

## Exploring the role of online discussion forums in endorsing Egyptian undergraduates' EFL learning

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**Abstract:** eLearning Management systems (eLMS) are software applications used in universities worldwide to implement specific educational goals. eLearning platforms have several features that support traditional Face to Face (FTF) teaching and provide valuable opportunities for independent, self-paced learning. One of these features is the Online Discussion Forums (ODFs). This research paper investigates the role of ODFs in endorsing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning by examining students' perceptions of its accessibility, peer/instructor interaction, assessment criteria, and discussion topics. The paper also investigates the influence of gender on students' perceptions of the role of ODFs. This is a non-experimental research design, and 108 Egyptian undergraduates completed a semi-structured questionnaire of five dimensions. Percentages of frequency were calculated and quantitatively analysed via the SPSS. Research findings revealed male and female students' positive perceptions of using ODFs in their learning process. Results also revealed that students highly perceived choice of topics and assessment as crucial factors for successful learning via ODFs, followed by peer/instructor interaction and accessibility of the tool. Implications for further research include employing ODFs to improve project-based teaching in different disciplines.

**Keywords:** *Critical analysis and decision-making, Online discussion forums, Peer/Instructor interaction, Topics and assessment, EFL reading and writing,*

### 1. Introduction

eLearning Management Systems (eLMSs) are increasingly used in universities and corporations to facilitate eLearning processes. These platforms provide electronic features for communication and interactive learning (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2015; Zekry & McKee, 2021). Among these features are Online Discussion Forums (ODFs); ODFs are web-based applications that connect people with the same interests and mindsets. In higher education, they endorse course-related online discourse among students engaged in distance learning. It has been utilised as an eLearning platform to archive course materials, students' posts, or links and to document students' activities and contributions (ABDUL RABU & HARUN, 2018; Alzahrani, 2016; Jamalai & Krish, 2021; Lee, 2017). ODFs harmonise with the modern educational philosophy because they are technological means to facilitate communication and enrich the process of knowledge construction. Students can engage in ongoing threaded discussions at their convenience and interact with their peers by posting replies or sharing resources. This magnifies the role of ODF as a necessary technology-mediated tool that enhances students' collaborative and successful learning. Students can reflect on their learning, build arguments, share information and critically analyse in a frame set up by their lecturers or instructors who act as the discussion moderator. Thus, ODFs are considered convenient learning environments for independent and peer-to-peer learning.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL), ODFs cater for extra foreign language practice outside the classroom as students would employ the tool for communication and completing individual and group assignments. Shy, hesitant learners or others with lower language proficiency levels can have both the chance and time to process the language to express themselves clearly and freely without feeling intimidated (Gasmi, 2022). There are opportunities to participate in meaningful activities and discussions at their own pace and convenience, not dominated by other classmates (Akmal, 2017; Bedi, 2008). This would eventually contribute to endorsing students' foreign language skills, higher-order thinking processes, and problem-solving and interpersonal capabilities crucial for their future professional careers (Morsi & Assem, 2021a; Oliveri & Markle, 2017).

According to the Sustainable Learning Framework proposed by Diana Woolis (2005), deep, effective learning should involve having intertwined capabilities, mastering solid academic background, thinking critically to overcome challenges, and working collaboratively (Woolis, 2018). This would lead to effective communication with others, self-direction of one's learning, and development of an academic mindset, i.e., "a belief in one's ability to grow." The key to sustainable learning is not to graduate and receive a certificate but to grant students unforgettable learning experiences that broaden their minds, enrich their professional knowledge, improve their skills, and change their attitudes (Sung et al., 2020). Further, the interaction between learners and inanimate objects using emerging technologies can positively affect learners' behaviour and boost education for sustainable development (Ghorbanpour, 2013). Accordingly, ODFs can positively impact students' behaviour toward achieving sustainable development goals of education. This research work aims at examining the role of ODFs in promoting EFL learning by examining Cairene students' perceptions of these factors: accessibility of ODF as a learning tool; peer/instructor interaction; and finally, the topics and assessment. Further, the influence of gender on students' perceptions of the role of ODFs will also be investigated.

The paper is divided into five sections. It begins with the introduction, the literature review, and theoretical frameworks are presented afterwards. The next two sections are the research methodology followed by the analysis and interpretation of results. The last section includes conclusions, limitations, and implications for further research work.

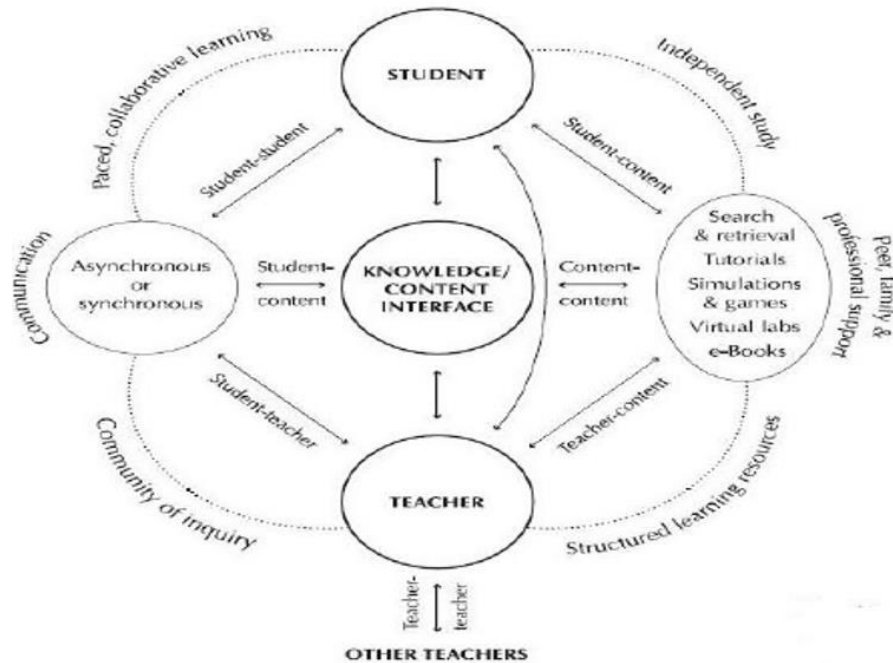
## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

The present research is based on two theoretical frameworks: the social constructivism theory by Vygotsky (1962) and the interaction-based eLearning model developed by Anderson (2003). Vygotsky developed the social constructivism theory. According to Vygotsky, the theory focuses on interactive learning as a complex phenomenon between students and teachers (Vygotsky, 1962). Teachers and students go through practical experiences in which they reflect and work collaboratively to find solutions to problems. Going through all these practices is the foundation of the learning process described by Vygotsky as the Zone of Proximal Development (Akayoğlu, 2019). The second model is Anderson's interactive eLearning model. In this model, Anderson highlights the significant impact of eLearning and internet-based applications on learning progression (Anderson, 2003). It is a model based on the rigorous work of Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999) (Bransford et al., 2000).

