

Introduction

The early focus of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) was on using the computer as a learning tool, and this was due to the limited access to the internet in the 1980s and 1990s. Later, the availability of the internet facilitated the construction of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) that have been developed to facilitate interaction and collaboration (Schwienhorst, 2002). VLEs have been incorporated into many higher education institutions. Regarding the field of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), there has been a clear preference for combining Virtual Language Learning Environments (VLLEs) and flipped learning approaches over traditional in-class learning. VLLEs appear in various forms, such as platforms, games and social networks (Mroz, 2014). This preference for utilising VLLEs is due to a number of reasons. First, many EFL studies have revealed the positive impact that VLLEs bring to language learners in terms of learning development despite the existing challenges (e.g., training, cost and security issues) (Mroz, 2014). What facilitates the development of the learners' language skills is the fact that VLLEs provide a space for collaborative learning (Mroz, 2014). Collaborative learning is a "social process of knowledge building" (Miyake & Kirschner, 2014, p. 420). This process requires that learners work together when solving problems or completing tasks. Additionally, many linguists believe that VLLEs can create a learning environment that resembles the culture of the target language, and consequently, this can further facilitate language learning (Mroz, 2014). Also, the incorporation of VLEs, which entails the use of technology, meets "the needs of digital learners" (Gamble, 2018, p. 23). VLLEs is not obstacle-free. The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Saudi university students towards online learning during the COVID-19 quarantine period. This work presents one of so many stories around the world regarding education in the time of COVID-19. There are some expectations across the world that COVID-19 will persist for months and will continue to affect the next academic semester. Many universities around the world have made their decisions to continue with online lectures for the coming academic year. It is hoped that this study will allow educational authorities and instructors to get a sense of how learners experience online learning in order to improve the delivery of online courses and advance teaching innovation in their contexts. Also, learners' experiences with VLLEs can be an effective source for informing the design and content of professional development courses for language instructors, more particularly when teaching in a time of unease. The focus on using Blackboard (hereafter BB) in this study has emerged from the fact that it is a common teaching and learning platform at many Saudi universities and at many international universities. Accordingly, this study answers the following question:

What are the students' perceptions towards learning via BB during quarantine?

This main question is divided into the following sub-questions:

- a) What are the benefits of BB learning as perceived by learners?
- b) What are the problems with BB learning as perceived by learners?

Literature Review

VLLEs: Merits and Barriers

There are two delivery modes of online courses: Asynchronous and synchronous. An asynchronous mode of learning refers to the delivery of learning resources and materials via Learning Management System platforms (LMS), such as BB or Moodle. "Asynchronous online communication does not require the real-time participation of instructor and students, which can

be supported through tools such as e-mails, discussion boards, blogs, wikis, or video/audio recordings" (Huang & Hsiao, 2012, p.15). This mode allows students to study at their own pace (Reese, 2014). Synchronous mode involves the real-time delivery of course contents. Synchronous software allow "students and instructors to communicate orally, exchange messages through typing, upload PowerPoint presentations, transmit video, [or] surf websites together" (Mc Brien, Jones & Cheng, 2009, p. 2). It has been claimed that "Synchronous e-learning, commonly supported by media such as videoconferencing and chat, has the potential to support e-learners in the development of learning communities." (Hrastinski, 2008, p.52). It offers whiteboard, video and audio streaming and sharing files (Cornelius, 2014; Rudd & Rudd, 2014). The non-verbal communication signals accompanying the synchronous conferencing sessions make learners feel more connected and engaged with their peers and instructors (Rudd & Rudd, 2014). This helps to overcome the students' feeling of isolation occurs in asynchronous environments (Tunceren, Kaur, Mullins & Slimp, 2015). However, technical problems, such as the internet speed, might stand as a barrier to students' engagement with synchronous platforms (Rudd & Rudd, 2014). Although it might seem that asynchronous tools are less communicative than the synchronous tools, some studies claim that asynchronous tools can improve learners' cognitive skills (e.g., Ogbonna, Ibezim & Obi, 2019).

