018 ($M = 1.887$) to 2023 ($M = 2.541$) ($p < 0.001$) for the question 8. This enhancement in continuous learning and using of English reflects a proactive approach among students in sustaining their language skills. This positive change could be linked to increased self-directed learning practices during the pandemic, influenced by a recognition of the practical applications of English in various aspects of academic and personal life.

The question regarding familiarity with English learning methods also signifies a growing awareness among students regarding effective strategies for learning the English language. Notably, there was a marked increase in the scores for the question about knowing English learning methods, advancing from 2018 ($M = 2.048$) to 2023 ($M = 2.541$) ($p = 0.001$). This positive change could be attributed to various factors, such as increased exposure to diverse learning resources, improved self-assessment practices, and the integration of technology in English language learning. It reflects a proactive effort on the part of students to understand and employ effective methods for acquiring proficiency in the English language.

These results highlight a positive shift in students’ attitudes and commitment to various aspects of English learning from 2018 to 2023, emphasizing improvements in positivity, continuous learning and use of English, along with an increased understanding of English learning methods. The observed positive shifts in English learning among first-year college students from 2018 to 2023 may indicate adaptability in response to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Table 6, the data analysis unveiled significant differences in several survey questions between the years 2018 and 2023. A closer examination of the survey results, with categorization into subgroups, revealed noteworthy observations, particularly regarding anxiety (questions 1 and 2). In 2018, the average anxiety level was 3.508 with a standard deviation of 1.032, whereas in 2023, the average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>2023</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Worry about making mistakes</td>
<td>3.532</td>
<td>1.082</td>
<td>3.541</td>
<td>1.026</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>.963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Anxious when using English in class</td>
<td>3.484</td>
<td>0.987</td>
<td>3.158</td>
<td>1.079</td>
<td>1.739</td>
<td>.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Confidence in Writing</td>
<td>2.242</td>
<td>0.824</td>
<td>2.508</td>
<td>0.906</td>
<td>-1.706</td>
<td>.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Confidence in Speaking</td>
<td>2.339</td>
<td>0.829</td>
<td>2.615</td>
<td>0.887</td>
<td>-1.784</td>
<td>.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Confidence in Presentation</td>
<td>2.048</td>
<td>0.858</td>
<td>2.631</td>
<td>0.903</td>
<td>-3.670</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Positivity in English Learning</td>
<td>3.403</td>
<td>0.914</td>
<td>4.025</td>
<td>0.710</td>
<td>-4.216</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Continuous Learning of English</td>
<td>2.000</td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td>2.672</td>
<td>1.044</td>
<td>-3.984</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Continuous Use of English</td>
<td>1.887</td>
<td>0.630</td>
<td>2.541</td>
<td>0.886</td>
<td>-4.709</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Knowing English Learning Methods</td>
<td>2.048</td>
<td>0.711</td>
<td>2.541</td>
<td>0.941</td>
<td>-3.271</td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$
was 3.351, accompanied by a standard deviation of 1.066. This suggests a slightly diminished average anxiety level among first-year college students in 2023 compared to 2018.

Turning to confidence (questions 3, 4, 5), the 2018 average was 2.210 with a standard deviation of 0.841. Conversely, in 2023, the average rose to 2.585 with a standard deviation of 0.895, indicating a slightly higher average confidence level among first-year college students in 2023. However, similar to anxiety, the improvement in confidence did not exhibit a significant difference.

Regarding attitudes toward EFL learning (questions 6, 7, 8, 9), the 2018 average was 2.335 with a standard deviation of 0.988. In contrast, for 2023, the average increased to 2.945 with a standard deviation of 1.095. This implies a slightly positive attitude toward EFL learning among first-year college students in 2023. However, as indicated by the standard deviations, there was a bit of polarization in attitudes.

Given the relatively modest sample size, a more detailed examination of the frequency of student response patterns was undertaken, and the distribution patterns are illustrated in Figure 1.

