

## Saudi EFL Students' Perceptions toward the Online Interactions of their Peers and Instructors

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### Abstract

The role of the instructor during the online L2 learning of Saudi English foreign language (EFL) students has been seen as essential in their online educational environment. This paper examines the quality of Saudi EFL students' online interactions. It aims at exploring how Saudi students perceive and view the online interactions of their peers and instructors to help promote their L2 learning in online educational discussion forums. Over an entire academic semester in a Saudi prestigious university, 49 EFL students were requested to interact online with their peers and instructors by discussing some argumentative topics. The data which were examined in this paper included participants' questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative and qualitative analysis methods were employed. The findings of the present study show that Saudi EFL students perceived their instructor-student online interactions more positively than their student-student online interactions. They valued the online interactions of their EFL instructors as more important and useful for their L2 learning than the online interactions of their EFL peers. It was concluded that the online presence of instructors appeared to encourage their students to think critically, express their thoughts, and develop their grammatical and spelling accuracy. Further research should look at how students perform their second language (L2) and maintain their social presence during student-student and instructor-student online exchanges.

**Keywords:** discussion forums, instructor-student exchange, online interaction, perceptions, Saudi students, student-student exchange

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## Introduction

There has been a growing emphasis on the use of online discussion forums in L2 tertiary education because of the opportunities the forums offer students in their blended and online learning contexts (e.g., Hadjistassou, 2008; Hanna & de Nooy, 2009; Kol & Schcolnik, 2008; Kosunen, 2009; Montero et al., 2007; Nor et al., 2012; Paiva & Rodrigues-Junior, 2009; Ritchie & Black, 2012; Saude et al., 2012). However, there has been little research that looked at the perceptions and attitudes of Saudi EFL learners toward their online interactions with their peers and instructors in their educational discussion forums. Researching how Saudi EFL students view and perceive the online interactions of their peers and instructors is scant and whether or not these interactions are seen as helpful for their L2 learning in the online environment remains unexplored.

## Using Online Discussion Forums in Second Language Learning

Discussion forums can allow students to interact with their peers and instructors outside of the face-to-face class times and at their convenience (Nor et al., 2012). Montero et al. (2007) observed that participation in forums in a topic-oriented discussion helps students to identify language problems and solve them, and develop the acquisition of the linguistic and communicative skills. Forums played an essential role in supporting collaborative L2 learning (Hadjistassou, 2008). They allow students “to ask questions, express their thoughts, share resources, and justify their opinions beyond the four walls of the classroom” (Nor et al., 2012, p. 237).

Paiva & Rodrigues-Junior (2009) argue that learning in the educational discussion forums originates from the collaborative interaction between the instructor and students. Central to the role of instructor, discussion forums can promote higher rate of peer interactions because the instructor’s intervention is seen as minimal compared to that in face-to-face classroom (Kosunen, 2009; Nor et al., 2012).

The role of the instructor during students’ L2 interactions has been seen as crucial in the online environments (Zhang et al., 2007). In terms of students’ perceptions of student-teacher online interactions, Yang (2011) found that 72% of students agreed that they were able to share their thoughts and ideas with their peers and teachers, 83% believed that the teacher encouraged them in expressing their thoughts, and 90% thought that they had good interactions with their teachers and teaching assistants. Students overall had positive attitudes towards their online interactions with their instructors because the online interactions of their instructors seemed to encourage them to express their thoughts and enhance their L2 learning. AbuSeileek (2007) explains that most students in the online cooperative group “felt that they got a [sic] more individual attention from the instructor” (p. 508). Therefore, it can be argued that *more individual attention* which is given by the instructor during online interaction can be conceived of as scaffolding which is, from a sociocultural standpoint, seen as essential for promoting language learning among learners in the online environment.

Although online discussion forums have been under scrutiny by researchers for about two decades, the nature of students’ L2 interactions when interacting in student-student and instructor-student online exchanges needs further investigation. Hadjistassou (2008) points out that “the conditions for offering engaging and constructive [exchanges] in asynchronous forums are much more complex and have not been fully explored” (p. 358). Paiva & Rodrigues-Junior (2009) conclude that in instructor-student online interactions “[w]e are still learning how to behave in online educational forums, and research can show us what is underlying this online

environment” (p.66). Yang (2011) asserts that “[p]revious studies have emphasized the relationship between students’ engagement and learning performance, and yet the context in which students and the teacher interact [online] to engage each other has been ignored” (p. 181).

The present study examines the following research questions to shed light on how Saudi EFL students perceive and view online interactions in both student-student and instructor-student online exchanges.

- 1) Do Saudi EFL students have significant differences in their perceptions of interactions between student-student and instructor-student online exchanges?
- 2) What are the qualities of Saudi students’ perceptions of interactions in their student-student and instructor-student online exchanges?

### Method

In the present study, 49 Saudi EFL undergraduate male students participated in the online discussion forums with their three EFL non-Saudi instructors. The participants were sourced from the Faculty of Languages and Translation (FLT) of a prestigious university in the Southern region of Saudi Arabia. Students' native language is Arabic and they have an age mean of 22.5 years old. They are lower-intermediate-modest English users (Allan, 2004). They have been learning English for several years ( $M=9$  years) and using blended learning mode (face-to-face and blackboard) for more than one year ( $M=17$  months). In terms of their electronic literacy, participating students often use computer and internet and they sometimes use online discussion forums. The participating instructors are male PhD holders in the fields of linguistics and applied linguistics. Their native language is Arabic and their age is ranged from 37 to 50 years old. The three EFL instructors have been teaching English for many years (9 years, 15 years, and 20 years) and the length of their Blackboard experience in the EFL context seems relatively similar (two years, two years, and three years). They usually use online discussion forums when they teach in their English blended courses.

A mixed-methods research methodology was utilized in the present study in line with previous L2 studies (e.g., Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Yang, 2011). Thus, to obtain richer data researchers have been placing greater emphasis on employing a mixed-methods approach (e.g., Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Yang, 2011). In line with Miyazoe & Anderson (2010) and Yang (2011), the current study used the methods of questionnaires and interviews in order to obtain richer data and to better understand the perceptions and attitudes of Saudi EFL learners towards the online interactions of their peers and instructors. A questionnaire and an interview were designed by the researcher (see Appendix A and B). They were conducted in the students' native language to ensure that students could provide accurate responses and avoid misleading answers (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Mackey & Gass (2005) point out that conducting such methods in the participants' first language "remov[e] concerns about the proficiency of the learner impacting the quality and quantity of the data provided" (p. 174). The validation of Arabic translation was obtained from a certified translator in advance of the study. The questionnaire comprised structured closed and open ended questions and they were given to students by their instructors in class time. The interview consisted of structured open-ended questions and students were interviewed individually by the researcher in a conference room at the FLT. Each interview lasted about 50 minutes and it was voice recorded. Unfortunately, 21 students (43%) attended the interview with the researcher and the pressure of final examinations prevented other students from participating in the interview.

As an essential part of English blended courses at the FLT, the online discussion forums of the Blackboard educational system were used by the participants. The forums were created by the instructors for promoting students' online interactions in terms of L2 learning. Students discussed argumentative topics with their peers for five weeks and with their instructors for further five weeks. The topics were developed by the researcher and the instructors "so that [students] will not waste time 'surfing' the Internet to find a topic" (Ritchie & Black, 2012, p. 358). The themes of the topics were deemed appropriate because they were relevant to the participants' EFL context and their ordinary Saudi lifestyles. Hadjistassou (2008, p. 385) suggests using "culturally-relevant topics" for EFL students to enhance their participation in online discussion forums. The present study ensured that the topics were divided evenly, counterbalanced, and randomly assigned to student-student and instructor-student online interactions. For example, students in the forums discussed their opinions about a "favourite football team" with their peers, and similarly they discussed their opinions about their "favourite shopping mall" with their instructors. Participation in the online discussion forums was included in the overall assessment of students' English blended courses. The instructors allocated 70% of the course marks for face-to-face learning and 30% for online learning. The forum interactions are counted as 10% out of the assessment of students' online learning.