Anderson (2003) argues that the confluence of four-dimensional overlying lenses could lead to a successful online learning experience; these lenses are the sustainable aspects behind the model and rely on four centres: *community, knowledge, learner and assessment*. Those four-dimensional, overlapping lenses benefit from all the facilities and characteristics of web-based technologies and all media applications to provide a convenient environment for online learning for all learners. He signifies the role of "self-paced" independent learning and, most importantly, the interplay of all forms of students' learning. In his model, the core interplay between students and teachers and the content is the focus for successful learning. Numerous educational theories fully comprehended and documented such assumption, specifically in Vygotsky's constructivism theory.

In trying to prove the validity of Anderson's theorem, Miyazoe & Anderson (2015) conducted empirical research with 236 students from different university settings (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2015). Their research findings confirmed students' real satisfaction with a student-content interaction in a blended course in which effective knowledge-oriented content was used for online learning; they also highly perceived student-teacher and student-student FTF interaction in a "language-oriented course". Most of the students realised essential interaction factors for successful asynchronous online courses, and therefore the reliability of the theorem had been evident. Figure 1 demonstrates several interactions that occur on eLearning, flowing between learners, teachers and content. Anderson (2003) believes that eLearning environments should be all student-centred with respect to the following: instruction, content, community, and assessment (Daneshgar et al., 2012).



**Figure 1.**  
Interaction-based model of eLearning.  
Source: (Daneshgar et al., 2012).

## 2.2. Overview of Related Literature

According to cognitive learning theories, a discussion forum is chosen as a pedagogical tool for active students' engagement in threaded discussions about course content to "construct their own deeper and lasting learning". Literature on ODFs has revealed its significant role in promoting learning through collaboration and the construction of knowledge (Akmal, 2017; Alzahrani, 2016; Kelly & McNair, 2021; Lee, 2017; Oliveri & Markle, 2017; Sholihah, 2017). ODFs can assist students in building "positive" study habits" (Zekry & McKee, 2021) and attain better course grades by following up on saved course content, extra resources or quality arguments shared by peers and moderators (Biriya & Thomas, 2014). Students' cognitive processing is activated when they engage in critical analysis tasks in which they reflect on their thoughts to the audience. In experimental research conducted by Jamali & Krish (2018), students favoured structured threaded discussions because of clear instructions and stated guidelines for participation and collaboration among group members. Contribution to these discussions has improved students' learning and attitudes towards ODFs (Jamal & Krish, 2021).

Bliuc et al. (2010) found that students who perceived ODFs as platforms to engage in discussions that deepen their understanding of theories and concepts outperformed students who only perceived

them as platforms to receive instructions and complete their assignments (Bliuc et al., 2010). The researcher conducted classroom active research to examine the development of EFL learners' writing skills in middle school in retelling a story (Sholihah, 2017). Students went through different stages of writing, such as brainstorming, pre-writing and drafting, and then were instructed to post the final products on ODFs to receive feedback from their teachers and classmates. After checking the researcher's field notes, students' responses to the survey and their grades on the writing tasks, it was found that the percentage of participation contributed to the success of this learning experience via the ODFs, as 82% were enthusiastic about arranging for meetings via ODF to discuss the assignments, 81.4% scored very good grades in the final writing task, and 84% agreed that ODF contributes to substantial progress in their writing skills (Sholihah, 2017). To conclude, this research aims to understand Egyptian students' perspectives on the role of ODFs in endorsing their critical analysis skills and foreign language reading and writing skills.

There has been a growing use of ODFs in Japanese educational institutions for two decades. ODFs are regarded by the Japanese system as tools to establish meaningful connections among students learning online. Few studies have been conducted in Japan in relation to students' perceptions of discussion boards. Hirata & Hirata (2013) conducted one such study (Hirata & Hirata, 2013). The research examined novice users' perceptions of discussion forums in completing collaborative writing tasks. The findings suggested that students have greatly benefited from such a tool to develop their critical thinking abilities and solve problems. The results showed that students have also become more responsible and involved in all steps of the writing process. The study concluded that in the Japanese system, integrating discussion forums in relevant course discourse could encourage full participation in class activities on the part of the students.

### *2.3. Research Significance and Research Questions*

Despite the previously mentioned benefits of ODFs, for many students, as per instructors' reports, they only represent platforms to post essential announcements, store resources and materials of course content and submit assignments (Krasnova & Ananjev, 2015). It has been noticed that discussions often fall flat because of the small number of students or little contribution on their part. Students' numbers were a factor that could make a discussion lively and interactive or fall flat. Sometimes time constraints because of examinations period or heavy workloads delay posts or ineffective replies (Gasmi, 2022; Ghorbanpour, 2013; Nielsen, 2013; Wang, 2011). The fewer the number of participants who contribute to the discussion, the fewer opportunities for engagement and interaction. Taking much time to respond to students' posts by moderators can cause demotivation. Students may consider the discussion forum a platform for assignment completion or disregard the whole assignment tasks because they are irrelevant to course content or evaluated according to specific assessment rubrics (Biriya & Thomas, 2014).

Moreover, several studies have investigated the role of ODF in developing learners' cognitive engagement and knowledge construction, while few have examined their effects on promoting learners' reflective thinking and writing skills; writing skills and reflective thinking were seldom investigated as the dependent variables in North Africa in general (ABDUL RABU & HARUN, 2018) and in Egypt in particular, compared to studies conducted in Asia, the western world and few ones in Arab countries in the Middle East. In Egypt, the culture of using threaded discussion is not common, especially in learning foreign languages, because of the general preference for having these conversations FTF in the classroom (Morsi & Assem, 2021b).