In the field of higher education, there are several multidisciplinary studies that have examined the merits and challenges of VLEs platforms and modes of learning in different contexts, and various (sometimes contradictory) results have been obtained; ultimately, this keeps the debate on limiting or expanding VLEs in higher education very much alive. For instance, many studies have investigated the merits and challenges of using BB, which is the focus of this study. Some studies found that university students value the communicative aspect of BB that leads to active and equal participation opportunities in asynchronous environments (e.g., Huang & Hsiao, 2012). In contrary, other studies found that students believed that the asynchronous mode of BB does not provide them with a space for active learning because of the lack of direct communication with peers and instructors and the time needed for participation, so the ignorance of answering others' question was obvious. These students also believed that BB sessions should be used as a complementary tool to in-class teaching (e.g., Vonderwell, 2003; Wilson & Whitlock, 1998). Some studies revealed that the synchronous mode is valued as an interactional tool by learners (e.g., Chen, Dobinson & Kent, 2020; Guo, 2013), but not by staff (e.g., Heirdsfield, Walker, Tambyah & Beutel, 2011).

Regarding the field of ELF, some studies have found that using asynchronous discussion forums for EFL learning increases learners' anxiety (e.g., Bailey, Lee & Vorst, 2018). In contrast, other studies have reported that learners feel more confident when learning via these online forums. For example, Thompson and Ku (2005) found that most Chinese students expressed more confidence when sharing opinions in asynchronous online forums than in face-to-face discussions. Similarly, Zhao and McDougall (2008) claimed that asynchronous online communication provides those students who may have linguistic anxieties with more time for understanding and composing in the communication process. The reason for this variation in the research findings on VLLEs is that the teaching and learning of languages is localised and context-based (Shaw, 2009). Kumaravadivelu (2003, p. 33) argues that pedagogical strategies should be "location-specific, classroom oriented and innovative strategies". In accordance with Kumaravadivelu's (2003)

proposition of a post-method pedagogy, it is not logical to assume that a pedagogy that works for language learners in one context will work for other language learners in other contexts. This makes the generalisation of research findings regarding VLLEs difficult.

In the Saudi Arabian context, universities generally tend to use BB for providing blended learning courses. However, studies conducted in the field of EFL learning for examining and comparing both synchronous and asynchronous aspects of BB are limited in number. This indicates that the use of BB for learning EFL at Saudi universities requires more investigations. One study that does examine BB learning is the work of Fageeh and Mekheimer (2013) who found that students have positive attitudes towards asynchronous discussion forums; however, they feel more comfortable in conventional face-to-face communication than in asynchronous discussions. Another study by Pusuluri, Mahasneh & Alsayer (2017) focused on the use of BB by EFL learners at Al Jouf University, which is located in Saudi Arabia. Their study revealed that learners appreciate the fact that BB widens the scope of their learning experience. However, many learners were neutral about their preference for BB learning over face-to-face learning. Also, many learners were neutral about BB being considered as an interesting learning environment. Pusuluri et al. (2017) associated this neutrality with the learners' insufficient awareness of the benefits of BB. Another study by Ali (2017) has highlighted the positive attitudes of EFL learners towards using BB and related their attitudes to their high motivation levels. A recent study by Al-Mubireek (2019) compared students' use of two different platforms, including BB and Oxford IQ. His study found that students generally revealed positive attitudes towards learning via online platforms. However, the students in Al-Mubireek's study were only required to participate in online learning for two hours per week. A study by Anas (2020) at Bisha University confirms that Saudi students value blended learning and appreciate the interactivity of online tools, such as discussion forums and collaborative activities.

It should be noted that comparing synchronous and asynchronous aspects of BB in the Saudi context were beyond the scope of the previous studies. Also, all of these studies used online learning as a complementary learning mode to in-class learning (i.e., blended learning). In such circumstances, students spent a few hours a week engaging in online learning in order to vary their learning resources and experiences. Thus, this variation that characterises blended courses may have led to the students' more positive views towards online learning.

The case of blended learning differs from the recent case of shifting all education online due to the spread of COVID-19 across the globe. The world was simply not ready for these unusual circumstances. As a result, students and instructors have found themselves without any options or alternatives to online learning. Like what happened in many parts of the world, the quarantine in Saudi Arabia was announced suddenly in early March without allowing for any time to make preparations, but the Saudi Ministry of Education was very careful to keep all schools and universities on track with their educational plans. This was obvious in their regular instructions on online teaching and assessment. Nevertheless, significant challenges have accompanied this educational shift. Many courses were not designed for online learning, and many students were not used to online lecturing and testing. Consequently, concerns were raised by educationalists regarding these sudden changes (Alkhazim, 2020). This was not the case in Saudi Arabia alone. Educators in many other countries that have shifted exclusively to online education have raised

