

An Investigation into Students' Views on Blended Learning at the English Language Institute in King Abdulaziz University

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Abstract

Advances in the Internet and online learning technologies are having a tremendous impact on educational systems. Thus, educational systems are combining Internet and digital technologies with traditional classrooms in what is known as blended learning. An established definition of blended learning is combining traditional, face-to-face (f2f) teaching with web-based online technologies; the purpose of blended learning is to provide more benefits over using one single learning delivery medium. In line with an international trend towards blended learning, the English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) in Saudi Arabia has started blending traditional, f2f classrooms with the online learning platform (Blackboard). This study aims at finding out the students' views on the advantages and challenges that face the implementation of blended learning at the ELI. This study is based on a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design as it starts with a qualitative interview study and is followed-up with a questionnaire survey (QUAL \Rightarrow quan). The study concludes that blended learning can enhance the EFL learning experience at the ELI as it combines the advantages of both in-class instruction and online learning. However, certain challenges need to be addressed to improve the effectiveness of the blended learning experience. The study ends with recommendations that can enhance the blended learning experience at the ELI.

Keywords: EFL, blended learning, Blackboard, face-to-face (f2f) teaching, online learning, Saudi context

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1. Introduction

1.1 What is Blended Learning?

An established definition of blended learning is linking the traditional, f2f classroom teaching with web-based online technologies (Sharma, 2010). Blended learning is associated with combining the traditional, f2f learning systems with e-learning activities especially asynchronous work which is accessed by learners outside time and place constraints (Khan, 2005). Many universities use Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) to deliver the online component of blended learning (Osgerby, 2013). Universities around the world are blending sophisticated e-learning platforms with the traditional, f2f classroom component (Osgerby, 2013). By mixing web-based technologies with the traditional, instructor-led classroom, blended learning aims at exploiting the best of both worlds.

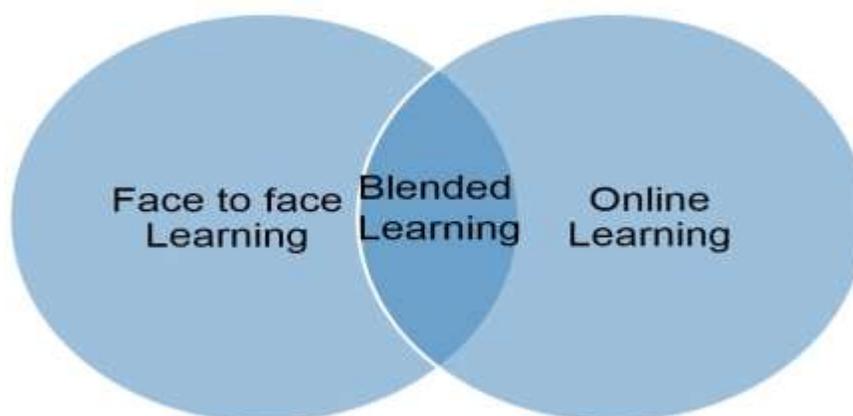


Figure 1. Blended Learning

1.2 Background of the Study

In keeping with an international trend towards blended learning, the English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) in Saudi Arabia has introduced blended learning. **The English Language Institute (ELI) provides English as a foreign language (EFL) courses to first year students in order to improve their English language skills;** the four-level EFL course ranges from beginner to intermediate which is equivalent to A1 to B2 on the Common European Framework (CEFR). In 2014, the ELI invested in Blackboard, an online learning platform, to deliver blended learning. The ELI started implementing blended learning by combining the traditional f2f course with the online learning platform, Blackboard. Blackboard is an online learning platform that delivers online learning by including an access system and tools for content display, tasks, exercises, assessment, communication, instant grading and tracking students' progress. Blackboard also allows teachers to design their own content by adding URL links, uploading files and creating, tasks, discussions and forums. Students can access Blackboard anywhere and anytime using their KAU usernames and passwords. Blackboard is meant to supplement and enhance the regular f2f course, meaning that new material is taught through the f2f course and additional practice is done through blackboard.

