

## Kuwaiti Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of ICT in Writing Classes

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### Abstract

This study sets out to explore students' perceptions of a web-based instruction tool at a private higher education institute in Kuwait. The tool comprises a database of articles enriched with various reading and writing activities, and is the first attempt to integrate Internet Communication Technologies (ICT) in the university. Student perceptions were measured with qualitative and quantitative methods. In the qualitative strand of the study, 42 undergraduate students filled in a survey with short answers regarding their general attitudes towards web-based instruction, its advantages and disadvantages, and opinions about its contribution to their own learning. The quantitative strand used a questionnaire, which was completed online by 117 students. The data analyses reveal that students think the online program has contributed to the development of their English skills. Most of the students think the online tool is a rich resource which provides them with the flexibility and independence to learn on their own. Perceived disadvantages include the workload, difficult questions, long articles and technical problems. Variables such as gender and years in the university are linked to some differences in perceptions, but students' discipline and level of internet use were not linked to a significant difference in perceptions.

**Keywords:** academic writing, ICT (internet communication technologies), Kuwait, student perceptions, web-based learning

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## Introduction

The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) are the primary providers of education for their youth. These countries have been investing heavily in education with their oil wealth. GCC countries have made remarkable strides in providing their youth with access to education opportunities. Establishment of quality universities, burgeoning student enrollments, rising literacy rates, and female access to educational resources are promising for the future across the region, also more and more universities are integrating technology and open and distance learning methods into their program. In sum, the region has made incredible progress despite the conflicts across the region (Olcott, 2010).

Nevertheless, there are some problems in GCC education systems, and indicators such as the relatively low mean number of years of schooling (6.1 years in Kuwait) and high dropout rates indicate serious issues in the GCC region (AlMunajjed & Sabbagh, 2010). In a survey conducted in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates in 2010 by AlMunajjed and Sabbagh, participants were asked the reasons for their discontent with their education system, and 63% listed traditional methods of teaching as the main reason. Participants think traditional teaching methods in the GCC countries emphasize repetition and memorization rather than skills highly valued in the modern workplace, such as creative thinking, brainstorming, problem solving, and personal initiative. Outmoded curricula and textbooks were mentioned as another source of dissatisfaction because they are not preparing students to succeed in rapidly changing societies that aspire to become knowledge-based economies in competitive global markets (AlMunajjed & Sabbagh, 2010). These deficiencies require a commitment by Gulf societies to address curricula, teaching methods, and the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in schools.

## Setting of the study

The software Achieve3000 is used in two consecutive courses in a private higher education institution in Kuwait, with the main focus on Academic English skills as a part of compulsory Freshman English Composition courses. According to the website, the program provides web-based, differentiated instruction solutions designed to reach a school's entire student population. Students who have a subscription to the web page receive daily content and they proceed with the guidance of their instructors. The materials of the program are geared to activate background knowledge; they mainly focus on vocabulary and reading strategies (Achieve3000, 2014).

Achieve3000 provides task-based instruction, integrated with authentic texts offered at students' proficiency level, as determined at the beginning of the term with a test. The tool could be used both in and out of class and it also offers extended writing tasks. The program has been used by the English Department since February 2011. The program targets reading 40 articles and answering comprehension and essay writing questions related to the article that has been read. This ICT tool comprises 40% of the course assessment, thus students are highly recommended to complete their reading and writing activities, so that they can gain higher grades at the end of the course.

## Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to find out students' general opinions and perspectives towards the program they used for the entire academic term that consists of 16 weeks. Despite some similar ICT implementation experiences in English language teaching (ELT) all over the world, this has been an innovative approach for Kuwaiti undergraduate students, and finding out student

perspectives has been deemed quite significant in estimating the effectiveness of the program. The research objectives are summarized as follows:

1. What are students' perspectives towards the use of this ICT tool in an ELT classroom?
2. Are there any differences in their perspectives based on gender, major, years at school or time spent online?