As a reaction to these concerns, further research into the effectiveness of ODFs in different cultures as tools for effective independent and collaborative learning is advised to identify the best teaching and learning tactics to boost active participation and engagement. The results of this study can contribute to the current literature on the topic by discussing the most influential factors that affect the use of ODFs as a learning tool based on students' perspectives. The participants in the study are Cairenes, who receive education at a university in Egypt. In Egypt, most students who receive education from public high schools' background are not familiar with ODFs; students in international schools mostly use

eLearning to store course content and send inquiries. In the private university setting where the researchers conducted this study, ODFs have rarely been used to complete collaborative tasks, after-class assignments or engaging in content-related threaded discussions. They are mainly used for posting announcements and relevant course materials. Most English instructors in the university are not motivated to use ODFs for activities because very little contribution from students is always reported.

However, after the spread of COVID-19, all technological features of eLearning have been explored. Employing ODFs was highly recommended by the upper management, especially those of the role of ODFs. It has been a valuable chance to use its various options to accomplish learning outcomes in diverse subject areas. This could be successfully achieved by looking into the most influential factors that would probably maximise its effectiveness in the learning process from students' perspectives. The following are the research questions.

1. *Do male and female Egyptian students perceive ODFs as a convenient platform for learning EFL?*
2. *What are the most influential factors that affect the role of ODFs in promoting students' EFL learning?*

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

Participants in the study are 108 freshmen enrolled in the informatics and computer science faculty at an Egyptian private university. They are either eighteen or nineteen years old. In their first year, students take English language courses to enhance their proficiency in academic English to meet their faculty's requirements. A placement test was administered to determine students' competence in the English language based on the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). Usually, students' entry-level ranges between B1 to C1<sup>1</sup>. In the first week of the academic year, students filled out a consent form to be official participants in the study. The real aims of this research were not revealed to students; instead, they were informed that its purpose was to assess the usefulness of online tools and develop the course content.

Upon the completion of the first draft of the survey, eight students from Year 1 and Year 3 in other faculties, namely faculty of Engineering, Business Administration and Arts and Humanities, were asked to answer the questions to receive feedback about the design of the questions and whether they led students towards a specific response or not. After completing the survey, these students were interviewed to listen to their comments, which were considered in drafting the final version of the present study.

#### 3.2. Procedures

During the first six weeks of the treatment, students were instructed to contribute to general topics posted on the discussion forum regularly. They shared their opinions and supported them with reliable sources. The topics were relevant to the course content. Topics included benefits and drawbacks of mixed schools, online learning, women's rights, euthanasia, shopping and other interesting topics that students should read about before debating and writing argumentative essays or compare and contrast essays (Appendix 1, Fig. A1, A2 & A3). Although students' participation was not graded, an important announcement was made to alert students that their contribution to the discussion forums on eLearning was mandatory and would be registered as their online attendance to the course weekly. FTF discussions were held in weeks seven and eight. In the ninth week, students completed the survey but were informed that it aimed to assess the usefulness of online tools and develop the course content.

#### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

For collecting data, students were asked to complete a semi-structured questionnaire that the researchers designed based on the dimensions mentioned in Lee's (2017) and Tienne's (2000) (Lee, 2017;

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CEFR descriptors for language proficiency level<sup>1</sup>

Tiene, 2000). The questionnaire had twenty-one questions. Participants responded to 17 statements by choosing a response from a 5-Likert scale, starting from 1=strongly disagree to agree and 5=strongly agree. There were three questions: one question about participants' gender and two open-ended questions for reflection on the accessibility of ODFs and their preference of preferred discussion mode: FTF or online. The first draft of the questionnaire was pretested and piloted to eight students. This is an important step to avoid biased or unclear answers before collecting data. Students commented on the structure of the questions, and accordingly, some of the statements were modified (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009).

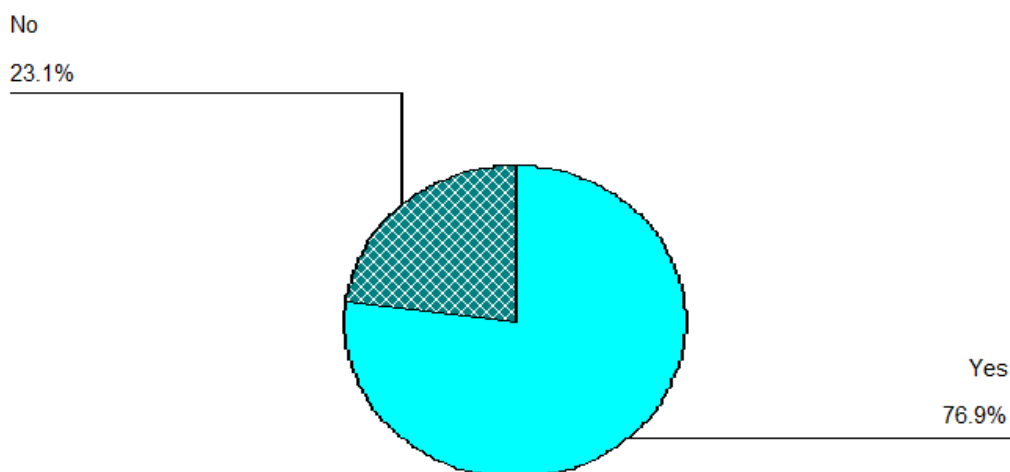
The questionnaire has five Dimensions (Ds): D1 (Accessibility of ODFs), D2 (Peer/Instructor Interaction), D3 (EFL Reading and Writing Skills), D4 (Critical Analysis & Decision-making skills) and D5 (Topics & Assessment). Participants had to choose a response from a 5-Likert scale. In the first part of the survey, students were asked about their gender and whether ODFs on e-learning can be accessed and used for posting replies, sharing materials and completing required assignments. In the second part, there were seventeen statements; students read the statements and chose from a scale ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree or strongly agree. One open-ended question ends the survey to collect information about whether students prefer online or FTF discussion; students should provide reasons for this preference. This study follows a non-experimental quantitative research design. Responses to the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively by calculating percentages. The SPSS 20 program was used to affirm the reliability and validity of the survey questions, besides analysing results quantitatively via independent t-test, One-Way ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and Linear regression.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This section displays the analysis of data collected from the questionnaire distributed to Egyptian undergraduates and discusses the findings to answer the research questions.