---

**Figure 1**

*Distribution Patterns of First-year College Students Survey Responses with Significant Changes between 2018 and 2023*
4.2. Self-evaluation

Following the survey, first-year college students in 2023 demonstrated notable improvement in some aspects of English language proficiency. Regarding self-evaluation among first-year college students, the overall average in 2018 was 4.548 with a standard deviation of 1.980. In contrast, the average in 2023 increased to 5.159 with a standard deviation of 2.538, indicating higher self-confidence among first-year college students in 2023. However, as implied by the standard deviations, there was a significant polarization in self-evaluation among students in 2023 compared to those in 2018.

Nonetheless, specific data results did not attain statistical significance, particularly in listening, writing, speaking, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary skills. Notably, the only statistically significant improvement was observed in reading and reading aloud, with both \( p \)-values below 0.05. Table 7 presents the results of the analysis of self-evaluation data for first-year college students.

The analysis of self-evaluation data revealed significant differences in reading and reading aloud skills between the years 2018 and 2023. Due to the relatively modest sample size, a more in-depth examination of the frequency of student response patterns was also conducted, and the distribution patterns are illustrated in Figure 2.

Upon comparing first-year college students self-evaluation data from 2018 and 2023, it can be observed that in 2023, there was an increase in the number of students who rated themselves with the highest score of 10 in certain categories. Notably, first-year college students self-evaluation of their English proficiency displayed a significant increase compared to the pre-COVID-19 era, particularly in the Reading and Reading Aloud categories.

Interestingly, the number of students who rated their English proficiency with the lowest score of zero also increased across all categories in 2023. These changes may indicate that students either underestimate their English skills in these categories or recognize the need for improvement. It could suggest difficulties in the English learning and evaluation process or a realization of the necessity for improvement. However, a similar pattern emerged with high standard deviations, indicating substantial variance in self-evaluation scores among students.

Based on the given data, it becomes evident that in 2023, student evaluations tend to display a polarized distribution. This indicates that post-COVID-19 first-year college students exhibit a distinct polarization when evaluating their English language proficiency. It is clear that the post-COVID-19 era witnessed a noticeable divide between students who rated their proficiency highly and those who assigned lower scores. In other words, some students hold their specific English abilities in high regard, while others underestimate their English proficiency. This polarization in evaluation reflects a significant divergence in students’ perceptions of EFL English learning and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Evaluation</th>
<th>2018 M</th>
<th>2018 SD</th>
<th>2023 M</th>
<th>2023 SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>5.085</td>
<td>2.152</td>
<td>5.631</td>
<td>2.598</td>
<td>-1.252</td>
<td>.213</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>5.254</td>
<td>1.862</td>
<td>6.066</td>
<td>2.568</td>
<td>-1.986</td>
<td>.049*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>4.220</td>
<td>1.858</td>
<td>4.590</td>
<td>2.532</td>
<td>-0.914</td>
<td>.363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>4.458</td>
<td>1.851</td>
<td>4.852</td>
<td>2.351</td>
<td>-1.024</td>
<td>.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Aloud</td>
<td>4.949</td>
<td>2.208</td>
<td>6.033</td>
<td>2.456</td>
<td>-2.539</td>
<td>.012*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>4.576</td>
<td>1.976</td>
<td>5.344</td>
<td>2.421</td>
<td>-1.900</td>
<td>.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>3.879</td>
<td>1.826</td>
<td>4.344</td>
<td>2.394</td>
<td>-1.195</td>
<td>.235</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>3.949</td>
<td>1.686</td>
<td>4.410</td>
<td>2.411</td>
<td>-1.216</td>
<td>.227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( *p < .05 \)
Before and After COVID-19: A Comparative Analysis of EFL Learning Responses Among First-year College Students

Figure 2

Distribution Patterns of First-year College Students Self-evaluation in English Proficiency between 2018 and 2023

Note: 0-Worst, 10-Best

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experiences post-COVID-19. It implies that post-COVID first-year college students perceive their abilities differently within certain English proficiency categories, and their personal learning experiences contribute to varying self-evaluations. Therefore, it is crucial to consider each student's unique abilities, the variability in self-evaluation, and how to bridge the gap between individuals.