concerns about the validity and effectiveness of this type of education (e.g., Ross, 2020). Thus, understanding the distinctive learning experiences of language learners during this exceptional time could be an important step towards facilitating online learning, teaching and assessment particularly in the case of catastrophes.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing a full repertoire of learners' experiences with online learning means that learners' evaluations of their own learning must be considered, and these evaluations should not be limited to their perspectives on the particular design features of the platforms. In order to evaluate the learning that occurs in VLLEs, the meaning of learning needs to be transparent. The interpretation of learning in this study is informed by Sfard's (1998) learning metaphors. Sfard identifies two metaphors of learning: the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor. The acquisition metaphor construes learning as a social process for expanding linguistic knowledge. This notion of learning relies on the Vygotskian theory of social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). The second view of learning is based on Lavar and Wenger's (1991) interpretation of learning as participation and engagement in a collaborative process. Sfard (1998) insisted on focusing on these two metaphors in order to obtain a full understanding of what learning is. Ultimately, acquisition and participation together can lead to learning transfer. Transfer involves the application of the acquired knowledge and skills in real-life situations (Haskell, 2001). Billing (2007) identifies self-monitoring and collaboration as the required conditions for facilitating learning transfer. In line with these views, this study adapts Sfard's (1998) two metaphors of learning in order to understand students' perceptions towards learning via BB. The next section discusses the methodology used in this study.

Methodology

Design

Since the purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of university students towards VLLEs during an exceptional time (i.e., the COVID-19 quarantine period), the case study design matched this purpose. Case studies can clarify the complexities found with respect to themes in the field of applied linguistics (Duff, 2008), but they are not meant for the generalisation of findings; case studies in applied linguistics are meant for examining societal, educational and linguistic issues that affect language while taking context into consideration (Duff, 2008). Educational policies and teaching practices are usually shaped by the findings of case studies (Duff, 2008). What was expected from the findings of this case study was identifying the merits and challenges of VLLEs in order to help educational authorities and instructors in higher education to rethink VLLE policies and practices to save education in a time of an emergency.

Context of this Study

This study took place at Taif University (TU), located in the western part of Saudi Arabia. Upon the announcement of the quarantine early March 2020, TU made every effort to provide both instructors and students with support and facilities to make their online journey fruitful. The university announced the availability of data SIM cards and laptops for students who might need them. Also, there was a WhatsApp service provided by TU to answer urgent technical issues faced by teaching staff and students. Tutorial videos were posted for teaching staff on how to use BB effectively (including information on preparing BB lectures, administering exams and using

different assessment tools). These tutorials were published and made public over social media. Similarly, via TU official Twitter account and emails, students received some videos and instructions on how to use BB for uploading assignments, attending online lectures and taking exams. Around this time, the Saudi Ministry of Education sent a letter to all universities stressing the need for varying the use of assessment tools. The next section provides more details on the participants and courses taught to them.

Background of the Course and Participants

There were 25 female bachelor of arts (BA) students in the designated English Morphology course. The instructor (the author) taught this group of students in a previous semester, and the majority of them were considered to be highly motivated and enthusiastic. The English Morphology course required students to master three core types of learning outcomes: knowledge (understanding main morphological concepts of English language), thinking skills (demonstrating higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation) and competency skills (working on collaborative tasks and using technology effectively for learning English morphology). The students received a BB readiness survey at the beginning of their online experience early in March of 2020. The survey was adapted from Online Readiness Assessment by Vicki Williams and The Pennsylvania State University, and it is designed for assessing students' readiness for studying online. The reason for using this questionnaire in this study was because the instructor was not sure about her students' readiness for moving online. The survey is available at this link:

https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7QCNUPsyH9f012B?s=246aa3a5c4b64bb386543eab834f8e75

Table 1. gives the background information of the students' readiness level for studying online.

Table 1. *Responses to the BB readiness survey (computer skills)*

Survey items	Agree	Somewhat agree	Disagree
I am pretty good at using the computer.	76%	0	24%
I am comfortable surfing the Internet.	48%	44%	8%
I am comfortable with things like doing searches, setting bookmarks, and downloading files.	44%	28%	28%
I am comfortable with things like installing software and changing the	36%	24%	40%

configuration settings on my computer.			
--	--	--	--

Note 1. Adapted from Williams and Pennsylvania State University

According to Table one, the students' computer skills varied. For instance, more than half of the students either disagreed or agreed to some extent that they were comfortable with their search and downloading skills, compared to 44% who expressed that they felt comfortable with these skills. Table two reveals the perceived availability of online learning support and facilities.