*Research Question 1: Do male and female Egyptian students perceive ODFs as a convenient platform for learning EFL?*

For checking the reliability and stability of the variables, Alpha Cronbach was used in the five dimensions for all responses of the total sample. A stability coefficient of 0.845 reflected high validity for the sample; the sample's coefficient also affirmed this, which equals 0.919. In **Figure 2**, responses to the Yes/No question about the accessibility of ODFs are illustrated.

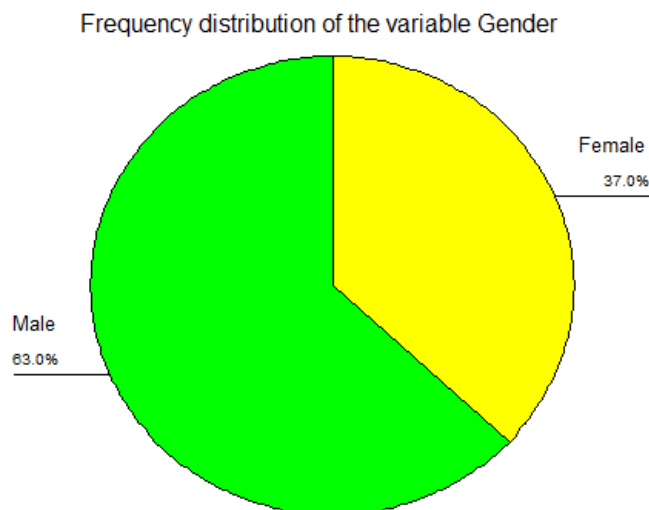


**Figure 2.**  
Perceptions of Accessibility of ODFs by the total sample.

In Figure 3, 76.9% of the students found that ODFs were easily accessible and posted replies and shared files, while 23.1% revealed that ODFs were not easily accessible. These findings were expected



since students of this modern age are digital literates. ODFs on eLearning resemble other social media platforms in how they post their comments and share material, hyperlinks, or videos with their classmates (Tiwary, 2020). Some students reported that they have become highly interested in the online features of eLearning as it represents a common place where they can discuss and share their concerns about related topics to their courses. In class, they may not have this time to think and share their queries; sometimes, they may feel embarrassed to ask these questions because they might seem pointless or have already been covered in the lecture. In this study, students appreciated the easy access of ODFs to course materials, recorded lectures, tutorials or YouTube videos related to their study online via their laptops or mobile phone with no need to browse other websites, which may distract them and waste their time.



**Figure 3.**  
Frequency Distribution of the variable gender.

The findings of this study emphasise previous research results that stressed the vital role of technology in providing quality education if the design of curricula allows for its effective integration into the course content (Matuga, 2009). This has been confirmed by other research findings (Akmal, 2017; Gasmi, 2022; Nielsen, 2013). For instance, in the exploratory study by Gasmi (2022), students at Qaboos University in Oman had positive perceptions of asynchronous forums in learning the English language (Gasmi, 2022). Students improved their social and critical reflection and behavioural and cognitive engagement skills. Yet, some challenges needed to be considered in designing and implementing tasks, such as writing effective replies, delaying posting, or reading all peers' posts thoroughly when time is tight due to studying for exams or being overwhelmed with other assignments. Thus, considering students' proficiency level, workload, and the design of adequate activities are important elements for effective learning via ODFs. In Nielsen's study (2013) among Japanese students, although most of the students were satisfied with using ODFs in their study, showing a significant increase in their participation and interactive responses to their peers, their motivation for contribution was affected by the workload, limited computer-skills, and most importantly by being unfamiliar to the social constructivism approach in learning via ODFs (Nielsen, 2013) (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
The Chi-square test between "Gender" and "Accessibility" Of ODFS.

Question	Chi-square	Contingency coefficient	P-value	Result
Do you find using Online Discussion Forums accessible on eLearning to find resources, post replies and share materials?	6.371	0.197	0.05*	Sig.

**Note:** \* Significant level 0.05.

Table 1 illustrates the findings of the Chi-square test that showed a relationship between gender and accessibility of using ODFs on eLearning in posting replies and materials. Significant differences were found between the two variables, with a Chi-square equal to 6.371 and a contingency coefficient equal to 0.197 at a p-value less than 0.05 for the benefit of female learners. This indicates that female students favoured using ODF than male students. Research has shown that female learners are usually more active on ODFs than males (Tsai et al., 2015). Their findings explained that female learners positively perceived their elaborative strategies in online asynchronous discussions. They actively contributed to various topics; however, in the FTF discussions, males and females contributed equally. Males tended to favour FTF discussions and perceived themselves as active contributors (Tsai et al., 2015). To investigate whether Egyptian male and female undergraduates positively perceived the role of ODFs, the independent t-test was used across all 5 questionnaire dimensions (Table 2).

**Table 2.**  
Comparison between males' and females' responses for the 5 dimensions.

Dimensions	Female n= 40		Male n= 68		t-value	p-value	Result
	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.			
D1	3.54	0.55	3.51	0.66	0.243	0.80	N. Sig.
D2	3.24	0.55	3.09	0.66	1.238	0.21	N. Sig.
D3	4.06	0.60	3.50	0.83	3.73	0.01*	Sig.
D4	4.04	0.68	3.56	0.82	3.101	0.01*	Sig.
D5	3.88	0.64	3.61	0.74	1.903	0.06	N. sig.
Total	3.75	0.41	3.45	0.61	2.739	0.01*	Sig.