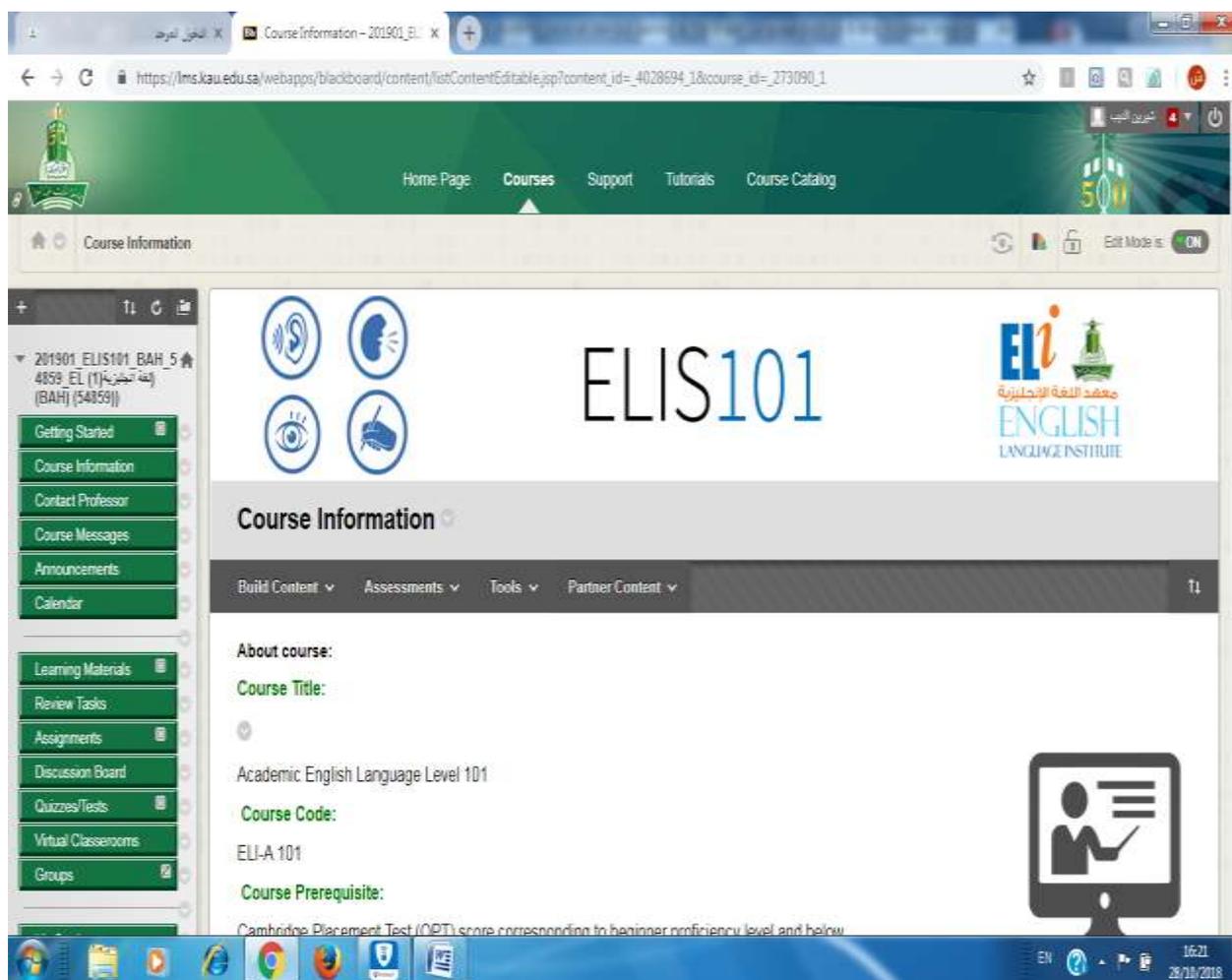


Figure 2 Blackboard interface

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how ELI students view and experience blended learning. It also aims to present suggestions that can enhance the blended learning experience at the ELI.