### Literature review

In 1983, the term Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) was first used. According to Kern & Warschauer (2000), CALL has gone through three phases and computers have been utilized in different ways for different purposes. The first phase was *behaviouristic*, focusing on drilling and practicing specific language points. The second phase, *cognitive CALL*, was prompted by the communicative approach to language teaching and learning, with CALL software emphasizing interaction and offering communication exercises for learners to form a mental linguistic system. After the 1990's, CALL moved into the current phase – *integrative CALL*, based on a socio-cognitive view of language learning. With each phase of CALL development, the computer's role changed, and the activities applied to language teaching and learning also varied. The activities became increasingly diversified to include multiple-choice and true/false quizzes, gap-filling exercises or cloze, matching, re-ordering/sequencing, crossword puzzles, and simulations. In the first phase, the computer was ideal for carrying out repeated drills, since the machine did not get bored with presenting the same material and it could provide immediate non-judgmental feedback. The computer was used as a tutor, presenting material and feedback on an individualized basis, allowing students to proceed at their own pace and freeing up class time for other activities. In the second and third phases of CALL, the computer was used as a tool or medium for students to become active learners (Fotos & Browne, 2004). Applications of the computer include writing and word-processing, e-mail exchanges, use of multimedia, Web search, test-taking, etc (Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

In higher education, the communication capability of the Internet has acted as an important driver for change. There has been high institutional investment in ICT infrastructure in higher education institutions to support more 'flexible' or 'blended' models of teaching and learning. ICT has been introduced into courses to support distributed or part time learners, or simply to supplement classroom-based teaching (Kirkup & Kirkwood, 2007).

It is important to ensure high levels of student learning and achieve a better understanding of students' needs in relation to their learning (Armstrong, 2011). Particularly in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) classes, which are offered as obligatory electives and non-departmental service courses, keeping students interested and engaged in an activity may be a challenge for teachers. Information communication technologies (ICT), an umbrella term for using computers, software and/or Internet for instructional purposes (Hew & Brush, 2007) provides new possibilities for assisting teachers to successfully meet this challenge.

ICT and computer aided language learning can energize students (Lee, 2000), and they offer some advantages, such as the reduction of long-term costs, and increased opportunities for access to various sources of information, increased opportunities for communication and personalization of the teaching process (Jorge et al., 2003). By using authentic materials with visuals and animations, posting and replying messages, writing and replying emails, learning is less constrained in time and space; rather, through the internet, learners are offered opportunities to communicate and learn collaboratively whenever and wherever they want. The students display an enhanced sense of achievement and an increase in self-directed learning, with the

ability to communicate, conduct research and present ideas effectively beyond the confines of the class (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000).

Internet communication technologies, and in particular their application in language learning, have been reported to have a positive effect on learners' performance and attitude. According to Ayres (2002), CALL should be used more frequently in a range of language courses because it can be tailored to students' needs and provide them with useful materials and activities. According to his findings, the CALL environment is less stressful than the traditional classroom. Moreover, in computer-based learning there is more interaction among learners because students depend less on the teacher: the class becomes more student-centered than teacher-centered and chances for cooperation increase (Brandl, 2002). In another study, students' attitudes towards integration of ICT in a reading course were analyzed and the 30 students who took part in the study were observed to have built positive attitudes toward the use of ICT despite the difficulties experienced (Şimşek, 2008).

The general tendency is a positive attitude to the use of computers in academic settings. Education and technology are becoming more intertwined and the number of ICT applications is growing by the day. These benefits seem to be promising for educators; however, there are some problems in measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of ICT in the classroom.

Firstly, the effectiveness of ICT is highly connected to a successful implementation. Various factors should be considered while measuring the success and effectiveness of ICT, and human elements in the educational system, particularly teachers and students, seem to be the most influential agents in facilitating or impeding change (Pelgrum, 2001). Therefore, any successful transformation in educational practice requires the development of positive user attitude toward the new technology.

Moreover, positive attitudes towards language learning can raise learners' motivation (Merisuo-Storm, 2007), and as individuals', particularly learners' attitudes to e-learning and computer-based learning become more positive, they will have greater behavioral intention to use it (Liw et al., 2007). Computers are useful for individual and student-centred learning, so it is important to determine student attitudes towards the use of computers, because student attitudes contribute to our understanding of why computers have enhanced achievement, performance and motivation. Computer attitudes are important because of the long-documented relationship between computer attitudes and motivation and performance (Usun, 2004).

Ayres (2002) suggests that learners appreciate and value learning through ICT, which results in high face validity for CALL. Students who see CALL as an important part of the course also have high motivation and perceive CALL work as relevant to their needs; therefore, it seems that attitudes towards technology can serve as a useful way to measure the effectiveness of technology in the classroom. Mitra (2001) suggests that learning can be measured by using some surrogate methods, such as changes in the attitudes towards learning and changes in the learning process.