**Note:** \* Significant level 0.05.

Results showed no significant differences between male and female learners in D2 ( $t=1.238$ ,  $p=0.21$ ). The same findings were found for D1 ( $t=0.243$ ,  $p=0.80$ ) and D5 ( $t=1.903$ ,  $p=0.06$ ). However, for D3 ( $t=3.73$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) and D4 ( $t=3.101$ ,  $p=0.01$ ), results revealed highly significant differences between the responses of male and female learners as female learners highly appreciated these effective roles of ODFs than their male counterparts with respect to these two dimensions. In Liu, Zhao & Hong (2021), gender differences in self-regulation among high school students as they learn online were investigated through three phases: preparatory, achievement and appraisal (Liu et al., 2021). Self-regulation strategies included good mood and time management, adapting strategies, asking for help, and self-assessment. The findings of their research showed better self-regulated strategies. Female learners scored higher on all three phases than male learners' scores. In Morsi & Assem (2021), findings again favoured female learners (Morsi & Assem, 2021a). They investigated the online collaborative work achievements of 141 students in an Egyptian university. Results of the independent t-test showed that "sole female" groups scored higher grades than mixed groups; the "sole-male" groups attained the lowest grades. It was concluded that female learners usually outperform male learners because they have better self-directed strategies, effective communication skills, and active online presence.



In Table 2, highly significant differences between male and female students in all five questionnaire dimensions with t-value ( $t=2.739$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) were reported for the benefit of females, highlighting their positive perception of the role of ODFs in their learning process. These findings affirmed the efficiency of ODFs. Guillier, Drundell & Ross (2008) examined the quality of peer interaction and critical reflection in the online and FTF modes of discussions among 55 students' responses (Guillier et al., 2008). It was found that peer interaction and critical reflection have significantly improved in online discussions. More students preferred the online mode of discussions because it gave them time to think and process the information before constructing a response. Other students also stated that the online mode was less "embarrassing and intimidating" for them. With respect to improving writing skills, Akmal (2017) offered significant evidence that confirmed the effectiveness of ODFs in developing Indonesian students' EFL writing skills (Akmal, 2017). 63 Indonesian took a pre-test and post-test before conducting the treatment employing ODFs. The results showed significant improvement in students' writing skills using "Brown's assessment writing rubric" regarding content, language, style, organisation of ideas, grammar and mechanics. Research findings showed significant improvements in mean scores from 76.47 in the pretest to 80.68 in the post-test.

In Asia, the same findings were revealed by Malaysian students learning English for specific purposes. It was observed that undergraduates in Malaysia used mostly the Malay language and avoided using the English language in class; only a few extroverted students used English throughout completing their tasks (Jamalai & Krish, 2021). The researchers conducted a project-based case study utilising ODF to examine whether it could aid "passive learners" of foreign languages. 26 Malaysian students participated in the research. Students replied to posted questions on the discussion forums and were instructed to write reflective journals about their experience using ODFs, and later were interviewed about their experience. The students highly appreciated the use of ODFs in their course, confirming that ODFs were an important tool to endorse crucial "21<sup>st</sup> century skills". They reported its positive role in improving their foreign language, self-confidence, discipline, leadership, time management and digital skills, and being an archive of references and documentation of their participation (Jamalai & Krish, 2021). It can be concluded that ODFs do play a key role in promoting foreign language learning.

*Research Question 2: What are the influential factors that affect the role of ODFs in promoting students' EFL learning?*

To answer the second research question about the factors that affect the role of ODFs in promoting EFL learning, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to find the relationship between D2 on D3 and D4 Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
Effect Of D2 On D3 And D4 using pearson correlation and liner regression.

Independent variables	$\beta$	T test		F. test		$R^2$
		Value	Sig.	Value	Sig.	
D3	0.493	5.841	0.01**	34.112	0.01**	24.3%
D4	0.502	5.975	0.01**	35.704	0.01**	25.2%

Note: \*\* Significant level 0.01

Findings showed a significant positive relationship between the independent variable D2 and the dependent variables D3 and D4. D2 was responsible for the total variation in the dependent variable D3 (24.3%). D2 was also responsible for the total variation of the dependent variable D4 with a higher percentage (25.2%). To test the quality of the regression model, the F-test was used. The F-value of D3 (34.112) and D4 (35.705) were found significant at a p-value of 0.01. The t-test was also used to test the significant effect of the independent variable D2 on D3 and D4. Results showed significant effect on D3 ( $t=5.841$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) and D4 ( $t=5.975$ ,  $p=0.01$ ). D2, thus, had almost the same significant effect on D3 and

D4 as the beta ( $\beta$ ) value (0.493 and 0.502, respectively). Biriya & Thomas (2014) confirmed this by examining all features available on ODFs that could contribute to effective student-teacher interaction and successful learning outcomes (Biriya & Thomas, 2014). These features include the forum's structure that allows for the availability of user groups and moderators, posting links, articles or documenting activities, and creating threads of discussion topics. Such features were highly perceived by Egyptian students in this study.

Furthermore, Abdul Rabu (2018), in his impact of ODFs on learning, pointed out that advanced thinking abilities such as effective analysis, intellectual reasoning, knowledge-building and commitment to the fulfilment of tasks were the most frequently selected targets for learning outcomes in many ODF studies (ABDUL RABU & HARUN, 2018). This highlights the importance of quality interaction and prompt responses by peers and instructors to motivate learners to engage actively in discussions with valuable contributions. In this study, as students participated in ODFs, they had ample time to read various resources and prepare their responses. They were advised to use formal language and check their contributions for language and structure before posting. Receiving immediate responses and feedback or affirmations from their peers and instructors probably motivated them to reflect on their peers' posts. This would probably enrich their knowledge and improve their foreign language and critical analysis abilities. Again, Abdul Rabu & Harun (2018) confirmed the significant relationship between D2, D3, and D4 in the systematic review (ABDUL RABU & HARUN, 2018). The review reported that many studies investigated intellectual reasoning, building solid academic knowledge and students' emotional engagement as the learning goals for using ODF, whereas "reflective thinking and writing skills" were rarely investigated. Thus, this study contributes to current research by revealing perceptions of Egyptian learners about developing their writing proficiency besides their reading and critical analysis abilities.