Thus, the research aims are:

- To investigate the students' views on the advantages of blended learning at the ELI.
- To investigate the students' views on the challenges that encounter blended learning at the ELI.
- To come up with suggestions that can enhance the blended learning experience at the ELI.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Why Blend?

There are many reasons for choosing blended learning in education. Graham (2006) identifies the following three reasons for choosing or designing blended learning:

- **Improving Pedagogy:** A major reason for blended learning is offering more meaningful pedagogical practices (Graham, 2006). Teaching and learning in higher education focus on transmissive strategies more than interactive ones (Graham, 2006). On the other hand, distance education provides students with a large amount of information that they have to absorb independently (Waddoups & Howell, cited in Graham, 2006). Blended learning is seen as a compromise that increases collaboration between peers and usage of learner-centered strategies (Graham, 2006). Moreover, students learn in different ways and the traditional approach only is not suitable for all students (Young, 2001).
- **Increasing access/ flexibility:** Another major factor is access to learning (Bonk, Olson, Wisher & Orvis, cited in Graham, 2006). Blended learning also offers flexibility and convenience to learners who have other commitments and cannot commit to a fully f2f course (Graham, 2006). Most of the learners want both the convenience offered by blended learning and also social, human interaction in f2f classrooms (Graham, 2006).
- **Increasing cost effectiveness:** A third reason is cost effectiveness. Universities are using technology to reduce costs (Graham, 2006). For example, the University of Central Florida has anticipated cost savings due to the reductions in facilities (Dziuban et al. cited in Graham, 2006). In addition, blended learning environments are needed in higher education to handle issues created by a large number of students (Graham, 2006).

2.2 General Categories for Blended Learning

Graham (2006) provides the following description for two categories on how to blend:

- **Enabling Blends:** It provides the learning experience through different modes: entirely f2f programs, fully online programs and blended learning programs. Learners choose the option that best meets their demands.
- **Enhancing Blends:** It enhances the traditional f2f university setting with online supplementary resources; universities often adopt a Learning Management System as the online component. The enhancing blend which offers supplementary online resources along with the main traditional line is the most common type of blended learning in traditional university settings. It should be noted that the ELI which is the focus of this study adopts an enhancing blend. Enhancing blends are the first step towards transforming blends.
- **Transforming Blends:** In the transforming blend the learning environment is a mixed- format of online and f2f instruction. Both traditional and online learning are main methods of instruction in transforming blends.

2.3 Language Learning Theories Behind Blended Learning

This section of the study focuses on how computer-based and blended learning was influenced by the three major language learning theories. The three major language learning theories are used in instructional environments and they can also be used to examine online learning materials (Ally, 2008).

- **Behaviorist Approach to Computer-Based Learning:** The behaviorist language learning theory influenced the first generation of computer-based learning (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Behaviorism was limited to stimulus and response and learners were subjected to linguistic stimuli in order to produce automatic, accurate responses; influenced by behaviorism, computers provided drill practice and corrective feedback (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

Behaviorism was rejected due to its boring drill programs and the second generation of computer-based programs was ushered in (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