Concerning the data analysis methods, the present study employed quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse students' questionnaire and interview data. Questionnaire data were analysed quantitatively using SPSS software and qualitatively using narrative and descriptive approaches. The interview data were transferred to Nvivo software and analysed qualitatively using narrative and descriptive methods. The qualitative analysis was first conducted on the Arabic data and extracts were translated into English during the analysis of students' questionnaires and interviews. 30% of Arabic to English translated information were reviewed by a certified translator to make sure that the translation was accurate.

## Quantitative Analysis Results

### *Descriptive Statistics Results*

**Table 1. Students' Perceptions—Descriptive Analysis Results**

Students' Perceptions	Student-Student		Instructor-Student	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Online interactions were excellent with	3.53	.89	3.93	.98
2. I felt comfortable interacting with	3.73	.97	4.00	.97
3. I felt personally connected with	2.97	.80	3.63	.92
4. Online interactions were very important with	3.73	.83	4.00	.95
5. Online interactions gave me the confidence to participate and interact with	4.06	.89	4.00	.91

6. Online interactions gave me a sense of being a part of one social learning community with	4.10	.84	4.04	.95
7. Online interactions motivated me to engage in interaction in	3.89	1.00	4.08	.97

As can be seen in table 1, by and large, the mean value of students' perceptions was found to be higher in instructor-student than in student-student online interactions. This shows that students liked the online interactions of their instructors than the online interactions of their peers. By looking at the first four perceptions in Figure one, it can be observed that students valued the interactions of their instructors more than the interactions of their peers.

Students liked and valued interacting in instructor-student online exchanges more than in student-student online exchanges because they benefited from the interactions of their instructors. That is, instructors' online interactions might have provided students with opportunities to develop several aspects of their English such as improving L2 accuracy or learning new grammatical and lexical forms. In terms of perceptions in items five, six, and seven in Figure one, students' perceptions did not seem to differ between student-student and instructor-student online interactions. Students valued their feelings of confidence, social learning, and motivation in student-student at a similar level as in instructor-student online exchanges. This is because they may have regarded themselves and their peers and instructors as one learning community where it is expected that they should have the same degrees of feelings of confidence, social learning, and motivation when they interact with their peers or instructors to promote their language learning.

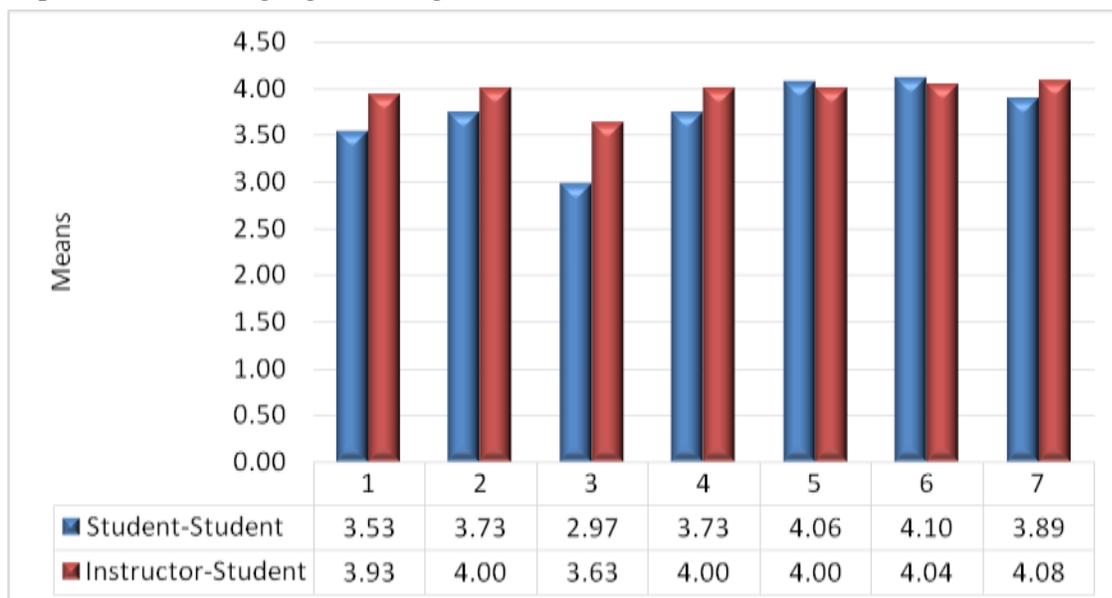


Figure 1. Students' Perceptions

### Inferential Analysis Results

To examine whether the means of students' perceptions differed significantly between the two types of online interactions, a nonparametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was deemed appropriate and selected because the data of students' perceptions were not found to be normally distributed—the Kolmogorov-Smirnova and Shapiro-Wilk tests were used for examining normality. The negative  $z$ -values which the test revealed in table 2 occurred because this non-parametric test examines the mean rank differences across the data, not the mean differences which the descriptive statistics show in Table one and Figure one. Because of this, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test generates negative  $z$ -values when it examines the differences of mean rank.

**Table 2. Students' Perceptions—Inferential Analysis Results**

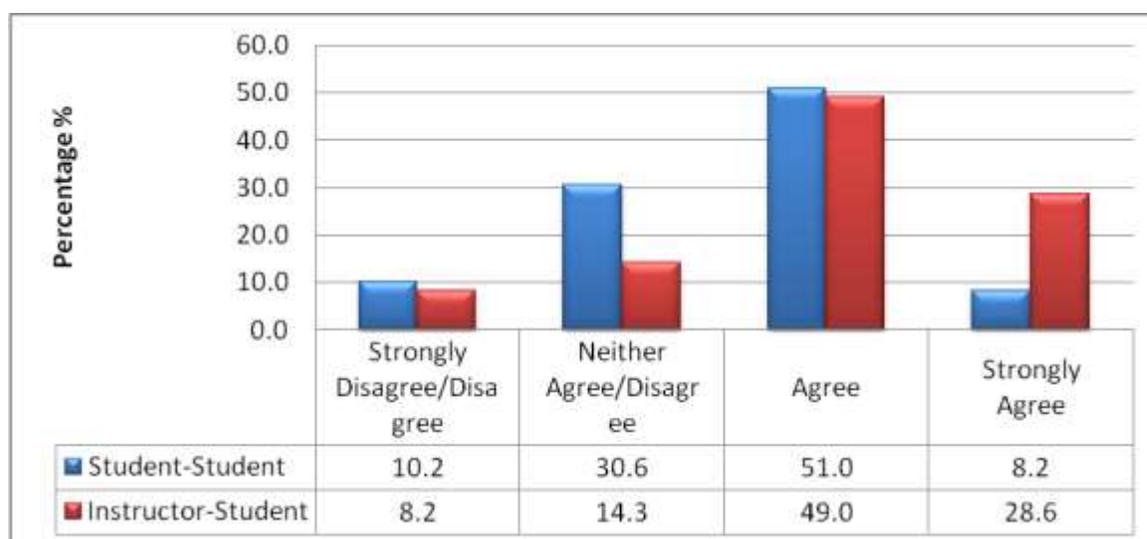
Students' Perceptions	$Z$	$P$
1. Online interactions were excellent	-2.17	.029
2. I felt comfortable interacting	-2.02	.043
3. I felt personally connected	-4.30	.000
4. Online interactions were very important	-2.04	.041
5. Online interactions gave me the confidence to participate and interact	-.52	.597
6. Online interactions gave me a sense of being a part of one social learning community	-.65	.513
7. Online interactions motivated me to engage in interaction	-1.48	.138

According to the test results in table 2, significant differences were found in the means of students' perceptions between student-student and instructor-student online exchanges. These significant differences were found in the students' perceptions of *online interactions were excellent* ( $p=.029$ ), *I felt comfortable interacting* ( $p=.043$ ), *I felt personally connected* ( $p=.000$ ), and *online interactions were very important* ( $p=.041$ ) between the two conditions of online exchanges. These four perceptions show that students significantly perceived the online interactions of their instructors more positively than the online interactions of their peers. This may be because students received more attention and support from their instructors when they interacted in instructor-student than in student-student online exchanges. In terms of the last three perceptions (i.e., perception items five, six, and seven), no significant differences ( $p>.05$ ) were found in the students' perceptions between the two conditions of online interactions. Students might have thought that feelings of confidence and social learning and being motivated were the same for their language learning with both their peers and instructors in online interactions.