Recognizing the importance of student attitudes in efficient integration of ICT, scientists have conducted research that focuses on students' attitudes towards learning language with computers. Although the construct of attitude towards computers has gained recognition as a critical factor in the use of ICT, there is no single clearly defined definition of computer-related attitude (Vandewaetere & Desmet, 2009). According to Chapelle and Jamieson (1991), researchers should investigate students' use of CALL by posing questions concerning its effects on second language learning, students' attitudes toward using CALL, and the learning strategies students use during CALL activities. The value of online education as an educational tool can be

increased by getting feedback from students and teachers on a regular basis. By investigating the ways that students perceive and interact with the learning environment, the design of the online learning environment can be better developed to support learning and cater to students' needs and expectations.

Despite the abundance of research on teacher and student attitudes and perspectives towards computers, studies regarding the use of ICT in teaching ELT in the GCC, and in Kuwait in particular, are scarce. Based on the literature review, the researcher concludes that there is a need for a study to assess student attitudes towards this ICT implementation in a private university in Kuwait for betterment of the ICT experience. For that purpose, this study sets out to explore the undergraduate students' perceptions of a commercial web-based instruction tool, Achieve3000.

### **Methodology**

This study used a mixed methods research design, which means collecting, analysing, and combining both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study or a series of studies to understand a research problem (Creswell, 2012). Mixed methods research does not involve simply collecting two distinct strands of research (qualitative and quantitative); it consists of merging, integrating, linking, or embedding the two strands.

Research methodology in fields like ICT has traditionally relied only on quantitative approaches. Many researchers have generally dismissed qualitative research asserting that this methodology gives no valid findings because they are based on the analysis of a few single cases (Eng, 2005); therefore, qualitative studies regarding attitudes and perceptions towards ICT are rare. However, qualitative approaches are required in some research cases where quantitative approaches fail to give us a vivid description of user perceptions and experiences. To analyse cultural values or social behaviours, there is a need for data collection methods like observation or interviewing, which would give us more detailed description of learning experiences (Cano-Parra & Nicolas-Alonso, 2012).

From among different types of mixed methods designs, the study reported here employed an exploratory sequential design, in which the researcher begins with qualitative data and then collects quantitative information. The purpose of this design is to explore a phenomenon and then collect quantitative data to explain relationships found in the qualitative data. Generally the qualitative data is used to identify themes, design an instrument and variables and subsequently test them (Creswell, 2012).

For this study, the qualitative strand of the study was conducted in three English classes of the university to obtain detailed student responses and to form the basis of survey items in the quantitative phase of the study. The survey statements were created based on the findings of the qualitative strand; and the second phase of the study was carried out with a wider group of students to check whether the findings of the qualitative phase could be generalized to a wider population of students and confirmed by statistical patterns.

#### ***Qualitative data collection tool***

For the qualitative phase, participants were asked various open-ended questions aiming to evaluate their perspectives of the online instruction tool. Participants were chosen through the purposeful sampling method because qualitative researchers recognize that some informants are more knowledgeable than others on the topic that is studied and that these people are more likely to provide insight and understanding for the researcher. This is why the purposeful sample method is quite common in qualitative research in which the researchers actively select the most

productive sample to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996). The method was applied by asking the faculty members using the program in their classes to choose the students who attend classes and use the program on a regular basis. In the fall term of the 2012-2013 academic year, 50 students who met the faculty members' criteria were given a questionnaire that included four open ended questions asking their perceptions of the commercial ICT.

Literature and expert opinion were consulted in the preparation of these questions. Forty two students (18 males and 24 females) completed the surveys. All participants are either first or second year university students in a private Kuwaiti institution, taking Academic English class. All participants mentioned they had never used an ICT tool in their previous classes. The open-ended questions posed to the participants are as follows:

1. Did you enjoy using a web-based program for this course?
2. What did you most like about the program? (advantages)
3. What did you not like about the program? (disadvantages)
4. Do you feel the program has contributed to your English skills?

### ***Researcher's role***

In qualitative research, the "researcher is the instrument" (Patton, 2001; cited in Golafshani, 2003); therefore, explicitly identifying oneself assumes importance that it might not have in quantitative research. In this study, the researcher has been working in the aforementioned institute for four years and been familiar with the program for 3 years as an instructor. She included in this study her own students as well as her colleagues' students. Due to previous experiences working closely with the program, she may bring certain biases to this study. Although every effort has been made to ensure objectivity, these biases may shape the way she views and understands the data she collects and the way she interprets participants' experiences.

### ***Qualitative data analysis method***

All student papers were anonymous. The participants were given codes. When there are direct quotes from the participant, a code number is given at the end of each quote. Student responses were not corrected and grammatical errors were kept for authenticity.