- **Cognitive Approach to Computer-Based Learning:** The second generation of computer-based programs was based on cognitivism which regarded the mind as a computer (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Thus, the second generation of computer-based programs shifted the role of the computer from a tutor to a provider of language input, resources and inferential tasks; learners chose how to use these tools (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).
- **Constructivist Approach to e-learning and Blended Learning:** The constructivist learning theory appeared as a counteraction to behaviorism and cognitivism; educational practitioners realized that learners could not be limited to stimuli and response and could not be programmed as computers (Harasim, 2012). A constructivist learning theory advocates that learning is a collaborative activity in which learners interact with their teachers, peers and community in order to construct meaning (Harasim, 2012). The constructivist theory emphasizes the role of the learner not the instructor as the learner interacts with events and content, thus gaining an understanding of events or ideas; this way the learner creates his/her own conceptualization and solutions to problems (Mason & Rennie, 2006). It also actively encourages learner autonomy and initiative (Mason & Rennie, 2006). Educational practitioners and researchers indicate that constructivism is the underlying theory behind e-learning and blended learning. Mason & Rennie (2006), indicate that constructivism is the most evident approach in e-learning and blended learning courses. Bangert (2004) also shows that most web courses are influenced by constructivism.

2.4 Challenges Facing the Uptake of Blended Learning in EFL Instruction

In spite of the glamour of blended learning, there are some challenges that influence the uptake of a blended learning approach. First, computer-based exercises are criticized as being "stimulus-response" activities as they include gap-fill/mix-and-match and true/false activities; such activities are influenced by a behaviorist learning theory and do not encourage a more communicative approach (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Second, blending technology into language learning does not always guarantee better students' acquisition skills than in a traditional, f2f classroom; the effect of technology on L2 acquisition depends on what is being taught, the kind of technology used and how it is used (Al-Jarf, 2005). The learners' level is also an influencing factor in the type of technology used and how often it is used (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). The term digital natives refers to someone who grows up using technology like today's learners; whereas digital immigrants refers to an older generation that did not grow-up using technology (Dudney & Hockly, 2007). In many cases, younger learners are digital natives and teachers are digital immigrants (Dudney & Hockly, 2007). Teachers can have negative attitudes towards technology due to the lack of training and confidence which results in an inability to view the benefits of technology in their classrooms (Dudney & Hockly, 2007). Thus, Sharma & Barrett (2007) recommend that teachers acquire a basic knowledge about technology and its incorporation into their courses.

2.5 Research on Blended Learning in Saudi Arabia

Studies in Saudi Arabia indicate a positive attitude among students towards blended learning. A study by Mohandes et al. (2006), on blended learning at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Saudi Arabia indicated that 90% of the male students in an electrical engineering

course preferred blended learning instruction over completely online courses. Other studies among Saudi female students also reveal a positive attitude towards blended learning. Alebaikan (2010) conducted a study on the perceptions of Saudi female lecturers and students on blended learning at King Saud University. Blended learning courses were applied at various colleges in the following majors: Arabic, Social studies, English, Law, Business, Accounting, Psychology, Special education and Preschool. The qualitative study concluded that blended learning enriches the learning experience, offers Saudi females the flexibility to pursue their higher education and reduces the routine of the f2f classroom. However, blended learning faced challenges such as shortage of internet labs on campus, poor students' IT skills and e-plagiarism. Another study on blended learning among Saudi females at King Saud University in Riyadh was conducted by Al-Jarf (2005). Unlike the previous two studies, this one focused on using blended learning in EFL classrooms. The aim of the study was to find out if blending the f2f class grammar instruction with online learning can improve the EFL university students' achievements. Al Jarf (2005) concluded that supplementing the in-class grammar instruction with online instruction has the potential to increase students' achievement in grammar, but administrative support is required to make the students take the online course more seriously. Students also believed that the online course which was not allocated a course grade should be used for fun not for serious studying and credit. Finally, the study recommended extending blended learning to other language courses and colleges.

3. Design of the Study

3.1 Mixed Methods Research

This study adopts an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAL \Rightarrow quan) as it starts with qualitative data and then gathers quantitative data. An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design first gathers qualitative data in order to provide an in-depth exploration of a few participants and then, collects data from a larger number of participants to check the general trends (Dorneyi, 2007). The following steps as mentioned by Creswell (2005), were followed in my exploratory, mixed-methods research:

- *Locating an instrument*: Collecting qualitative data and identifying themes that are used to locate parallel instruments.
- *Developing an instrument*: Using these themes to create items and scales as a questionnaire. Then, testing the instrument with a sample population.