Table 2. Responses to BB readiness survey (availability of online support and facilities)

Survey item	Yes	No
I know someone who can help me if I have computer problems.	96%	4%
I have access to a printer.	76%	24%
I am connected to the Internet with a fairly fast, reliable connection such as a DSL or cable modem.	64%	36%
I have access to a computer with virus protection software on it.	80%	20%
I have headphones or speakers and a microphone to use if a class has a videoconference.	52%	48%
My browser will play several common multimedia (video and audio) formats.	88%	12%

Note 1. Adapted from Williams and Pennsylvania State University

According to Table two, 96% students knew someone who could help them with technical problems. This might suggest that they did not have any critical unresolved issues during their online studies. On the other hand, 48% of these students did not have headphones, which could have adversely affected their study. This will be reviewed further in the results.

Instruments and Data Analysis

As seen in the introduction, most studies on learners' attitudes towards VLLEs have employed questionnaires, and these have sometimes been combined with interviews. This study approached

learners' attitudes as reflected in their learning logs, which were designed to evaluate their learning journey. Logs can provide students with more space for reflecting on their learning (Morphy, 2008). Students were given guided questions to facilitate writing in their logs (See the Appendix section). Common themes were then identified and highlighted by the researcher. Fifty percent of the learning logs and identified themes were checked for reliability by another researcher, and the level of agreement was almost similar (90% agreement). Their reflections in the logs were validated by their weekly attendance of online lectures and participation rates in the online forums. Pseudonyms were used to hide the participants' identities.

Research Procedures

Online classes began on March 8, 2020 and lasted for seven weeks. After understanding students' readiness for online learning as reported in the questionnaire, the instructor had to reconsider the implemented teaching practices to overcome the technical challenges identified, reduce stress levels and maintain students' high levels of motivation. Here are some of the teaching practices that were reported to be helpful for students' learning:

- The instructor considered the students' mental health and attempted to create a stress-free learning environment. In order to reduce the stress levels among my students, the instructor assured them that they would continue learning in the same effective and collaborative ways that they had already practiced in the class. The instructor was available for them via BB sessions and email to address their concerns.
- Another important mission was creating an interactive learning environment. Thus, it was important to remind students of the course learning outcomes that we had discussed earlier in the semester and to relate them to higher-order thinking skills (i.e., analysis, synthesis and evaluation). The students were able to see that thinking skills could be easily applied virtually, as will be seen later in the Results section.
- The instructor utilised BB for creating and uploading helpful learning materials, such as research articles that contrasted the morphological aspects of different languages and tutorials uploaded on YouTube. During the classes, the instructor used BB tools such as sharing and enlarging slides and documents, allowing students to speak and write during class and asking questions to make sure that they were following what was happening in the class.
- Realising that the students had not had an earlier experience with online lecturing in conjunction with their reported fears about taking online exams, the instructor had to rethink the assessment tools. The new assessment plan included forums, online synchronous discussions, learning logs, quizzes, extra-curricular activities, midterm exams and final exams. In order to familiarise the students with online exams and reduce their stress levels, the instructor gave them mock exams before their midterm and final exams.

Results and Discussion

Generally speaking, this study has revealed that students prefer learning via asynchronous tools to synchronous tools, a finding that differs from other studies on VLEs (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Guo, 2013). When comparing BB learning with traditional in-class learning, the students preferred in-class learning, which is in line with the findings by Fageeh and Mekheimer (2013). Also, this study has shown that students' high levels of motivation do not necessarily imply that they have positive

attitudes towards VLLEs. The instructor taught this same group of students in a previous academic semester, and the majority of them were perceived to be highly motivated; however, they revealed a strong preference for in-class learning over online learning for reasons that will be discussed below. Interestingly, this finding is different from Ali's (2017) on the correlation between high motivation levels and positive attitudes towards VLLEs. However, it could be said that the learners' high motivation levels towards learning have led to their realisation of the importance of completing their learning experience successfully even though they may prefer traditional in-class learning to the use of VLLEs. The following sub-sections discuss the strengths and weaknesses of VLLEs as identified by these students in their learning logs. It should be noted here that the students' mother tongue is Arabic, and the logs were written in English. This explains why some quotations might include a few structural errors. Following the analyses and discussions of the learning logs, data from the students' participation in the BB forums will be considered to validate the study findings.