Content analysis, a very popular form of attitude measurement which involves the systematic analysis of written texts (Akkawi, 2010), was carried out on the student papers. The documents were categorically analysed and key words and phrases reflecting attitudes were identified and underlined. By doing so, the raw data was converted into categories. Qualitative research findings and their interpretation were created by analysing the views of participants under certain categories. Direct quotations from student papers were taken and consistency was analysed to ensure internal reliability. Due to the word count limitations of the article, only four or five direct quotes were taken for each main theme to give the reader a general idea about student perceptions.

### ***Quantitative data collection tool***

In the quantitative phase, the questionnaire included twelve five-point Likert-scale statements and two multiple choice questions. One multiple choice question asked the students whether they had enjoyed using the program or not, and the second asked the students to describe the program with three adjectives. The questionnaire also asked four demographic questions about gender, major, year at university and the average length of time the student spends on the internet.

After the preliminary findings of the qualitative study, the questionnaire was constructed in collaboration with another faculty member using the program. It was first piloted with 50 students, and then sent to 250 students from eight different sections of the English course through a website named esurveycreator.com. The researcher sent a link to the electronic mailboxes of students. By clicking on the link, the students responded to the statements as *strongly agree* (5), *agree* (4), *neutral* (3), *disagree* (2) or *strongly disagree* (1). Out of 250 students, 117 students filled in the questionnaire (a return rate of 48%).

### ***Population of the study***

The questionnaire was filled out by 117 students who took ENG 100 in the spring term of 2012-2013. 73.5% of participants (86 students) were females, simply because there are more female sections in the university; 31 male students (26.5%) completed the questionnaire. Overall, 58 students were from the College of Arts and Sciences (English, Communication and Computer Science), while 59 students were from the College of Business Administration (Economics, Accounting and Business Administration). A great majority of the students (85.5%) are 1st year students as this is a course that is offered to first year students. 2nd year students (14.5%) are the ones who either have spent a year in the Foundation program to support their English or are repeating the composition course. When asked about the average hours they spend online every day, 1 hour was the most popular response (38.5% of respondents) with 30% of students estimating 2 hours online and a similar number, 3 or more hours.

### ***Quantitative data analysis method***

For the quantitative phase, the reliability of the questionnaire was checked with Cronbach's Alpha and was found to be 0.907. Factor analysis yielded two major factors. One of them is covering the positive statement and the other factor is covering the negative statements about the online program. Because the variables showed non-normal distribution in the Skewness test, non-parametric tests such as Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis were used for comparing the means and were tabulated. Frequency, percentages and mean scores are provided in relevant findings.

## **Qualitative data analysis results**

### ***Overall perceptions of the program***

The first question of the qualitative survey was: "Did you enjoy using a web-based program as part of your course?" The question also asked students to give a brief explanation as to why they enjoyed or did not enjoy the experience. The analysis of responses did not elaborate on the reasons but only the positive or negative perception, as the next questions asked for a detailed explanation. 29 students said they enjoyed using the program, whereas 13 of them said they did not enjoy the program. The comments below exemplify the various positive perceptions towards the ICT experience:

"Yes, I enjoyed as I became able to improve my English not only at the university, but also at home." (St 19).

"Yes, I did because it is less stressful and I have learned to like reading" (St 21).

"I enjoyed using it because it made things a bit easier, like if we missed a class we can still do our class work at home" (St 22).

"I did as it gave the course a new, entertaining dynamic that made reading and comprehension all the more better" (St 5).

"I did enjoy using a web program for studying in this course because I always support using technology in schools and universities" (St 12).

Students who had a positive attitude towards the program generally had a variety of reasons ranging from the contribution of the program to language learning skills to the practicality of using computers in class or their interest in using technology in class.

The students who expressed their negative perceptions towards using the program gave the major reasons as mentioned below:

"No, I didn't, because it was boring and it was huge amount of articles to do with no use" (St 42).

"No, I didn't enjoy it at all, because it is time consuming, and we are not getting any new information from it" (St 33).

"No, I didn't enjoy, I think the demand for 40 articles by the end of this course was a bit too much, it honestly made me struggle focusing on my other subjects. The process of completing them felt a bit tedious; not that I didn't benefit from it; I did actually benefit" (St 15).

"I didn't enjoy using it because we should do a lot of articles in less time" (St 20).

Students seemed to be complaining about the workload as that was the most frequent response mentioned for not liking the online tool. A few students even said they were displeased with the workload only, not with the program itself. The only student giving a different reason for not enjoying the online tool is below:

"No, I prefer pen and paper" (St 26).