This study starts with qualitative exploration through semi-structured interviews with 10 students and is followed by a second quantitative phase, a questionnaire with 60 students, to check general trends about blended learning at the ELI. The information gathered from the initial qualitative phase was used to identify different categories on blended learning. Themes from the qualitative data were used to design a Likert-type scales and items for the follow-up questionnaire. Thus, the second phase of the research consisted of forming and testing an instrument based on the qualitative data. In the data analysis stage, qualitative data was analyzed and backed by the quantitative data.

The second phase of the exploratory research design includes questionnaires in order to explore the general trends from the interviews. Questionnaires are practical, economical (Sarantakos, 2005), easy to construct and can be used to gather a large amount of information

(Dorneyi, 2007). In this study, the questionnaire took the form of a Likert scale which is made-up of closed-ended items in which respondents had to choose from a range of choices from strongly agree to strongly disagree and the scores for the items dealing with the same target were averaged. All of the research instruments had to be translated from English to Arabic because the students' English level does not always allow them to express themselves fluently in English. The ELI has two branches at King Abdulaziz University, one in the Men's Campus and another in the Women's Campus as women and men receive instruction in separate campuses in Saudi Arabia. This study took place only in the Women's Campus.

Credibility was accomplished by taking the interview interpretations to the participants and asking them directly whether the findings are plausible. Reliability and validity were ensured by piloting the questionnaires among some ELI students and instructors.

4. Results and discussion

A rich amount of data was gathered. The data analysis of the students' views is presented in two main sections: the advantages and challenges of blended learning. For each theme, the qualitative results are presented first followed by the quantitative results. Data is anonymised through the use of pseudonyms to ensure participants' anonymity.

Table 1. *Major Findings*

Advantages of blended learning
Accessibility and flexibility
Improving pedagogy
Blackboard content and interface
Student performance
Challenges of blended learning
No reduction in f2f instruction
Student evaluation and assessment
Lack of resource support
Lack of online collaboration

4.1 Students' views on the advantages of blended learning

The majority of the students have expressed positive views on their blended learning experience which reflects the findings of other studies conducted among Saudi undergraduates including (AL-Jarf, 2005; Mohandes et. al 2006; Alebaikan, 2010). Today's learners are digital natives who have grown up with technology, for them technology is a natural and integrated part of their lives (Dudeney&Hockly, 2007). Digital natives expect a language course to provide opportunities to use technology (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). This was evident in the responses of the participating

students on blended learning. According to the students the advantages of blended learning include:

Table 2. *Advantages of blended learning*

Question	Agree			Neutral	Disagree		
	Overall	Strongly agree	Agree		Overall	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Blended learning offers flexible access to the online resources at any time or place.	72.5%	25%	47.5%	17.5%	10%	7.5%	2.5%
2. Blended learning improves pedagogy as it combines the traditional classroom with online learning.	77.5%	30%	47.5%	15%	7.5%	5%	2.5%
3. The Blackboard content is related to the course's subject matter and the interface is organized and easy to navigate.	82.5%	40%	42.5%	15%	2.5%	2.5%	—
4. Blended learning improves student performance.	77.5%	50%	27.5%	15%	7.5%	7.5%	—

- ***Accessibility and Flexibility***

A key attribute of blended learning is its ability to enable flexible access to online material (Graham, 2006). Flexible access means accessing and using the online resources at a time, place and pace convenient for the learners. Most of the participating students indicated that supporting the English course with Blackboard gave them more flexibility in both time and place. Students were pleased that they could solve the different Blackboard tasks and exercises at their own convenience. The following excerpt was taken from an interview with Amal:

Blended learning is better than traditional learning only because it does not depend on your presence in the class only ...you solve the Blackboard exercises from a laptop, mobile or at home.