Barriers to Online Learning

Lack of Required Information Technology (IT) Skills and Facilities

As reported by the learners in the BB readiness survey, there were some barriers to online learning. First, 48% of the learners did not have headphones during the first weeks of using BB, and this affected their communication with their instructor and peers, more particularly in the synchronous sessions. The only way for these students to communicate was through writing in the chat box instead of oral participation. Facing technical problems has been a common issue (Rudd & Rudd, 2014). Furthermore, in order to help those students who reported in the BB readiness survey that they were not confident with downloading files (28%) or had limited IT skills (28%), the instructor sent all of the students all of the required reading materials as PDF files; the instructor then explained to them how to download and save these files and use some PDF features such as editing and adding notes. In order to avoid technical problems, the instructor directed the students to the WhatsApp number for the TU Technical Division, who was in charge of resolving the students' online issues. Therefore, the job of an instructor was not limited to online teaching. It should be noted that there were some issues out of the hands of authorities, such as the slow speeds of the internet, and this was more of a global issue. However, the instructor recorded the classes so the students could access them whenever the internet started working properly.

Regarding the issue of internet speed and the lack of headphones, one student said, "My experience with virtual classes mainly depends on internet connection, but overall it is good...I hate to type my answer because I am kind of slow when it comes to using a keyboard."

In a similar vein, Lina wrote, "Many students face problems with the internet in answering exams or attending lectures, but for submitting assignments it is much easier. What I like about BB is that the sessions are recorded and we go back to them whenever we need."

Distractions at Home

In their learning logs, some students reported that studying at home was not working well for them. This was due to distractions at home. For example, Manal wrote "I think BB does not help us to achieve learning outcomes because sometimes I have problem with the internet connection, or I

have some work to do at my home". Hind wrote: "I prefer traditional classes. Home is distractive. My experience with online classes mainly depends on internet speed, but overall it is good."

Another student explained why home is not a convenient place for studying online, stating, "my little sisters are always noisy, so I keep the mic off all the time and use the chat box to participate."

Lack of Physical Interaction

All these students were not used to taking lectures online. The use of BB at TU for online lecturing was limited to a few courses for evaluation purposes. The majority of the students reported that they preferred in-class learning to BB learning since the latter lacks physical interaction. In-class physical interaction is highly valued by students as appeared in other studies (e.g., Fageeh & Mekheimer, 2013; Vonderwell, 2003).

"I prefer face to face communication it is more interesting and comfortable for me"
(Ameera/ learning log)

"Finally, I am not really satisfied with learning via blackboard. I think learning in traditional classes is easier and better for my learning and understanding. Overall, I still having wonderful time learning and studying morphology." (Reema/ learning log)

"I prefer traditional classes to the online ones. going to uni makes me more productive and I took studying seriously which is something missing in the online classes." (Lina/ learning log) "Finally, learning via Blackboard or online classes for me wasn't a good choice. Because in traditional classes sitting on a chair next to a classmate listening and interacting with our teacher is a way much better than being alone holding my phone and distracted between the book or taking notes, not to mention the slow internet connection or mic problems."
(Joory/ learning logs)

Not an Appropriate Venue for Taking Exams

BB was found to be especially stressful for a number of students during exam periods.

"I always become anxious during online exams and can't focus on the questions because of the short time given." (Sana/ learning log).

This finding confirms the results reported by Bailey et al. (2018), who found that anxiety levels increase in online learning environments.

Merits of Online Learning

A Preferred Learning Mode for Shy Learners

Despite the challenges that the students reported, some advantages of learning online were also identified by the students. For instance, online learning provided an opportunity for shy students to more easily express their opinions. This was very obvious in the discussion forums. After discussing some topics, the instructor set up a forum for students to share their views and related

evidence in order to facilitate engagement in active learning. Interestingly, it was found that the forums were helpful for shy learners who used to hesitate when participating in class. Heba, a shy learner, wrote "I think learning in an actual class is better but via technology we could ask questions comfortably and we can go back to the recorded classes whenever we want, so there is a lot of advantages and disadvantages in both ways"

Laila, who was another shy student, said the following when comparing traditional classes with virtual classes: "Each one of them has its own advantages and disadvantages, yet virtual classes are the best for me because I feel more comfortable while asking questions and participating."

These findings are in line with those reported by Thompson and Ku (2005) and Zhao and McDougall (2008) who claim that anxiety is actually reduced in asynchronous online discussions.