4.3. Academic performance

Figure 3 illustrates a comparison of academic performance grade distributions between 2018 and 2023. The average score in 2018 was 85.45, whereas in 2023, it decreased to 81.78. The comparison of these first-year college students’ academic performance grades indicates that the number of first-year college students scoring 80 or higher did not significantly differ between pre- and post-COVID-19 classes. However, there appears to be a tendency for lower average scores in 2023 compared to 2018.

Notably, there was a substantial increase in the number of students receiving grades lower than 70 (D or below) after the pandemic. The percentage of students with grades lower than 70 (D or below) increased from a mere 3% in 2018 to 11% in 2023, indicating a higher proportion of students with lower grades after the pandemic. While multiple factors may contribute, one notable factor is the observed increase in absenteeism among first-year college students of 2023. This suggests a lasting impact, influencing attendance scores, class attitudes and participation, assignment submissions, and even exam performance. The rise in absenteeism and lower academic scores in 2023 underscores challenges faced by students in the post-COVID-19 era. This statistical shift emphasizes a significant divergence in the English learning experiences of these first-year college students post-COVID-19.

4.4. Overall Discussion

Drawing on insights from previous research, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on EFL learning, influencing first-year college students in various ways. The literature consistently emphasizes the role of psychological factors in shaping EFL learning outcomes, a theme reinforced by this study. This study reveals a notable divergence between self-evaluations and academic performance, highlighting the pandemic's influence on the perspectives and experiences of first-year college students.

The increased number of first-year college students receiving lower scores in 2023 may be linked to external factors, with the COVID-19 pandemic being a potential influential factor. Disruptions caused by the pandemic, such as the transition to online and hybrid learning, may have presented challenges for some students, impacting their academic performance. While some students adapted well, maintaining or even improving their performance, as indicated in the survey responses and self-evaluations, others encountered difficulties adjusting to new learning formats. Those who maintained confidence in their English abilities likely navigated the changes effectively, demonstrating resilience in the face of challenges.

On the contrary, students who rated their skills lower might have encountered greater difficulties in adapting to online or hybrid learning. The increase in the number of first-year college students receiving below 70 (D or
Before and After COVID-19: A Comparative Analysis of EFL Learning Responses Among First-year College Students

below), and even being absent from their classes (as previously mentioned in the research participants section when explaining surveys and self-evaluations numbers) in 2023 emphasizes the importance of providing tailored academic support to students who may be struggling, especially in the context of evolving learning environments.

Moreover, the increase in absenteeism and lower academic scores highlights the need for the reevaluation of teaching methodologies and beyond. This could involve refining not only online teaching methods but also enhancing support systems, providing resources, and even motivation to help students navigate the complexities of altered learning conditions.

Upon concluding the analysis of the research data, a compelling question emerges. Surprisingly, students in 2023 rated their confidence and self-evaluation in general English learning higher than their counterparts in 2018. However, academic performance grades exhibited a declined average compared to 2018. This prompts an inquiry into the factors contributing to the increased confidence and self-evaluation of English abilities among first-year college students in 2023.

Given that the survey and self-evaluation in this study were completed within the first two to three weeks of each semester, it appears that students had limited experience of learning English at the college level. Considering the prevalence of online and hybrid learning formats for English during the COVID-19 era in their secondary education, students may have been accustomed to a learning environment that involved more independent study. This likely resulted in a lack of substantial exchange and competition in English learning with peer students. Consequently, it is plausible that students found it challenging to assess their own English proficiency objectively. The absence of significant comparisons with peers who excelled may have naturally led them to an improvement in their confidence in EFL learning.