It was deemed important for the present study to investigate students' perceptions in terms of the score distribution on the levels of their questionnaire's Likert scale. Because the Likert scale was built based on levels from one to five, the weight of perception scores from one

level to another might give further explanations for understanding the results of students' perceptions. Because of the zero values and small percentages of the questionnaire levels of *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree* across the students' perception data, the two levels were combined together to help present the results adequately and understand them in a clearer way in comparison with other levels on the Likert scale. The percentages of students' perceptions, where significant differences were found, were explored and the analysis results are reported in figure presentations and discussed in the following sections. The exploration of the Likert data of students' perceptions addressed the large percentage categories which clearly show the extent to which students perceive and view the online interactions of their peers and instructors.

### Results of Student Perceptions' Distributions *Online Interactions were Excellent with*



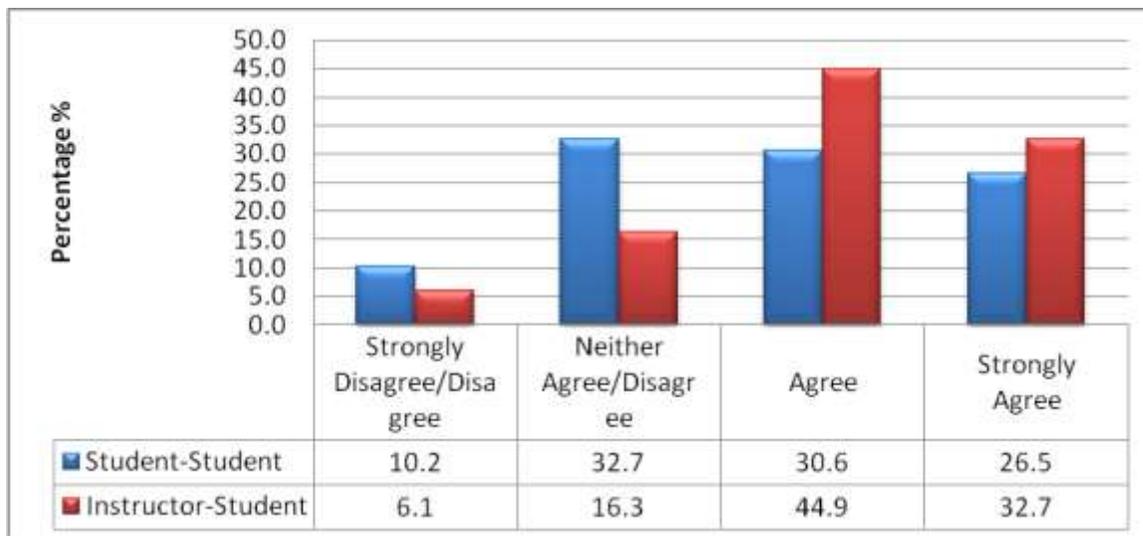
**Figure 2. Online Interactions were Excellent with**

As can be seen in Figure 2, large numbers of students (49% agreed and 28.6% strongly agreed) valued the interactions in instructor-student online exchanges as being excellent compared with interactions in student-student online exchanges. Students had higher positive perception towards the online interactions of their instructors because they may have benefited from their interactions. It can be observed that 30.6% of students neither agreed nor disagreed although 51% of the students agreed (and 8.2% strongly agree) that the online interactions of their peers were excellent. This perception result can indicate that students valued their peers' online interactions as less positive than the online interactions of their instructors. Perhaps, students did not benefit from the online interactions of their peers as they benefited from their instructors' online interactions and this is why they held more positive perception towards their instructor-student online interactions.

Another interpretation which can be made on the basis of this perception result is that students might have regarded the presence of their instructors as useful for their online interactions in the discussion forums in comparison with the absence of their instructors. That is, the presence of the instructor (as the knowledge expert) in the forums can provide students with a supportive

learning atmosphere where students can see their instructors share the floor with them, support their language learning, and take care of their language learning problems.

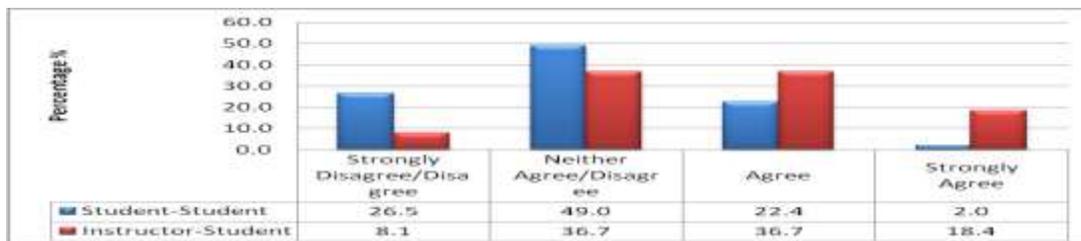
***I felt Comfortable Interacting with***



**Figure 3. I Felt Comfortable Interacting with**

In terms of the second perception, substantial numbers of students (44.9% agreed and 32.7% strongly agreed) showed that they felt comfortable interacting in instructor-student online exchanges as can be seen in Figure 3. As compared with their perception of student-student online exchanges, students were seen to be more comfortable interacting in instructor-student online exchanges. Because of the presence of their instructors students might have felt more comfortable interacting in instructor-student online exchanges as their instructors might have provided them with language support and facilitated their language learning in the discussion forums. It can be found that 32.7% of students neither agreed or disagreed that they felt comfortable interacting in student-student online exchanges. This percentage shows that students were unsure whether they felt comfortable interacting with their peers. Although a few numbers of students (strongly) disagreed that they felt comfortable interacting in student-student and instructor-student online exchanges, large numbers of students still held more positive perceptions about feeling comfortable interacting with their instructors.