In general, the perceptions were positive. Students seemed to have enjoyed the experience for a variety of reasons, with the exception of some students preferring the conventional methods or feeling pressured because of the required workload.

### *Perceived advantages of the program*

The second question asked the students about the advantages of the ICT tool. Table 1 displays the most frequently mentioned advantages that emerged from their comments.

**Table 1. Perceived advantages of the program**

Advantages	Frequency
Interesting and educational articles on various topics	25
Improving language skills	16
Independent learning / Freedom and flexibility	14
Multiple-choice questions	4

Table 1 shows that the most frequent advantage as perceived by students was the *variety of topics*. Students thought access to a rich database of articles on interesting topics was the greatest strength of the program. Some students make the following comments on this issue:

"It lets the students to increase their knowledge in many fields such as trade, cars, history and industry. I like reading the history of companies, people and nations. That's what I mean with history articles" (St 17).

“It is interesting on the topic choices that we have to read about, gives it an up-to-date feeling to it, and I actually learned many things I wasn't aware of, for example the topic about Afghanistan taught me a lot of things I had no idea about” (St 15).

Textbooks or course books may have a wide array of reading texts but the options that students have in an online program are beyond comparison to the richest textbooks and the new generation of students seem to appreciate this aspect of the resource. Students tend to value the contribution of the program to improve their *language skills* as well. 16 students expressed this as an advantage of the program and the following quotes support this.

“I think the program has several news and information and students learn new words, so that helps to know more these words and their meaning” (St 35).

“The biggest advantages of Achieve3000 is improving our reading and writing skills by reading the articles and writing the thought questions. It is really good for learning” (St 10).

“The biggest advantage of Achieve is it helps me to improve my English skills and know more vocabulary” (St 27).

Although the program is mostly based on reading articles, students perceived the online program as contributing to multiple skills, including writing and vocabulary.

Following these two most frequently expressed advantages, *freedom and independent learning* was expressed as another advantage. The program allows students to work on any topic they like by using the search option, and gives them the independence to read the text and answer the questions at their own pace. In addition, when they miss the class, they can still follow it by participating in the activity, which is not limited to class time. Students have the chance to complete the work outside the class and they can work through the materials on any device that will allow them to access the internet. Students considered these options as independent learning and obviously appreciated them. Some quotes to support this view are as follows:

“What I liked most about it is being able to learn on my own, “how to be independent”. I learn from my own mistakes and stuff. It was cool” (St 21).

“The biggest advantage is that we can feel free to choose articles; this makes it enjoyable” (St 11).

“The biggest advantage for me about the program is there are no specific articles we must do and we can search for articles talking about our interests such as sports and music” (St 12).

Students mostly focused on these three advantages, while some of them mentioned the multiple choice questions as a strength of the program in addition to the ones mentioned above. These students thought multiple choice questions were easy to answer and added to the entertainment aspect of the program; for example:

“I like the activities; they are really enjoyable” (St 29).

#### ***Perceived disadvantages of the program***

Despite some commonly agreed upon advantages, the program was perceived to have disadvantages as well. Table 2 shows the major disadvantages as expressed by the student users of the program.

**Table 2. Perceived disadvantages of the program**

Disadvantages	Frequency
Workload (the number of articles and questions in total)	14
Difficult questions	12
Scoring/ grading issues	7
Long, boring articles (lacking variety)	6
Technical problems (internet access, connection issues etc.)	4

The major complaint about the ICT tool was the 40-article target to be met in one term. Case studies from various schools in the USA using the program suggest that students who successfully complete 40 Achieve3000 activities can go up one full grade level in reading (Achieve3000, 2014), and this approach has also been adopted by the writing instructors in the institution that this study was conducted. However, students thought this was an ambitious target and found it challenging to reach. This is the reason that 14 students ranked *workload* as the biggest disadvantage of the program.

“It is very time consuming to do 40 articles as we have many other subjects to concentrate on as well.” (St 28).

“Thought questions (the essay writing questions) may be an obstacle along the course” (St 39).

“I don’t see any disadvantages, but I think it would be a disadvantage if a person doesn’t like reading because this is mainly based on reading. Also the amount of articles to be read and solved is big” (St 21).

“The biggest disadvantage is that the articles take a lot of time to complete and there are a lot of them to be done” (St 3).

As student quotes show, the number of articles was perceived as a (potential) problem and caused dissatisfaction among students who had other subjects to study in the college.