In addition, Dina confirms this opinion, she said:

[Blended learning] better than learning in the class only because it allows you to learn through the Internet anywhere and anytime.

The students' follow-up questionnaires also supported this view with the majority of the students reporting that blended learning offers accessibility and flexibility. This finding is in line with a research on blended learning at Stanford University which indicates that learners enjoyed the flexible learning options offered by blended learning (Singh, 2003).

- **Improving Pedagogy**

Student interviews indicate that a major advantage of blended learning is improving pedagogy. Students view blended learning as the best of both worlds. Several students indicated that the f2f contact with the teacher is indispensable, but the traditional classroom focuses on transmissive strategies as it includes lecturing when they needed more interactive strategies. A major advantage of using technology in language teaching is the "interactivity" of language exercises (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Students appreciated that Blackboard provides them with the needed interactivity which appeals to many learners. For example, Rozan said:

The Blackboard exercises are more interactive than the paper-based exercises in class. To solve interactive exercises (in Blackboard) is better than being a recipient all the time.

In the follow-up questionnaire also, most of the students (77.5%) agreed that blended learning improves pedagogy. This finding is consistent with studies from the University of Tennessee and Stanford University that have indicated that blended learning is better than utilizing the traditional instruction and e-learning separately (Singh, 2003).

- **Blackboard Content and Interface**

Interface design deals with the integration of content and its organization with interactive and navigational controls (Jones & Farquhar cited in Khan, 2005). The majority emphasized that the content design was related to the course's subject matter. For example, Rozan said:

Absolutely and the Blackboard content is presented in a clear and readable way. And the exercises presented new ideas.

Again, most of the students indicated that the web pages in Blackboard were organized, easy to navigate, accessible and usable. Rahaf added:

I like the graphics and multimedia in Blackboard. I navigate through Blackboard easily and with reasonable speed.

The follow-up questionnaires also revealed that the majority of the students agreed that the Blackboard content was related to the course's subject matter and that the interface was organized and easy to navigate. In all 8 items of the questionnaire, satisfaction with the Blackboard content and interface scored the highest agreement percentage (82.5%). This is consistent with Alebaikan (2010) who found out that Saudi university students perceived the online learning platform tools as friendly and helpful.

- **Student Performance**

The majority of the interviewed students reported that blended learning has improved their performance and consequently increased their GPA. Students stated that Blackboard gave them access to a wealth of ready-made EFL material which made them practise the main language skills. For example, Lojain said,

My performance has improved significantly as a result of blended learning which helped me increase my GPA.

The student questionnaires also backed up and supported this view with the majority of students reporting that blended learning improves their performance. This is in line with a study conducted

by Al-Jarf (2005) among Saudi EFL university students who found out that blending the in-class grammar instruction with online instruction increases students' achievement.

4.2 Students' Views on the Challenges that Encounter Blended Learning

Although most of the students have expressed satisfaction with the blended learning courses, they still expressed challenges that have prevented a more effective blended learning experience. Following are the challenges mentioned by the students.

Table 3 Challenges of blended learning

Question	Agree			Neutral	Disagree		
	Overall	Strongly agree	Agree		Overall	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5. The duration of the f2f course should be reduced and replaced with Blackboard.	80%	65%	15%	5%	15%	7.5%	7.5%
6. Marks have to be allocated for using Blackboard.	77.5%	60%	17.5%	10%	12.5%	7.5%	5%
7. Students receive enough technological and human based support when using Blackboard.	37.5%	10%	27.5%	37.5%	25%	17.5%	7.5%
8. Students interact through Blackboard messages, discussions and forums with teacher and other peers.	10%	5%	5%	20%	70%	15%	55%

- **No Reduction in f2f Instruction**

Out of the three categories of blended learning: enabling, enhancing and transformative (Graham, 2006), the ELI adopts an enhancing blend in which the f2f course is supplemented with Blackboard without any reduction of the f2f class hours. The English f2f course is 18 hours per week with Blackboard as an addition that does not reduce the f2f teaching hours. Most of the participating students expressed dissatisfaction as there was no reduction in the f2f instruction time. For example, Lojain said:

It' better to decrease the in-class hours and replace them with Blackboard to encourage self-studying.