***I felt Personally Connected to Interact with***

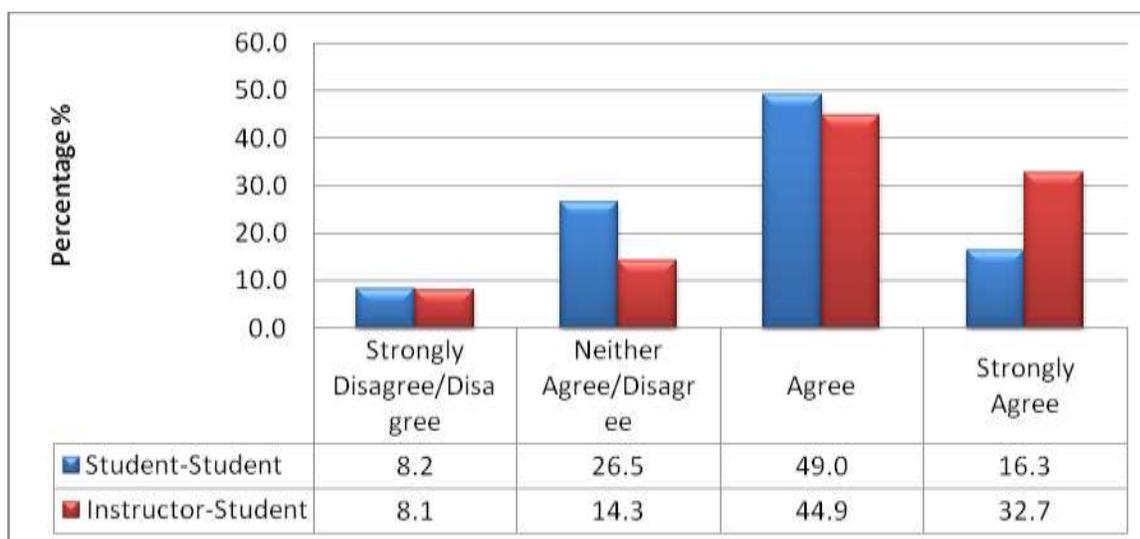


**Figure 4. I felt Personally Connected to Interact with**

As can be seen in Figure 4, a large number of students (36.7% agreed and 18.4% strongly agreed) indicated that they felt personally connected with their instructors in instructor-student online exchanges and 26.5% of students (strongly) disagreed that they felt personally connected with their peers in student-student online exchanges. This shows that students had positive perceptions of feeling personally connected with their instructors more than with their peers. This personal connectedness can be attributed to the fact that students felt that they communicated socially with their instructors at a personal level in the forums. Having said that, it should be pointed out that students did not appear to interact socially with their peers or instructors outside the confines of the context of their language learning. Online interactions in the discussion forums seemed to be the only social interactions which students engage in with other interlocutors in the present study. As compared with the face-to-face classroom, online interactions were found to help students establish personal connectedness between them and their instructors. This personal connectedness enabled students to seek support from their instructors pertaining to their language learning and personal learning issues while they were interacting in instructor-student online exchanges. This was evident in the current study because several students in their interviews were found to communicate with their instructors using email to discuss their language learning problems and seek advice on their personal learning matters.

Figure 4 shows that 36.7% of students indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that they felt personally connected with their instructors. Similarly, a considerable number of students (49.0%) neither agreed nor disagreed that they felt personally connected with their peers. Students felt the same in terms of feeling personally connected with their instructors and peers.

***Online Interactions were very Important with***



**Figure 5. Online Interactions were very Important with**

As can be shown in Figure 5, a large proportion of students (44.9% agreed and 32.7% strongly agreed) indicated that their instructor-student online interactions were important. This is again because students might have benefited from the online interactions of their instructors as to improve some aspects of their English language. Although considerable numbers of students (49% agree and 16.3 strongly agree) indicated that student-student online interactions were

important, 26.5% of students in student-student neither agreed nor disagreed with this perception. The proportion of neither agreed nor disagreed shows that students were unsure whether their student-student online interactions were important and this may be because of the fact that they were interacting with students (novices) not with instructors (experts).

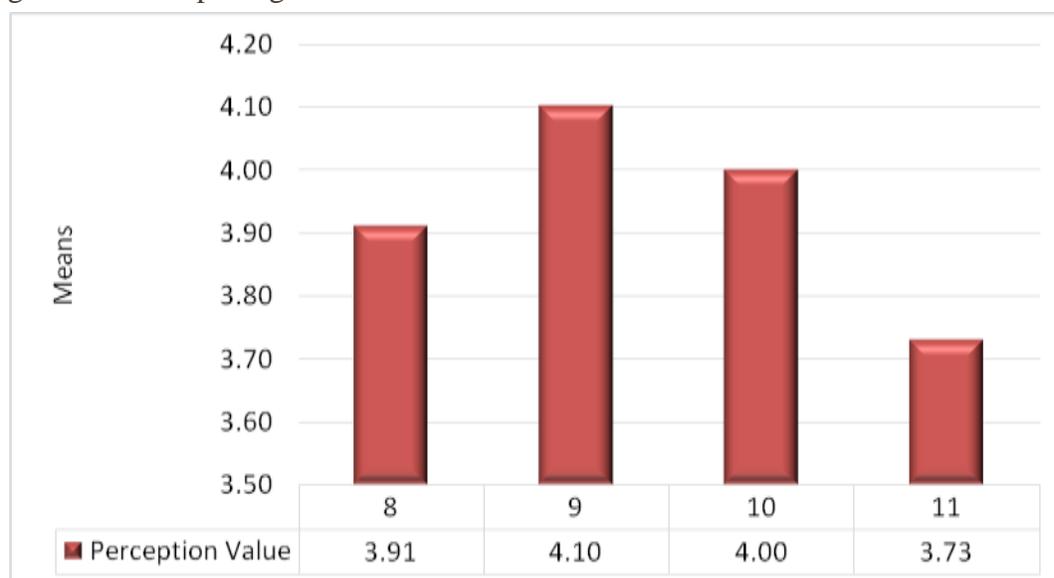
### Students' Perceptions of Instructors' Online Interactions

**Table 3. Students' Perceptions of Instructors' Interactions—Descriptive Analysis Results**

N=49		
Students' Perceptions	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
8. Online interactions of the instructor supported my interactions	3.91	.75
9. Online interactions of the instructor encouraged me to improve my English language	4.10	.94
10. Online interactions of the instructor encouraged me to compose correct grammatical sentences	4.00	.88
11. Online interactions of the instructor encouraged me to write correct spelling	3.73	1.07

According to Table three, students had high means of perceptions about the statement that instructors' online interactions were seen as beneficial for their language learning. This indicates that students valued their instructors as helpful and perceived their online interactions as positive.

This is because instructors may have supported their students' online interactions and encouraged them to improve their English language, thereby helping them to write correct grammar and spellings.

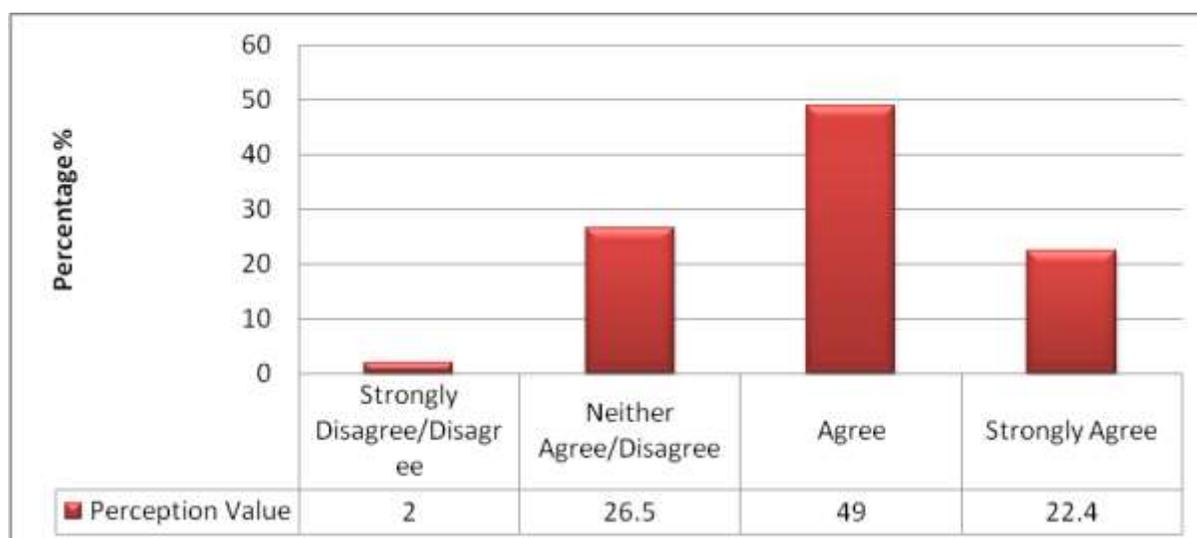


**Figure 5. Students' Perceptions of Instructors' Interactions**

By looking at Figure 6, it can be observed that student have a higher mean in perception nine which indicates that the online interactions of instructors encouraged students to improve their English language in comparison with other perception means. Students' answers in perception items ten and eleven also supported above findings that instructors' online interactions might have encouraged students to write correct grammatical sentences and use correct spellings.