The second problem area is also related to workload. “*Difficult questions*” was not welcomed by students and was mentioned as the second biggest disadvantage.

“It has some difficult questions that are sometimes hard to answer” (St 22).

“Some reading questions are difficult and writing questions are not clear” (St 1).

“I dislike many things, especially the activities because some of them are not clear and have two similar answers” (St 17).

Apart from the workload and difficulty of the articles and questions, some students were not pleased with the grading and scoring system of the tool. Some thought the first trial should not count but they should be given a second attempt at answering multiple choice questions. The other issue is that the program considers a score of 75% or above a success in multiple questions and anything below this means that the exercise should be repeated. Some students found this target too high to meet and expressed their concerns about it:

“It counts just the first try and cancels the second try. Also it counts the scores above %75 and this is not fair” (St 16).

“For activity questions, 10 questions is better than 7 or 8. They should make the average less than 75%, for example %63” (St 1).

Some students found the article topics limited, and six students expressed the view that the articles were boring:

“The biggest disadvantage is the articles are too long and boring” (St 32).

“Honestly the big disadvantage is the topics are limited if you want to do research for a topic” (St 42).

Technical issues such as a slow connection or computer/ internet problems seemed to be experienced in ICT-based classes, and therefore were mentioned as disadvantages in the use of the online program.

“The only thing that bothered me was the technical issues. I had to wait a while for the page to start up sometimes and it is not an internet issue” (St 5).

“The webpage could have a lot of improvements and at times there were some connection issues” (St 15).

Overall, students tended to complain about the workload, difficulty level and topics of articles. Some technical features related to the use of the program, such as grading, scoring and even connection quality were less frequently mentioned. Although the educational content of the program was generally praised by students, when it came to reading and answering the questions about 40 articles over a period of about 3 months, the workload became a major source of complaint.

#### *Perceived contributions of the program*

**Table 3. Perceptions regarding contributions of the program to language skills**

Skills	Frequency
Vocabulary	25
Reading	23
Writing	15
Other skills	4
No contribution	3

Many students mentioned an improvement in more than one skill; vocabulary and reading in particular were often mentioned in the same sentence. Writing was also mentioned by 15 students, following vocabulary and reading. The quotes below summarize how students felt about the contribution, without differentiating the skills:

“It has improved my reading skills; I am able to understand the contents much easier than I used to do. Also because of reading and the dictionary option, my vocabulary has increased” (St 19).

“I started to use Achieve3000 as a major source of information. I see this program has improved my English skills such as reading, writing and vocabulary” (St 9).

“This program has improved my English a lot, especially in writing, every time I write in the thought question I feel that I learned something new about how to write well” (St 10).

The following quotations mention other skills that some students considered as a contribution of the ICT tool:

“The skills that I got are reading, writing, vocabulary and how to do research” (St 11).

“Yes, a lot! In everything, I can speak easily and know more words” (St 27).  
For other contributions, participants mentioned “research skills” and even “speaking”.

### Quantitative analysis results

#### *General perceptions of the program*

In the questionnaire form, following the Likert scale statements, students were asked two other questions. The 13<sup>th</sup> question asked students whether they enjoyed using the system or not. Students were given three options: *Yes/ No/ Neutral*. Out of 117, 98 students, i.e. 83.56% of them said “yes” to the question. 8 students said they neither liked nor disliked the program, which is equal to 6.84%. The percentage of students who expressed a dislike for the program was 12% with 11 students. This shows strong popularity of the program among students.

Question 14 presented students with a list of four negative and four positive adjectives and asked them to choose any three without any specific rank to describe their opinion about the program. The question yielded the following results shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Adjectives selected to describe the program**

Adjective	Frequency	%
Flexible	75	24.2
Beneficial	68	21.9
Motivating	50	16.1
Fun	39	12.6
Boring	29	9.4
Unnecessary	21	6.8
Difficult	19	6.1
Not user friendly	9	2.9

Table 4 shows that students have generally positive feelings towards the program and almost a quarter of them see it as a *flexible* tool for learning. The second most popular adjective was “*beneficial*” with 68 students (almost 22%). Adjectives like “*motivating*” and “*fun*” are ahead of their negative counterparts, and the four negative adjectives “*boring*”, “*unnecessary*”, “*difficult*” and “*not user-friendly*” were at the end of the ranking with lower percentages than positive adjectives.