D5 also demonstrated a positive relationship with D2, D3 and D4 (Table 4). D5 caused total variation in D2 dependent variable (29.3%). D5 also affected the total variation of the dependent variables D3 and D4 with a higher percentage, i.e., 52% and 64.9%, respectively. To test the quality of the regression model, the F-test was used. The F-value of D2, D3 and D4 were highly significant; 43.836, 114.942, and 139.94 at p-value 0.01, respectively. The t-test was also used to test the significant effect of the independent variable D5 on D2, D3 and D4. Results showed significant effect on D2 (t=6.621, p=0.01), D3 (t=10.721, p=0.01) and D4 (t=13.994, p=0.01).

**Table 4.**

The effect of D5 On D2, D3 And D4 using Pearson correlation and linear regression.

Independent variables	$\beta$	T test		F test		R <sup>2</sup>
		Value	Sig.	Value	Sig.	
D2	0.541	6.621	0.01**	43.836	0.01**	29.3%
D3	0.721	10.721	0.01**	114.942	0.01**	52%
D4	0.805	13.994	0.01**	139.94	0.01**	64.9%

Note: \*\* Significant level 0.01

D5 had a highly significant effect on D2, D3 and D4, in which the  $\beta$  value was 0.541, 0.721 and 0.805, respectively. This signifies that it is crucial to relate activities on ODFs to course content topics, which are evaluated based on the frequency and quality of participation, as this would highly motivate students and enhance students' learning in different ways. Recent research has shown that the quality of learning on ODFs is associated with other factors other than its design; to achieve successful learning outcomes, adequate curricula with engaging activities should be developed besides adopting "teaching strategies" that meet all students' diversity and individual characteristics (ABDUL RABU & HARUN, 2018; Gasmi, 2022; Nielsen, 2013; Sholihah, 2017). Biriya & Thomas (2014) emphasise the role of a flexible asynchronous distance environment to support the community of online learners (Biriya & Thomas, 2014). They also recommend reciprocal interaction for reaching sustainable discussion and encouraging an advanced level of quality interaction. Students had the flexibility to post one of their

classmates or to all students or the moderator/ instructor. In the study, instructors were the moderators, and their presence did motivate learners to participate besides giving them clear instructions, adequate due dates to post to the forums, and not demanding long replies. Thus, using effective directed tactics on the instructors' side would be truly helpful in sustaining fruitful discussions.

In Table 5, a one-way ANOVA F-test was administered to find the differences among the dimensions.

**Table 5.**  
one-way Anova results about the differences among D1, D2 AND D5.

Variables	Dimensions	Mean	Std. deviation	F	P-value	Result
All sample's general opinion	D1	3.52	0.62	6.336	0.01*	Sig.
	D2	3.30	0.63			
	D5	3.60	0.68			

Note: \* Significant level 0.05

Significant differences were detected between D1, D2 and D5 according to the participants' opinions at an F-value of 6.336 and a significance level less than 0.05. The benefit of the dimension was found for D5, followed by D1 and D2 with means average 3.60, 3.52 and 3.30, correspondingly. D5 was highly favoured by the participants, followed by D1 and D2, with averages of 3.60, 3.52, and 3.30, respectively. These findings sound very logical as when students access ODF easily to discuss topics that are relevant to their discipline and interests; they would feel they are not wasting their time and thus would probably be willing to share their resources and viewpoints; it is a convenient asynchronous environment to ask for queries without feeling embarrassed. Once there is effective interaction with other participants, they will be more motivated to continue contributing to the discussion. Fatimah et al. (2019) demonstrated similar findings among graduate students taking advanced English sociolinguistics courses (Fatimah et al., 2019). Graduate students understood the role of ODFs in achieving their learning outcomes. Students shared arguments on various topics and commented on their colleagues' arguments and refutations. When researchers analysed students' comments, it was found that most were responsible for their learning and used the tool effectively to write clear, logical, and relevant ideas.

The above findings are also confirmed in the work of Bedi (2008), who found that "teacher's presence" was an indispensable factor for the success of online discussion boards (Bedi, 2008). In this research, the best practices of using discussion boards adopted by the faculty of the Operation Management Program in a university in Singapore were explored; results showed that the faculty's gauging of the academic content posted by students led to a high degree of satisfaction. Bedi (2008) categorised faculty postings into Corrective, Informative or Socratic. The Corrective category is used to curb students' deviation from the topic of the discussion, while the Informative posting category by the faculty would give more insights into the discussion; this would, in turn, arouse students' interest and result in quality reflection on their parts. The Socratic posting category would motivate students with questions to increase their participation in the discussion; Receiving prompt and quality feedback on students' posts contributed to the intensity of the discussion and effective learning.

Findings of One-Way ANOVA showed no statistically significant differences among D1, D2 and D5 with respect to the female sample's perceptions. F-value was 1.7740 at a p-value of more than 0.05 (Table 6). The three dimensions were of the same importance from female students' perspectives.

**Table 6.**  
One-way Anova results of the differences among D1, D2 & D5 Of Only the female sample.

Variables	Dimensions	Mean	Std. deviation	F	P-value	Result
Female's sample opinion	D1	3.54	0.55	1.778	0.17*	Non. Sig.
	D2	3.39	0.53			
	D5	3.63	0.64			

**Note:** \* Significant level 0.05

However, One-Way ANOVA showed statistically significant differences among D1, D2 and D5 dimensions of research according to the males' sample opinions with an F-value of 4.586 and a significance level less than 0.05 for the benefit of D5 (mean=3.58), D1 (mean = 3.51) and D2 (mean = 3.24) (Table 7).

**Table 7.**  
one-way ANOVA results of the differences among d1, d2 & d5 of only the male sample.

Variables	Dimensions	Mean	Std. deviation	F	P-value	Result
Males' sample opinions	D1	3.51	0.66	4.586	0.01*	Sig.
	D2	3.24	0.67			
	D5	3.58	0.72			

Tsai et al. (2015) revealed similar findings (Tsai et al., 2015). Although both female and male students regarded ODF as a "less anxiety" learning environment, female students were more active contributors to ODFs than their male counterparts. Male students preferred the FTF context of discussions. On the other hand, female learners were described as "strategic learners" who could adapt to any context of the discussion. They perceived their elaborative strategies as better in asynchronous discussions and perceived their sophistication of responses as the same in both contexts FTF and online.