The present study investigated the above perceptions in terms of scores' weight on the response levels identified in the Likert scale to further understand students' perceptions of instructors' online interactions. The scales of *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree* were also merged together because of zeroes and small score values to help present the results adequately.

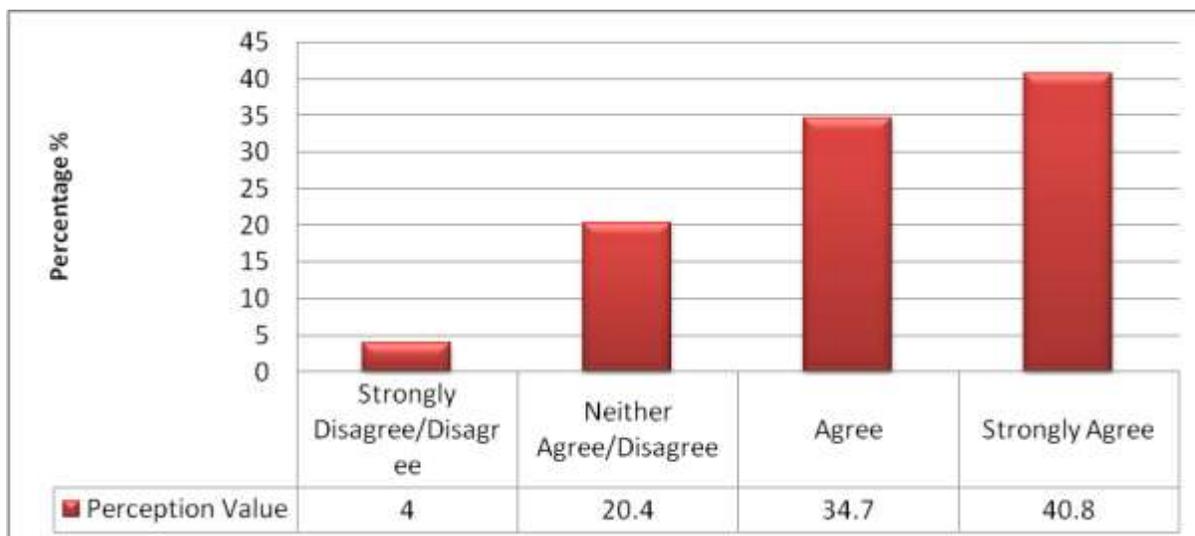
### ***Online Interactions of the Instructor Supported my Interactions***



**Figure 6. Online Interactions of the Instructor Supported my Interactions**

As can be seen in Figure 7, a substantial number of students (49% agreed and 22.4% strongly agreed) agreed that instructors' online interactions supported their online interactions. This shows that students valued their instructors' interactions as positive for promoting their online interactions. That is because instructors guided the interaction in instructor-student online exchanges and their online interactions might have been found to trigger students to engage in reflective interaction. However, 26.5% of students neither agreed nor disagreed that instructors' online interactions supported their online interactions.

### ***Online Interactions of the Instructor Encouraged me to Improve my English Language***



**Figure 7. Online Interactions of the Instructor Encouraged me to Improve my English Language**

As can be seen in Figure 8, large number of students (34.7% agreed and 40.8% strongly agreed) believed that the online interactions with their instructors encouraged them to improve their English language. This result supports above results as students were found to rate the online interactions of their instructors as excellent, important, and supportive. Nevertheless, 20.4% of students were found to be unsure of whether their instructors’ online interactions encouraged them to improve their English language. Perhaps it was difficult for those students to judge the improvement of their English language, especially if their language competence was low.

***Online Interactions of the Instructor Encouraged me to Compose Correct Grammatical Sentences***

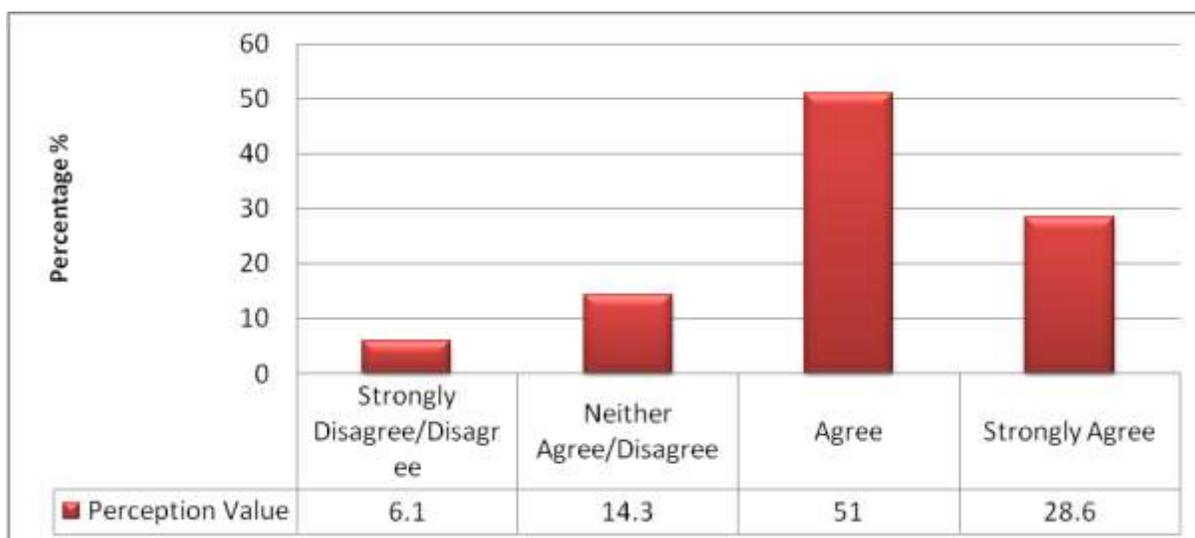


Figure 8. Online Interactions of Instructor Encouraged me to Compose Correct Grammatical Sentences

As can be seen in Figure 9, considerable numbers of students (51% agreed and 28.6% strongly agreed) believed that the online interactions of their instructors encouraged them to compose correct grammatical sentences. This also supports the above findings when students perceived that they benefited linguistically from their instructors' online interactions. Nonetheless, a small number of students (14.3%) neither agreed nor disagreed that their instructors' online interactions encouraged them to compose correct grammatical sentences.