When asked about replacing some of the f2f hours with Blackboard, another student replied:

Absolutely

The follow-up questionnaire also indicates that the majority of the students (80%) are for replacing part of the f2f course with Blackboard. This percentage was second-highest agreement percentage in the questionnaire. The ELI does not reduce seat time in its blending learning course. However, Graham (2006) asserts that the reduction of seat time allows increased convenience and flexibility for learners.

- ***Student Evaluation and Assessment***

Within each module or level at the ELI, students receive marks for an in-class supplementary program. However, no marks are allocated for Blackboard. Many participating students were dissatisfied that their work in Blackboard is not graded. For example, Sara said:

We should be given bonus marks for using Blackboard.

Marks are an important incentive for Saudi students. For example, in a blended EFL course for Saudi undergraduates, students believed that the online course which was not allocated a grade is used for fun not for serious studying (Al-Jarf, 2005).

- ***Lack of Resource Support***

Resource support is crucial in successful learning environments and students in online courses should receive both technological and human-based support (Khan, 2005). The student interviews indicated issues related to technological support and the availability of computer labs. When asked about technological support at the ELI, all of the students indicated that they head to their English teachers if they face any technological problems. Regarding the technological problems, Afnan said:

Blackboard exercises that include dragging the answers do not work on iphones. Also, sometimes the screen freezes.

Another issue that was raised during the interviews was the unavailability of computer labs. Several students indicated that they do not have the same opportunity at home when it comes to access to computers, Internet connectivity and speed; this issue was echoed several times in the interviews. Student questionnaires also indicated that technological and human-based support was not sufficient. In the questionnaire, the number of students who are neutral and disagree exceeds the students who agree with a ratio of 1.7 times.

- ***Lack of Online Collaboration***

Sharma & Barrett (2007) indicate that a challenge that faces computer-based exercises in EFL instruction is that they are based on "stimulus-response" activities such as gap-fill, true/false and mix-and-match; such activities are informed by behaviorist principles and do not encourage collaboration and interaction between peers. Mason & Rennie (2006) indicate that online courses should be informed by a constructivist language learning theory which views learning as a collaborative activity in which learners communicate with their teacher and peers to construct meaning. In line with constructivism, online courses promote interactive communication through asynchronous and synchronous discussions so that learners can take part in authentic discourse

communities (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Although online courses are now informed by constructivism which promotes collaborative learning, Blackboard at the ELI is not. When asked about the type of activities used in Blackboard, students mentioned "stimulus-response" activities such as: true/false, gap-fill and mix-and-match. For example, Rozan said:

I solve grammar and vocabulary activities. They are fill in the blanks and matching.
Similarly, Rahaf said:

We solve fill in the blanks and drag the correct answer exercises.

One student expressed a need for collaborative learning:

If there were forums or discussions, then, we can collaborate and if one of us has a problem we can solve it together.

This item scored the highest disagreement percentage (70%) and the lowest agreement percentage (10%) in all items of the questionnaire giving a strong indication that Blackboard was not used as an online collaboration tool. Unlike the ELI context, many studies indicate that online discussions are of significant value for the students. Miyazoe & Anderson (2010) indicate that EFL university students in Japan used online forums and blogs to communicate with their peers and lecturers which gave them a better opportunity to practise writing in English and express their views with more confidence.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

Following are the recommendations based on the research findings.