By acknowledging the challenges illuminated by this study, educators and institutions can proactively adapt their approaches to foster a more conductive and supportive learning environment for first-year college students in the post-COVID-19 era. Considering the limited research on the psychological factors of EFL college learners before and after the pandemic in previous studies, this study, involving an examination and comparison of first-year college students’ responses to EFL learning before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, appears to hold significant value. It has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the field of EFL education. Furthermore, this study is considered meaningful and valuable for individuals engaged in the field of education in the post-pandemic era.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on EFL learning and attitudes among first-year college students, both before and after the pandemic. Initially, the study assumed that students’ responses post-COVID-19 would lean towards negativity, indicating a more passive approach to learning compared to their pre-pandemic counterparts. However, an analysis of the survey and self-evaluation responses of first-year college students regarding EFL learning after the COVID-19 revealed positive sentiments, with high standard deviations across survey and self-evaluation items.

Interestingly, there was an increase in the number of students who self-rated themselves with the highest score of 10 in the Reading and Reading Aloud categories in 2023. Conversely, the number of students who self-rated their English proficiency with the lowest score of zero also increased across all categories in 2023.

This divergence in self-evaluations highlights the impact of the pandemic on first-year college students’ perspectives and experiences. Those who maintained confidence in their English abilities despite disruptions may have adapted well to the changes in the learning environment, demonstrating resilience in the face of challenges. On the contrary, students who rated their skills lower might have encountered greater difficulties in
transitioning to online or hybrid learning. This pattern was also evident in the academic performance grades. The increased absence rate and the tripled number of first-year college students receiving grades below D in 2023 compared to 2018 further reinforce these observations.

However, the study acknowledges certain limitations, including the sample size and the focus on a specific context. Future research should consider expanding the sample and exploring additional factors that may influence the psychological impact of EFL learning in diverse educational settings. Incorporating open-ended questions in the future study could provide deeper insights into the specific challenge students faced during the shift to online and offline learning.

Overall, these findings suggest that students who experienced COVID-19 disruptions during high school exhibited diverse responses to college-level EFL learning. The distinct contrast between first-year college students from 2018 and 2023, as well as among first-year college students in 2023 between those with well-adapted abilities and those facing difficulties, emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing these differences. Tailored approaches are crucial for providing effective support and guidance to all students, recognizing and nurturing the strengths of those who have thrived despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study may contribute to bridging the gap in addressing these differences and difficulties among students after the pandemic.

References


Zhang, J., Ding, Y., Yang, X., Zhong, J., Qiu, X., Zou, Z., &

코로나 이전과 이후의 EFL 학습
- 대학교 신입생들의 교양 영어 학습 반응 비교

정신시아명희
인제대학교 리버럴아츠칼리지 자유전공학부, 조교수

초록

우선, 2018년에 대형의 영향을 받지 않은 62명의 대학 1학년 학생들과 2023년에 대학 1학년으로 대학 생활을 시작한 69명의 학생들의 응답을 대조하였다. 본 연구 초기에 코로나 이후의 신입생들에게 부정적인 영향이 있었을 것으로 전제했음에도 불구하고, 설문과 자기 평가 데이터 분석에서는 2023년도 신입생들에게서 주로 긍정적인 반응이 나타났다. 특히, 영어학습에 대한 긍정성이 크게 증가하는 변화가 보였다. 그러나 2023년 신입생들 사이에서도 영어능력과 관련된 자기 평가에서는 극단적인 분포가 나타나면서 그 표준편차가 컸다.


이러한 차이를 인식하고 대응하는 것은 교육자와 대학이 다른 방향의 지원이 필요한 학생들을 도움 뿐만 아니라 그들의 강점을 옹호하는 데 있어서 매우 중요한 접근이라고 사료된다. 본 연구는 코로나 이후 다시 학교 생활로 돌아온 학생들의 이러한 차이와 어려움을 이해하는 데 기여하고자 한다.

주제어: 코로나 19, 대학 신입생, 교양영어학습, 설문 및 자기 평가, 학업 성취, 학습의 어려움