***Online Interactions of the Instructor Encouraged me to Write Correct Spelling***

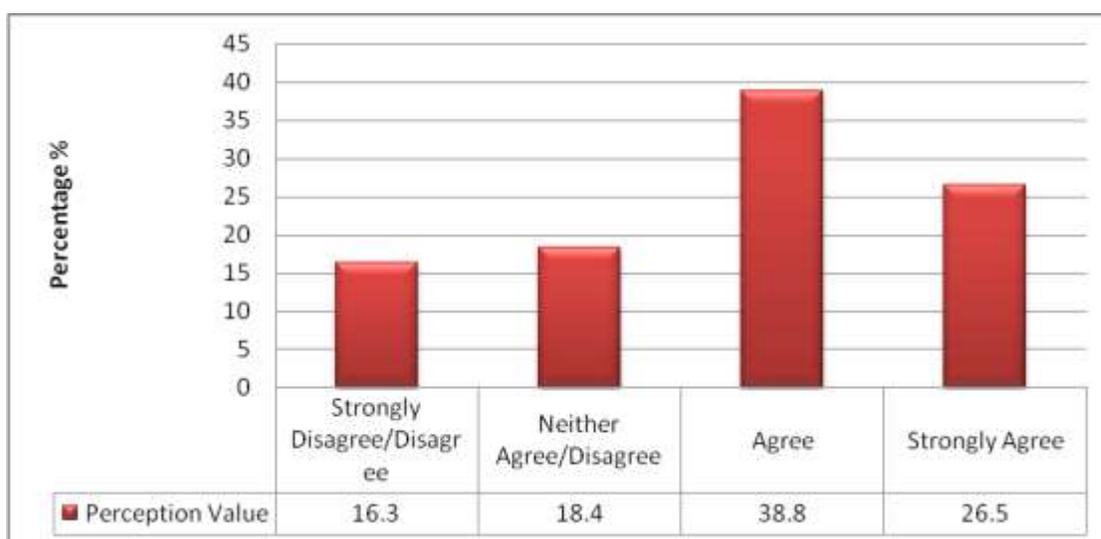


Figure 9. Online Interactions of the Instructor Encouraged me to Write Correct Spelling

In terms of spelling, Figure ten shows that 38.8% of students agreed and 26.5% students strongly agreed that instructors' online interactions encouraged them to use correct spelling. This shows that the presence of the instructor might have positively influenced students to pay attention to their L2 spellings. On the other hand, it can be observed that 16.3% of students disagreed and 18.4% of students did not agree or disagree that the online interactions of their instructors encouraged them to write correct spelling.

### Qualitative Analysis Results

***Instructor-Student Online Interactions were Important***

First of all, from students' questionnaires, it was observed that 43 students (87.75%) indicated, by responding to the open-ended questions, that they valued their instructors' online interactions as more important than their peers' online interactions. This substantial percentage shows that students perceived the online interactions of their instructors more positively than the online interactions of their peers. This result supports the above quantitative findings as instructors' online interactions were perceived as helpful for improving students' language. For instance,

Musfer indicated in his questionnaire that the online interactions of his instructor were seen as important for improving his language.

I found that the interactions of instructor-student are more important than the interactions of student-student because they helped me to develop my grammatical accuracy and encouraged me to think deeply when I wrote in the online discussion forum.

The presence of his instructor seemed to influence him to pay more attention to the linguistic accuracy of his online interactions. He also indicated that his instructor's online interactions encouraged him to think carefully. It can be suggested that the instructor's scaffolding (such as directing referential questions) during online interactions might have influenced students to think carefully. What was found in Saif's interview below supports Musfer's perception result above by showing that the online interactions of instructors were perceived as more important for developing grammatical accuracy than the online interactions of students' peers.

The interactions of instructor-student are more important than the interactions of student-student because they can help students to improve their English grammar and accuracy when they interact in the online discussion forums.

Naser in his questionnaire summarized how the online interactions of his instructor were seen as important.

From my point of view, the instructor has a substantial role during online interactions in the discussion forum because he can help students to correct their grammatical and spelling errors. He also can help them develop their knowledge of culture, and this, in turn, can help students develop their English language effectively.

Naser perceived that the instructor played an important role in online interactions. Because instructors are regarded as the language experts, students can benefit from their language expertise such as learning language grammar and culture.

### ***Instructor-Student Online Interactions were Useful for L2 Learning***

In terms of perceiving the online interactions of instructors as useful for language learning, Ameer was found to feel excited because the online interactions of his instructor encouraged him to take care of his linguistic accuracy.

The interactions of my instructor made me felt excited because they helped me to pay more attention to language mistakes and write good sentences in instructor-student online exchanges. They encouraged me to write precisely and contribute to the discussion in the online forum.

Thus, it can be deduced that the role which the instructor plays eventually help students to acquire new language knowledge and develop their English language.

Mansoor reported how he perceived the online interactions of his instructor when he interacted in instructor-student online exchanges.

When my instructor started to interact with my postings, I really felt excited and energetic and that was the most interesting thing for me during instructor-student online exchanges.

The online interactions of instructors showed that instructors valued their online students' interactions and this in turn influenced students to feel excited.

### ***I Felt Comfortable Interacting in Instructor-Student Online Interactions***

By examining students' questionnaire responses to open-ended questions, it can be found that 36 students (73.46%) indicated that they felt comfortable interacting in instructor-student online exchanges. This considerable number gives more support for the quantitative findings in the present study. It was also found that a larger number of students reported in their questionnaire's open-ended responses that they liked to interact online with their instructors (20 students, 41%) more than with their peers (17 students, 35%) because of several reasons which students noted—the other students (12 students, 24%) liked to interact with their peers and instructors equally. These reasons which students noted are reported and discussed in the following sections.

#### ***Instructor-Student Online Interactions were Reflective***

The first reason why students liked to interact in instructor-student more than in student-student online exchanges is that students perceived the online interactions of their instructors as more reflective (i.e., responding and contributing to posts) than the online interactions of their peers. This can be attributed to the online presence of the instructors. That is, because instructors directed questions and argued with their students, this triggered their students to interact with their instructors and contribute to the reflectivity of instructor-student online interactions. For example, Zaman explained how his peers interacted in student-student and instructor-student online exchanges.

I noted that my peers interacted and did their best when they interacted with their instructor in instructor-student more than when they interacted without their instructor in student-student online exchanges.

Naser supports this by reporting that he felt more serious when interacting with his instructor than with his peers because of the online presence of his instructor.

Because of the presence of my instructor I felt more serious to interact in instructor-student than in student-student online exchanges.

As reported above, it can be noted that some students liked the online interactions of their instructors more than the interactions of their peers because student-student online interactions did not seem to be reflective and students did not show the same seriousness in their student-student online interactions as compared with their instructor-student online interactions.

#### ***Instructor-Student Online Interactions were Useful for Thinking and Language Exposure***

The second reason is that instructors' online interactions were perceived by students as useful because they encouraged them to think more about what they wrote and exposed them to the target language. For example, Ibraheem reported that he benefited from the online interactions of his instructor because they encouraged him to think.

I liked to interact in instructor-student more than in student-student online exchanges because the interactions of my instructor encouraged me to think more about what I was going to write in the online discussion forum.

Similarly, Amaar perceived the online interactions of his instructor as useful because it exposed him to the English language.

I liked to interact in instructor-student more than in student-student online exchanges because the interactions of my instructor exposed me to the English language.

Because instructors as the experts interacted online with their students, their referential questions encouraged students to think more when they answered them and their language output exposed them to the English language.

***Instructor-Student Online Interactions were Helpful for Grammatical and Spelling Accuracy***

The third reason is that the online interactions of instructors were perceived by students as helpful because they encouraged them to correct their grammatical and spelling errors. This was the most noted reason in the present study in terms of why several students liked to interact more with their instructors than with their peers. Saeed, for instance, indicated that he benefited from the online interactions of his instructor to improve his grammatical accuracy.

I liked to interact in instructor-student more than in student-student online exchanges because my instructor encouraged me to correct my grammatical mistakes when I interacted in the online discussion forum.

Fahad supports what Saeed believed by indicating that his instructor corrected students' linguistic errors when they interacted in instructor-student online exchanges.

I observed that my instructor was concerned with correcting students' grammatical and spelling errors in instructor-student online exchanges and I really liked that.

Abdul indicated in his questionnaire that the online interactions of the instructor can have a positive influence on students' language.

The interactions of the instructor can influence students to develop their language in terms of using correct grammar and spelling when they interact in the online discussion forum.

Likewise, Talal valued the online interactions of his instructor as helpful for the development of his grammatical and spelling accuracy.