To find the difference between the two independent variables, "Female vs Male Samples", the Post Hoc Test (LSD) was used to find the difference in average means between two independent variables in the treatment among male sample opinions (Table 8).

**Table 8.**  
Post Hoc comparison of means Of D1, D2 And D5 according to the male's sample opinions by using LSD.

Dimensions	D1	D2	D5
D1	-	0.267*	0.068
D2		-	0.336*
D5			-

**Note:** \* Significant level 0.05

Results showed a statistically significant difference between D1 and D2 for the benefit of D1 at a p-level less than 0.05 and an arithmetic mean difference of 0.27. There was also a statistical difference between D2 and D5 for the benefit of D5 at a p-value less than 0.05 and a mean difference of 0.34. At the same time, there was no statistically significant difference between D2 and D5 with a significance level of more than 0.05. Therefore, topics of discussion and clear evaluation of students' contribution to the forum were highly perceived by students, followed by the accessibility of the tool and the quality of peer/instructor interaction. This is again confirmed in most previous research (Akmal, 2017; Fatimah et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2008). Students are always keen to receive high grades, so when the topics are related to their fields of study, their contribution will probably increase, especially when they know they will receive grades that affect their overall course grades.

In Table 9, X represents the independent variables (D1, D2 & D5) which are factors that influence dependent variables, Y (D3 & D4).

**Table 9.**

Impact of the independent variable x (D1+D2+D5) on the dependent variable y (D3+D4) by using simple linear regression.

Independent variables	$\beta$	t. test		F. test		R <sup>2</sup>
		Value	Sig.	Value	Sig.	
Constant	0.170	0.647	0.5	175.185	**01.0	62.3%
X (D1+D2+D5)	0.789	13.236	0.01**			

Note: \*\* Significant level 0.01  
\* Significant level 0.05.

The coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>) results showed that X explained 62.3% of the total change in the dependent variable Y, and the rest of the ratio may indicate that no other independent variables are included in the regression equation model. By administering the t-test, it was also shown that X had effects on Y as the t-value (t=13.236, p-value=0.05). Similarly, to test the moral quality reconciliation of the regression model using F-test, it was shown that X had effects on the dependent variable Y with an F-value of 175.185 at a significance level less than 0.05.

These results indicated that the convenience of ODF as a learning tool, interaction, discussion topics, and participation assessment are factors that had a significant influence on endorsing Egyptian undergraduates' reading and writing abilities in the foreign language and their critical analysis skills from their perspectives. Likewise, Korean undergraduates reflected on their improvement in the English language in "semi-structured" interviews after completing assignments on ODFs weekly after class time. They used to share the writing of 150 words and post replies of 50 words to three of their colleagues (Lee, 2017). Some students reported that they knew their English had improved when it would not take much time for them to think and respond in English to questions in their daily journals about how their English language skills have developed as they contributed and shared their opinions online. Korean students had to complete tasks and assignments outside the English language classroom using ODFs. Shy learners reported the convenience of ODF to share their thoughts and participate effectively in discussions.

In another experimental study, 30 Persian students highly perceived ODFs as an efficient learning tool after class. The experimental group contributed to ODF after class in the study, while the control group used paper and pencils for reading and writing tasks. After the treatment, which took approximately two months, students took a writing test consisting of three sections: short paragraph, essay writing, and sentence structure. Students in the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control group. This shows how regularly participating in ODF in foreign language courses can aid learner's constructing knowledge, learning new vocabulary, grammar and, ultimately, improving their reading and writing skills, as students in this study reported they had ample time to review their posts for correct structure and vocabulary (Ghorbanpour, 2013). It was concluded that ODF had a motivating and engaging effect on students as interaction in English was highly perceived by Persian students while employing ODF to complete their tasks.

#### 4.1. Online Discussion versus FTF Discussion

Responding to the open-ended question, "Which do you prefer: Online Discussions or Face-to-Face discussions?" only 100 students answered the question after excluding 8 with no response or invalid answers. Students' answers to the question were examined, and similar responses or ones with the same meaning were collected and sorted out to calculate their frequency percentages. Only 35.2 % preferred the Online Discussion, 59.1% preferred the FTF discussion, and only 5.7 % favoured both. Most of the respondents who favoured online discussions commented that the ODF are "convenient tools" (50%) and that it was an "opportunity for improving their EFL reading, writing and critical analysis abilities" (28.13%). It also "catered for individual differences" (18.75%) and can make the discussion "lively and interactive" (3.13%).

On the other hand, the highest percentages of respondents who preferred the FTF discussion were of the viewpoint that FTF discussions were lively and engaging (50.57%). They would leave “no room for misunderstanding” (39.08%), “improve speaking and presentation skills” (8.05%), and the least percentages were given for the opinion that it would also improve their reading, writing and critical reflection skills (2.30%). To conclude, respondents regarded Online and FTF discussions as important to “improve their EFL reading, writing and critical analysis skills” (50%), to “avoid misunderstandings” (25%) and that ODF are “suitable learning tools” (25%). The low percentages for “suitable learning tool” and “avoid misunderstandings” sound logical as Egyptian students are used to learning languages FTF; as mentioned in the literature review, some Egyptian students probably have limited digital skills and experience in browsing eLearning platforms. Besides, the government is still working on improving the digital infrastructure network all over Egypt; that is why till the present time, some students often encounter several technical problems and unstable internet net connection in remote areas, and this may frustrate them as they participate online (Morsi & Assem, 2021b). For Egyptian students, especially those coming from governmental schools, it can be argued that their cultural background, familiarity, and experience in using online discussions for learning based on the social constructivism theory is relatively much less than those in international or private schools because of the shortage of teachers and the large number of students in classes as reported by the World Bank’s report (2022) about the situation of education in Egypt (Enterprise, 2022). This calls for more research on students’ perceptions of ODFs in developing countries (Nielsen, 2013).

These can be considered reasonable percentages for EFL students who believe they need time inside and outside class to practice the language and improve their fluency as they communicate in the foreign language (Alzaharani, 2016; Bliuc et al., 2010; Guiller et al., 2008; Jamalai & Krish, 2021; Kelly & McNair, 2021; Lee, 2017; Tsai et al., 2015; Wang, 2011).