- ***Moving towards a transforming blend***

The nature of blended learning investigated in this study is identified as an enhancing blend. Enhancing blends refer to a course that is mainly f2f, but includes online supplementary material (Graham, 2006). The ELI provides each of its four levels in 7 weeks of f2f instruction along with the Blackboard supplementary resources. Students receive 18 hours of f2f instruction per week. The majority of participating students indicated that 18 hours of f2f instruction per week along with Blackboard was too much for the English course. They expressed preference for reducing the f2f course and replacing it with Blackboard. My suggestion is moving from an enhancing blend to a transforming blend. Transforming blends utilize both traditional and online learning as main instruction methods (Graham, 2006). Adopting a transformative blend has other advantages other than cutting down the f2f hours. Another advantage for adopting a transformative blend is reducing costs. Reducing costs is a major reason for blended learning in higher education (Graham, 2006). A transforming blend at the ELI will result in reductions in physical infrastructure as fewer classrooms will be utilized.

- ***A constructivist approach to Blackboard***

Computer-based programs have progressed along with the major language learning theories. The early generation of computer-based programs was influenced by the behaviorist language learning theory as it was based on "stimulus-response" activities such as grammar and vocabulary drills and computers were limited to providing drill practice and instant feedback (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). The constructivist language learning theory appeared as a counteraction to behaviorism which limited learners to stimuli-response activities (Harasim, 2012).

Constructivism indicates that learners construct meaning as they interact with teacher and peers (Harasim, 2012). Constructivism places emphasis on the learner as he/she interacts with events and content to gain a better understanding of events and ideas (Mason & Rennie, 2006). Several educational researchers indicate that constructivism is the language learning theory behind e-learning and blended learning including: Bangert (2004) and Mason & Rennie (2006).

However, interviews and questionnaires with the participating students indicated that constructivism is not the underlying theory behind blended learning at the ELI. Almost all of the participating students indicated that they have never used the Blackboard discussions and forums with the teacher or other peers and that there was no online collaboration among teacher and peers. Actually, the student interviews indicated that most of the Blackboard activities were "stimulus-response" activities such as gap-fill and mix-match. According to Sharma & Barrett (2007), such activities are informed by behaviorist principles.

My recommendation is to be in line with constructivism. Teachers should establish Blackboard as a tool for interactive communication and encourage learners to interact through synchronous (simultaneous) and asynchronous (not simultaneous) discussions. Thus, learners can take part in authentic discourse communities. I also suggest encouraging online writing. Blackboard allows teachers and students to set up forums, blogs and wikis. Online writing and collaboration can be encouraged through forums in which students can hold conversations in the form of posted messages. Students can also interact through wikis, collaborative web space, which consists of a number of pages that can be edited by any student. Teachers can set up the first page of a wiki outlining the topic of the project and the steps learners will need to take in the project. Such activities create an environment in which knowledge is created and sustained as learners interact with each other.

- **Resource Support**

Although, technological and human based-support is crucial in successful blended learning environments (Khan, 2005), the participating students indicated that there is not enough resource support at the ELI. Students indicated that they presented their technological problems to their teachers and that there was no Blackboard student support unit at the ELI. Students also raised the issue of Internet speed and connectivity which does not give an equal opportunity to all students. I believe that the ELI should establish a Blackboard student support unit which can resolve any technological problems. Another suggestion is giving students access to the computer labs during the university working hours. This could resolve the problem of equal net access and connectivity for all students.

6. Limitations and Suggestions for further research

In conducting this study the researcher faced a number of challenges and limitations, one was excluding the males from this study due to the separate gender campuses in Saudi Arabia. This study was only conducted at the ELI in the Women's Campus. The participation of students from the Men's Campus could have enriched this study.

Unfortunately, there is a shortage of Arabic resources on blended learning and there is a need for more research in Arab contexts (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). In the light of this study, there

are a number of possible suggestions for research. This study did not include lecturers, further research that investigates the views of lecturers towards blended learning is recommended. Another suggestion for further research could be on blending online writing (forums, blogs or wikis) with the in-class instruction among Saudi EFL students. Finally, it is hoped that this study will contribute to a more effective blended learning experience at the ELI.

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