I felt that my language developed after I interacted with my instructor in instructor-student online exchanges. The online interactions of my instructor helped me to correct my grammatical and spelling mistakes.

The online presence of instructors might have encouraged students to pay more attention to their language errors and their online interactions helped them to improve their linguistic accuracy.

***Instructor-Student Online Interactions were Useful for Strengthening the Relationship between Student and the Instructor***

Another interesting reason why students preferred to interact in instructor-student more than in student-student online exchanges is because instructors' online interactions were perceived as useful in terms of lessening interaction barriers between students and their instructors. Sultan, for instance, reflected on the online interactions of instructor-student online exchanges.

The interactions of instructors are seen as helpful because they can break many barriers between students and their instructors and this in turn can have a positive effect on language learning in the online discussion forum.

In line with what Sultan perceived, Aziz perceived the online interactions of his instructor as useful because they fostered students' online interactions and developed a strong relationship between students and their instructor in the online environment.

The most interesting thing which I noted during the interactions of instructor-student online exchanges was the development of a strong relationship between students and their instructor.

It can be deduced that the online interactions of instructors with their students might have developed a supportive relationship between students and their instructors because they interacted online with each other as one learning community. A good relationship between students and their instructors is seen as important for fostering online interaction and language learning among students because it can support them to interact and develop their language in the online environment.

### **Discussion**

The results of quantitative analyses showed that students had greater means of positive perceptions towards the online interactions of instructor-student than the interactions of student-student. Students significantly valued their instructors' online interactions as excellent, comfortable, and important as compared with their students' online interactions. The qualitative analysis results of students' questionnaire and interview data demonstrate that students perceived the online interactions of instructor-student more positively than the online interactions of student-student. This finding gives more support for the previous quantitative findings by noting that students valued their instructors' online interactions as more helpful for online interaction and language learning than their peers' online interactions. Students felt personally connected to their instructors more than peers to the extent that some students used emails to communicate their personal language learning issues to their instructors.

When instructors were present during online interactions, this made students feel comfortable because their instructors were available online to support their online interactions and language learning. The referential questions and corrective feedback which were produced by instructor during online interactions were seen as useful. The former encouraged students to think more and engage in online interaction with their instructors and the latter helped students to improve their linguistic accuracy.

### **Are there Significant Differences in Saudi Students' Perceptions?**

The present study found significant differences in the perceptions of Saudi EFL students. Saudi students valued their instructor-student online interactions more positively than their student-student online interactions. This finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g., AbuSeileek, 2007; Yang, 2011; T. Zhang et al., 2007). This is because Saudi students perceived the online interactions of their instructors as more knowledgeable and important than the online interactions of their peers. They also felt comfortable and personally connected with their instructors when they interacted online with them. This clearly shows that Saudi students had a more positive attitude towards their instructors' online interactions than towards their students' online interactions.

### **What are the Qualities of Saudi Students' Perceptions?**

The present study found that Saudi students had different perceptions towards their student-student and instructor-student online interactions. First, a considerable number of students valued the instructor-student online interactions as important because Saudi students benefited from their instructors' online interactions. As found, instructors' online interactions were valued as useful for students' language development because instructors' online interactions encouraged Saudi students to express their thoughts and improve their linguistic accuracy in the online environment. These findings are consistent with Yang (2011) who revealed that students benefited from the online interactions of their instructors to develop their language accuracy and

their instructors' online interactions appeared to encourage them to express their thoughts. Secondly, a substantial number of Saudi students reported that they felt comfortable interacting online with their instructors more than with their peers. This finding supports the results of Zhang et al. (2007) that students felt more comfortable when interacting online with their instructors than peers in the discussion forums. This is because students in Zhang et al. (2007) liked getting positive feedback from their instructors. In the present study, Saudi students liked their instructors' online interactions because they benefited from them as they helped them to improve their English language and support their online learning. Saudi students considered their instructors' online interactions to be reflective and useful for the development of their grammatical and spelling accuracy and encouraged their critical thinking thus strengthening the relationship between students and their instructors in the online discussion forums

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Saudi students perceive the instructor-student online interactions more positively than the student-student online interactions because instructors' online interactions encourage students to interact and develop their language. Because of the presence of instructors, instructor-student online interactions encouraged students to interact, think carefully, pay attention to language errors, be reflective, and improve linguistic accuracy more than student-student online interactions.

There are some limitations in this study. The small sample size and the homogeneity of the participants and not having female participants might have affected the results of the present study. Because there was no control group in this study, it can be difficult to claim that the online presence of the instructor influences student online L2 interactions. Thus, the results of the present study cannot be generalizable to other EFL contexts. Furthermore, interacting with EFL instructors of different cultural backgrounds may influence the perceptions of EFL students in online environments. In this study, Saudi students did not participate with their Saudi EFL instructors.

Researching the perceptions of heterogeneous population of EFL participants is needed in online L2 learning. This would allow a more definite and generalizable conclusion as to how EFL students perceive and view their peers' and instructors' online L2 interactions. Because of the specificity of this EFL context (Saudi EFL L2 learning), it is worth conducting qualitative investigations to help understand the perceptions of Saudi students and whether there are other factors, different from the ones we observed in this study, that may affect Saudi students' perceptions in their online L2 learning.

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Appendices  
Appendix A:

#### Student Questionnaires

Code: .....

#### QUESTIONNAIRE

*We appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. The responses you write in this questionnaire will be treated with total confidentiality by the researchers. After completing this questionnaire, please put it in the enclosed sealed envelope. Then, put it into the students' box located at the Faculty of Languages and Translation.*

*This questionnaire has four sections (A, B, C, and D). Before you start completing this questionnaire, please read the instructions provided in every section carefully and choose items or answer questions accordingly.*

#### A) Collecting Students' Personal and Background Information.

*Please read each question carefully and choose the best answer by selecting a or b or by writing a correct answer under questions:*

1) How old are you?

.....years old

2) Is Arabic your mother tongue language? If not, what is it?

a. Yes  b. No: .....

3) Is English your foreign language?

a. Yes  b. No

4) Do you speak other foreign languages? If yes, what are they?

a. Yes: .....  b. No

5) Have you performed an English international proficiency test (e.g., TOEFL or IELTS)?

a. Yes  b. No

What was the name of the test? .....

When did you do it? .....

What was the total score? .....

What was the score of writing? .....

6) Have you ever travelled to a country where English language is the formal language?

a. Yes  b. No

Where did you travel? .....

How long did you stay there? .....

7) Have you ever studied any English course on the Blackboard while learning English language?

a. Yes  b. No

How long have you studied using the Blackboard system? .....

How many courses did you study using the Blackboard system? .....

8) Are you currently studying English courses on the Blackboard system?

a. Yes  b. No

How many courses? .....

9) How many years have you been learning the English language?

I have been learning English language for.....years.