Table 5 shows the averages of student responses for agreeing and disagreeing with the statements in the questionnaire. The most popular feature of the program was *flexibility* of using laptops, notebooks or smartphones in class (Q5): the mean for this statement is a high agreement (4.34). The second most popular aspect of the system was relevant to the first: flexibility of using it outside the class, anywhere the student wishes (4.31). Following these modern age features of

the system, its content, with a variety of topics, appears to be a popular aspect (4.13). The lowest mean is associated with differentiated instruction (Q7): students appeared to be less enthusiastic about this feature, although it was still viewed positively overall (3.83).

**Table 5. Mean responses to statements (1= Strongly disagree; 5= Strongly agree)**

Statements	Mean
5. I liked the flexibility of using my laptop, notebook, or smartphone in the classroom	4.34
4. I liked the flexibility of working with the program outside the class, anywhere I like	4.31
6. I enjoyed discovering a variety of topics in the articles	4.13
1. The program was simple to understand and easy to use	4.11
11. The program has improved my reading skills	4.11
8. Since records were kept in my portfolio, it was easy to monitor my performance	4.05
2. Working independently created a more relaxed and stress free atmosphere.	4.03
12. The program has improved my vocabulary.	4.00
3. I felt more motivated to do the online assignments than paper based assignments	3.99
10. The program has improved my writing skills.	3.91
9. I believe this program has improved my English	3.89
7. I liked receiving articles set for my reading level	3.83

***Effects of variables (gender, college, years and hours spent online)***

To check the effect of demographic variables on students' perceptions, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. Gender seemed to make a significant difference only in perceptions related to reading skills: female students tended to think more often than male students that the program made contributions to their reading skills (Table 6).

**Table 6. Mann-Whitney U results for gender (Q11)**

Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	p
Male	31	44.65	1384.00		
Female	86	64.17	5519.00	888.000	.003*

In regards to the effects of years in the university on perceptions related to the program, despite the great difference in the group sizes, a significantly less positive attitude towards some aspects of the program could be observed among second-year students. Specifically, statements about working independently, flexibility, monitoring progress, improvement in reading and English skills are perceived more positively by first-year students. Second-year students could be

repeating the course which may cause a boredom factor; first-year students may be more motivated as this is their first experience with ICT in university.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings from both the qualitative and the quantitative data results, students generally had positive attitudes towards the ICT tool they used in Academic English classes. A majority of them find it flexible to use in and out of the class, beneficial for their language skills and a motivating factor to read more and do more assignments. It does not require advanced computer skills, it is simple to use and it contains reading texts on various interesting and educational topics.

This positive attitude displayed by ELT students has been confirmed in many studies. Usun's (2004) study of 156 undergraduate students in Turkey reveals that students regard computers as an individual and self-paced learning tool that allows them to work privately, and that they want to drill and practice in an enjoyable environment on their own. In his study, computers were seen by students as:

1. individualizing learning;
2. self-paced;
3. allowing students to work privately;
4. fun and entertaining;
5. excellent for drill and practice.

These results are very similar to Kuwaiti students' perceptions of the ICT tool presented in this study.

Rahimi and Yadollahi's (2011) study of 142 Iranian female students (50 junior high-school, 49 high-school and 43 university students) also shows that the sample had a general positive attitude towards CALL. Particularly, it was found that the effectiveness of CALL was rated higher among university students than the effectiveness of non-CALL (computers vs traditional paper-pencil classes). This could be attributed to the fact that university students are more computer literate and they appreciate the value of using computers in their academic tasks, since they are more exposed to technology and have more opportunities to use computers for course-related activities (Rahimi and Yadollahi, 2011).

Gender is a factor that has been implicated in a wide range of educational outcomes and continues to be significant in educational processes. In this study, males and females generally show similar attitudes, with a small difference in their perception of reading skills. Female students think this program has contributed to their reading skills, whereas males agree with this contribution with a lower average. Findings regarding gender differences in reading attitude have been quite consistent in literature. Girls are observed to have more positive reading attitudes at all learning levels (Hogsten & Perogoy, 1999; Kush & Watkins, & Brookhart, 2005; McQuillan, 2000; Crawford Camiciottoli, 2001; Yamashita, 2004, as cited in Sani and Zain, 2011). Girls also tend to be more able readers, even from a very young age (Sani and Zain, 2011). Many teachers and academics would agree that Arab Gulf or in general Middle Eastern students are not avid readers, and this is also confirmed by the Arab Thought Foundation's Fikr fourth annual cultural development report. The report states that an Arab individual on average reads a quarter of a page a year compared to the eleven books read by an American or seven books by a British person (AlYacoub, 2012). However, the author of this paper has also personally observed in her four years of teaching experience in the Gulf that female students read more than male students. Rana Idriss (2013), a Lebanese publisher, expresses that the female readership in the Arab world

has increased significantly over the past few years. According to Idriss (2013), in a country like the United Arab Emirates, for example, it seems that only women are reading.