## 5. Conclusion, Limitations and Implications for Further Research

ODFs have been embraced over more than two decades in higher education because they endorse the student-centred approach to learning and provide valuable opportunities for collaborative learning and student-student and student-teacher interaction. The literature review and discussion of this research's findings revealed that most studies conducted in the Western, Eastern, and Middle Eastern cultures have almost agreed on the effective role of ODFs in endorsing learning in general and EFL learning. However, ODFs’ effective utilisations in teaching have mostly occurred in developed Western countries compared to the East and Middle Eastern countries to foster learning beyond the classroom. Digital literacy, workload and students’ cultural background may affect instructors’ usage of the tool in designing course activities and students’ contribution to the discussion. Consequently, ODFs have become an interesting research topic in North Africa, the Middle East, and other Asian countries after the great revolution in educational technologies. Still, more research into factors that make its utilisation more functional and appealing to students is required; more experimental research is needed in the middle east to examine the positive effect of using ODF to improve students' foreign languages' critical reading and writing skills.

This research investigated ODF's role in endorsing EFL learning among Egyptian undergraduates. It aimed to reveal males' and females' perceptions of the convenience of ODF in learning English and the most influential factors, namely peer/instructor interaction, topics and assessment, that would make employing such tools in EFL threaded discussions and collaborative or project-based work more effective. The study's findings showed that eLMS are means to blend educational technologies with the FTF teaching methods. Egyptian learners viewed ODF as an efficient learning tool, developing their EFL and other communication skills. For them, accessibility of ODF, positive interaction among peers and instructors, the topics, and the assessment methods chosen for grading their participation in the forums are essential for successful independent EFL learning. However, female learners’ responses were more positive than males’ regarding developing their critical analysis skills and English reading and writing skills. Nonetheless, both male and female students highly perceived relevant topics to their

course of study, clear guidelines on participation and most importantly, clear criteria for evaluating their contribution to the discussions.

Yet, the study does have its limitations. A larger sample from different governmental and private universities all over Egypt would help generalise the study's findings. The research only investigated students' perceptions; it followed the non-experimental quantitative research design. Therefore, for further research, it would be intriguing to conduct experimental project-based research to evaluate the effectiveness of ODFs in promoting EFL learning, namely critical reading and writing skills. In addition, more research is required into the best techniques to make following the discussion threads on eLearning user-friendly, such as using short sentences, posting images with labels, etc. Investigating best practices such as Socratic or corrective strategies to run the discussion would be interesting. Longitudinal research design can be used to investigate the effectiveness of ODFs in improving academic performance from different disciplines, age groups or cultural backgrounds (e.g., learners in humanities or science faculties) or other learners with special needs (e.g., autism and dyslexia).

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## Appendix 1

### Forum Discussion: Women's Rights Before and After Women's Movement!

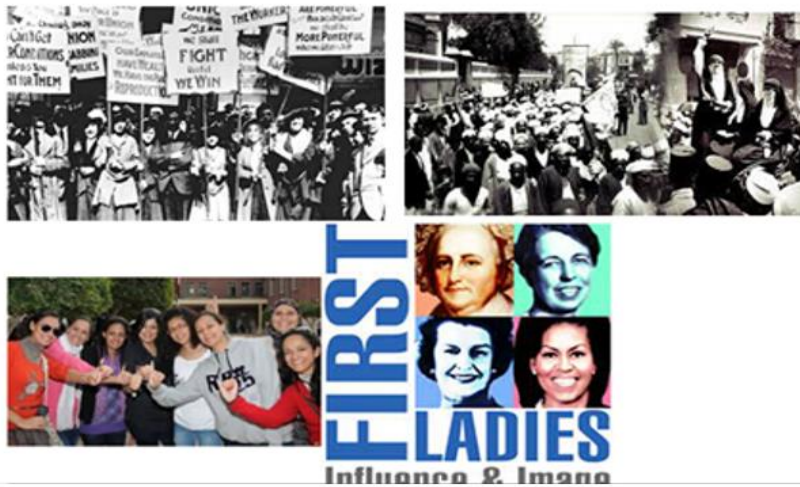
Dear Students,

In preparation for your assigned contrast essay "Women's Rights", contribute to the forum discussion by doing the following:

1. Share from your experience or from your readings about the topic some of the rights that women were deprived of in the past Or some of the rights they are granted at the present time. Reply to at least one of your peers' post, and answer my questions.
2. Post at least ONE reliable source from the BUE Library or Google scholar on the topic.

Good luck,

Dr. Wesam



**Figure A1.**  
Sample of after-class discussion assignment.

**Re: About the Contrast essay of Women's rights**

by omar 221322 - Sunday, 21 November 2021, 12:29 PM

The reason Hany chose this topic is particularly why I have chosen it as well. It is indeed a fascinating topic to learn about especially of its history because nowadays we may see the things women are able to do as normal and were like that from the beginning when in reality it was a completely different scenario.

I also completely agree with the point on Islam reinforcing women's rights and, not just that, but also giving women more praise, admiration, and more responsibilities on them to be given from the man, which just shows how appropriately equal Islam is when it comes to both genders.

**Figure A2.**

Sample of after-class discussion assignment.

**before women rights**

by maryam 222388 - Tuesday, 23 November 2021, 3:53 AM

women were oppressed since day one. they were not even allowed to live because traditionally they were counted as shameful. So, they get killed or buried alive and even if they are left alive they are expected to be maids and housewives as the only good a woman could do is cook, clean, give birth and take care of all the children and husband needs. they were not permitted education because what would a girl need to know other than how to cook a decent meal and clean properly. they weren't granted voices not only to participate as equally important citizens but not even to vote. Sexism is an ancient dilemma that is still present today mostly in a subtle way comparing today's situations to women before Islam and in ancient greek. I personally very strongly believe men fear women because of their powerful minds, their multitasking and their excellence under pressure they thought that if they gave women rights we would be more powerful and acknowledge their ignorance and arrogance. As a prove the first women leaders were the first and best at implementing revolutionary changes and problem solutions.

<https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/No-Lady/Womens-Rights/>

**Figure A3.**

Sample of students' posts.