**B) Rating Students' Computer and Internet Literacy.**

Please rate the following items in terms of your ability in and familiarity with computers and the internet by circling one number only from 1 to 5 according to the scale in the below Table:

5	Very often
4	Often
3	Sometimes
2	Not often
1	Not at all

Please see the following example:

I use computer for my homework.	Not at all <b>1</b>	Not often <b>2</b>	Sometimes <b>(3)</b>	Often <b>4</b>	Very often <b>5</b>
---------------------------------	------------------------	-----------------------	-------------------------	-------------------	------------------------

Computer and Internet Literacy	Scale				
	Not at all	Not often	Sometimes	Often	Very often
10. I use computers.	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
11. I use the internet.	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

12. I use e-mails.	Not at all <b>1</b>	Not often <b>2</b>	Sometimes <b>3</b>	Often <b>4</b>	Very often <b>5</b>
13. I use English discussion forums on the internet.	Not at all <b>1</b>	Not often <b>2</b>	Sometimes <b>3</b>	Often <b>4</b>	Very often <b>5</b>
14. I use English chat on the internet.	Not at all <b>1</b>	Not often <b>2</b>	Sometimes <b>3</b>	Often <b>4</b>	Very often <b>5</b>
15. I use internet messenger.	Not at all <b>1</b>	Not often <b>2</b>	Sometimes <b>3</b>	Often <b>4</b>	Very often <b>5</b>
16. I use Arabic discussion forums on the internet.	Not at all <b>1</b>	Not often <b>2</b>	Sometimes <b>3</b>	Often <b>4</b>	Very often <b>5</b>
17. I use the university Blackboard educational system.	Not at all <b>1</b>	Not often <b>2</b>	Sometimes <b>3</b>	Often <b>4</b>	Very often <b>5</b>
18. I use the discussion forums of the university Blackboard educational system.	Not at all <b>1</b>	Not often <b>2</b>	Sometimes <b>3</b>	Often <b>4</b>	Very often <b>5</b>

C) **Exploring Students' Perceptions of Online Interactions with Peers and Instructor**

*According to the scale in the Table below, please rate the following items in terms of your perceptions and attitudes towards your participation in the online discussion forums of the university Blackboard educational system by circling one number only from the scale 1 to 5.*

<b>5</b>	Strongly Agree
<b>4</b>	Agree
<b>3</b>	Neither Agree/Disagree
<b>2</b>	Disagree
<b>1</b>	Strongly Disagree

First: Your interactions in student-student online exchanges.	Scale				
19. Online interactions were excellent with my peers.	Strongly Disagree <b>1</b>	Disagree <b>2</b>	Neither Agree /Disagree <b>3</b>	Agree <b>4</b>	Strongly Agree <b>5</b>
20. I felt comfortable interacting with my peers.	Strongly Disagree <b>1</b>	Disagree <b>2</b>	Neither Agree /Disagree <b>3</b>	Agree <b>4</b>	Strongly Agree <b>5</b>
21. I know my peers in the discussion forum very well.	Strongly Disagree <b>1</b>	Disagree <b>2</b>	Neither Agree /Disagree <b>3</b>	Agree <b>4</b>	Strongly Agree <b>5</b>

22. I felt personally connected with my peers.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
23. Online interactions with my peers were very important.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
24. Online interactions with my peers gave me the confidence to participate and interact.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
25. Online interactions with my peers gave me a sense of being a part of one social learning community.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
26. Online interactions of my peers motivated me to engage in interaction in the discussion forum.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
27. The topics used for online interactions motivated me to interact in the discussion forum.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
28. The length of online interactions was good.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5

<b>Second: Your interactions in instructor-student online exchanges.</b>	<b>Scale</b>				
29. Online interactions were excellent with the instructor.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
30. I felt comfortable interacting with the instructor.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
31. I felt personally connected with the instructor.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
32. Online interactions of the instructor were very important.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
33. Online interactions of the instructor gave me the confidence to participate and interact.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
34. Online interactions of the instructor gave me a sense of being a part of one social learning community.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5

	1	2	3	4	5
35. Online interactions of the instructor motivated me to engage in interaction in the discussion forum.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
36. Online interactions of the instructor supported my interactions in the online discussion forum.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
37. Online interactions of the instructor encouraged me to improve my English language in the discussion forum.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
38. Online interactions of the instructor encouraged me to compose correct grammatical sentences in the discussion forum.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
39. Online interactions of the instructor encouraged me to write correct spelling in the discussion forum.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
40. The topics used for online interactions motivated me to interact in the discussion forum.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
41. The length of online interactions was good.	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree /Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5

**D) Exploring Students' Perceptions (Open-ended Questions).**

*Please read the following questions carefully. According to your experience and feelings, write your answers clearly about your interactions in the online discussion forum in this study.*

1) Did you like to interact more in student-student or in instructor-student online exchanges? Why?

.....  
.....

2) Was the presence of the instructor in the online discussion forum very important to you? Why?

.....  
.....

3) Did you feel comfortable and socially engaged when interacting in instructor-student online exchanges? Why?

.....  
.....

4) What was the most interesting thing to you about the interactions in instructor-student online exchanges?

.....  
.....

5) What was the most interesting thing to you about the interactions in the online discussion forum in this study?

.....  
.....

6) Did you find any difficulties in using the online discussion forum, or interacting in student-student and instructor-student online exchanges? If so, please mention some of these difficulties?

.....  
.....

- 7) If you would like to write or suggest anything about your participation in this study, or interactions in student-student and instructor-student online exchanges, please feel free to do so.
- .....
- .....

***Thank you very much for your participation ☺***

**Appendix B:**

**Student Interviews**

**INTERVIEW**

*In this interview, a student has to answer the questions prompted by the researcher around a discussion table. The role of the researcher is to listen to the interviewee's answers and interaction, and to make sure that the student responds to the interviewer's questions and provide information about the study. This interview has four sections (A, B, and C). The researcher will record the students' responses on computer audio files using a digital voice recorder.*

**A) General Questions about Participation in the Present Study.**

- 1) How was your experience in participation in the online discussion forum in this study?
- 2) What was the most interesting thing to you in terms of interactions in the online discussion forum in this study?
- 3) Describe your interactions when you interacted in the online discussion forum?
- 4) What benefits did you gain from participation in the online discussion forum in this study?
- 5) Did you have any difficulties when you participated in this study?
- 6) Would you like to say anything more about interactions in the online discussion forum in this study?

**B) Questions about Interactions in Student-Student Online Exchanges.**

- 1) How was your experience in the interactions of student-student online exchanges in this study?
- 2) Were you willing to interact in student-student online exchanges in this study? Why?
- 3) Did you feel comfortable when interacting in student-student online exchanges in this study? In what way? Give some examples please?
- 4) Did you feel socially engaged when interacting in student-student online exchanges in this study? In what way? Give some examples please?
- 5) Did you feel a sense of being a part of one online social learning community when interacting in student-student online exchanges in this study? In what way?
- 6) Describe your reactions when you read the messages and posts of your peers in student-student online exchanges in this study?
- 7) How did you feel about your interactions in the online discussion forum compared to those of your peers when you interacted in student-student online exchanges in this study? Why?
- 8) What was the most interesting thing you found when you interacted in student-student online exchanges in this study?
- 9) Did the discussion topics stimulate you to interact in student-student online exchanges in this study? How? Give some examples please?
- 10) Do you think that your language improved as a result of you interaction in student-student online exchanges in this study? How? Give some examples please?
- 11) Did you have any difficulties during interactions in student-student online exchanges in this study?
- 12) Would you like to say anything more about the interactions of student-student online exchanges in this study?

**C) Questions about Interactions in Instructor-Student Online Exchanges.**

- 1) How was your experience in the interactions of instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 2) Were you willing to interact in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? Why?
- 3) Did you feel comfortable when interacting in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? In what way? Give some examples please?
- 4) Did you feel socially engaged when you interacted in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? In what way? Give some examples please?

- 5) Did you feel a sense of being a part of one online social learning community when you interacted in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? How?
- 6) What were your feelings about the presence of the instructor during instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 7) Describe your reactions when you read the messages and posts of the instructor in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 8) Did the presence of the instructor encourage you to interact in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? How?
- 9) How did you feel about your interactions in the online discussion forum compared to those of your peers when you interacted in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? Why?
- 10) What was the most interesting thing to you when you interacted in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 11) Did the discussion topics stimulate you to interact in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? How? Give some examples please?
- 12) Do you think that your language improved as a result of interacting with the instructor in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? How?
- 13) Did you have any difficulties during interactions in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 14) Would you like to say anything more about your interactions in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?

***Thank you very much for your participation!***