Also the years spent in the university, and probably in the course seem to have an impact on perceptions as senior students agree less than their junior counterparts with statements about the flexibility of the program, independent study and contributions to language with statements about the flexibility of the program, independent study and contributions to language skills. Higher averages of first year students could be linked to perceived novelty, as students who are new to the university life and ICT in classes may have a more positive approach than more experienced second year students. The course load of the second year students is different from that of the first year students, which may also be the underlying factor in their lower average. This finding coincides with other studies. For instance, a study conducted in Oman with higher education students showed that more students used the online learning programs in the first term (54%) than in the second term (25%) (Saidi, 2003). Saidi also cites another study carried out by Stevens in 1991, in which student motivation remained quite high following the induction to the computer application as students regarded it as an innovative method, but motivation decreased gradually as the academic year progressed.

Major (the field of study) and hours spent online were not associated with significant differences in perceptions. According to Akbulut (2008), foreign language learners reveal positive attitudes towards CALL because of computers' potential to provide autonomous learning, creativity and achievement. Also, student attitudes are not strongly affected by factors such as ownership of a computer or frequency of use.

Some disadvantages of the program perceived by the students in the present study include workload, difficult or boring reading texts, management of the program and technical problems. These disadvantages could be related to teaching styles, the number of assignments faculty members expected from students or curriculum designers' decisions in course designs. Depending on the intensity of student complaints, this number could be changed, taking the optimum benefit into account. From these challenges presented by students, only technical problems seem to be related to the nature of ICT; others are relevant to the administration of the course or the proficiency level of students, which could be found in any class. Another study also showed that faculty get similar feedback from students regarding the use of the ICT tool (Erguvan, 2014). When Erguvan interviewed the faculty members on a similar branded ICT tool, she found that the feedback the faculty members reported from students was generally related to the course load; for example:

Truthfully speaking, my students generally find it a chore. They say things like 'too much work', 'too much writing', if the teacher insists on essays, the students grumble. They think volume is too much; the articles are too difficult, even if it set at their level, and they would rather something easier so they can answer the questions more easily and quickly (Erguvan, 2014, p. 123).

However, faculty members tend to ignore these complaints because they do not see it as negative feedback, as one participant has put it, "all students say it is too much work, but that's just typical laziness" (Erguvan, 2014, p. 124).

One thing to be aware of is that if the workload starts affecting student motivation levels and participation in the program, it may certainly hinder learning. Still, participants do not seem to be negatively influenced by these perceived disadvantages. Instead, both students and faculty members seem to feel that the program is motivating.

However, as mentioned by some students, connection problems and website breakdowns may demotivate some students. This result has been shared by many other studies conducted on integration of ICT in class. A classroom that meets all the suggested criteria should allow the teacher to concentrate on teaching and learners on learning in a “techno-problem-less” environment (Wee & Bakar, 2004). In Wee & Bakar’s study in Malaysia, 151 public and private university faculty members expressed the view that network connectivity does not necessarily imply reliability and some technical failures can be quite frustrating and demotivating in the classroom (Wee & Bakar, 2004).

### Limitations and recommendations

This study was carried out under several limitations. The qualitative questionnaires were completed by 42 students and this number may limit the generalizability of the findings, as every academic term around 500 students sign up for this program. Although quantitative surveys were expected to be distributed to a greater number of students, due to the timing of the online survey (end of spring term, beginning of final exams etc.) only 117 students completed the online survey. The small number may be considered a limitation of the study.

In addition, the participants in this research study are students in a private university setting in Kuwait that has adopted a specific type of an ICT tool; therefore, the findings of the study can only be generalized for similar groups of participants. This study has assessed the perceptions and attitudes of students towards the program; however, in order to fully assess the impact of the software, more comprehensive investigation measuring the effect on learning outcomes is needed. Future research is suggested to check whether these positive attitudes can have a significant impact on improving student performance in language skills.

### About the Author:

**Dr Deniz Erguvan** has been teaching academic writing skills in Gulf University for Science Technology, Kuwait since 2010. Her research interests mainly lay within educational administration. She has worked on topics such as the impact of privatisation of higher education institutions, internationalization of universities, the use of ICT in the ELT classroom, and reading habits of undergraduate students.

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