Building an Interactive Learning Environment

Some students appreciated working on collaborative tasks on BB:

"I realized the importance of Morphology when I tried to understand the word itself, and how it was built by analysing the affixes of the word. I feel more engaged when I make discussions with my classmates. It really helped me to understand each point and to reinforce my understanding. Also clarifying some points to my classmates helped a lot." (Joory/ learning logs)

Achieving Learning Outcomes (to Some Extent)

Some students thought that despite the challenges of online learning, it had still helped them to reach the course learning outcomes.

"I honestly didn't like it at all due to the problems I have faced such as internet connection problems, but overall I can't say it didn't help me in achieving the course outcomes, of course it did." (Renad)

In their reflections, some students were very specific about how this course, which was partly conducted over BB, improved their learning. They talked about the transfer of some critical thinking skills (e.g., analysis and evaluation) to other courses, including translation courses.

"I found word formation is the most helpful topic for understanding the relationship between morphology and other courses. It helped me a lot in translation because I came across some new words that I didn't know their meaning, but I could guess the meaning from their word formation. However, the most challenging point was when we divided words from other languages into morphemes and wrote the morphological rules that were used. It was difficult at the beginning because I didn't even know the meaning of these words, but we did a lot of exercises until the process became easy for me. For thinking skills, I think I kind of master 'noticing' and 'application' skills. For example, in identifying the processes in words of other languages, I used to notice the changes and the processes used and also applying the same processes to other words, even if they were not

English words.” (Hajar/ learning log) Salwa agrees with Hajar on how this course helped her in her translation course, stating,

“Mostly all the information we took in this course are related to the other courses. For example, learning about affixes helped to know the meaning of words that I didn't met before. This strategy is important in translation courses, since we're meeting new terms every class.”Reham mentioned additional evidence of transfer:

“This course is full of useful information that I use in all the courses and in my language acquisition in general. For example, the study of the word formation processes helped me in the Language Acquisition course specially in understanding the stages that children go through when acquiring the language. It helped me understand which of the morphological morphemes children develop first. Since the Language Acquisition course is all about the structure of language and how it's acquired, this morphology course eased things for me. I think all the information I learned in this course will absolutely benefit me in the future because I'm already analyzing any word my eye falls on so I think will always carry these information and keep developing them since I now like morphology I'll keep progressing.”

This transfer of skills was a result of the intensive collaborative online tasks that the students were engaged in. This suggests that collaborative learning, although not occurring in class, can lead to effective learning transfer (Billing, 2007; Haskell, 2001). Also, it shows that despite the disadvantages of online learning, learning can occur with the facilitation of instructors who vary the learning resources and assessment tools. The transfer of knowledge and skills to other courses indicates that the students have achieved the two learning outcomes of increased knowledge and improved skills mentioned earlier in the Methodology. Further evidence in support of this is the fact that students demonstrated the abilities to evaluate their learning experiences and explain how the identified merits and barriers of BB had affected their learning.

In order to further validate that the course outcomes were achieved, this study considered the number of students' posts in the BB forums. There were four forums in total, and Tables 3 and 4 show the extracted engagement indicators.

Table 3. *Students' total participation in BB forums*

Total number of posts	Total number of participants	Total number of forums
260	25	4

Table 4. *Samples of students' engagement indicators in BB forums*

BB forums	Number of participants	Total number of posts	The number of initiated posts	The number of replies
Forum 2	24	102	24	78

Forum 4	19	84	17	67
---------	----	----	----	----

In Forum two, almost all of the students participated in the discussion. There were 24 initiated posts which referred to newly posted information, extended discussions on a related topic and questions asked. The 24 initiated posts received 78 replies. The number of participants in Forum four was lower than the others (19 students), which means that six students did not take part in this forum. However, this did not affect the students' active engagement in the discussions. There were 17 initiated posts, which is a relatively high number when compared to the number of participants. The 17 initiated posts received 67 replies. The students' participation in the forums indicates that the majority of the students have achieved the competency skills, a learning outcome which required students to collaborate with others successfully and use technology effectively.

The analyses of the students' learning logs where they identified some evidence of learning transfer and participation rates in the BB forums revealed how learning can be interpreted and assessed in accordance with Sfard's (1998) definition of learning as a process of acquisition and participation. What seems to facilitate transfer of learning is participation because it allows learners to practise what they had learned. It could be said that transfer is the ultimate outcome of acquisition and participation. Therefore, Sfard's (1998) two metaphors (i.e., the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor) allow language educators and instructors to understand what language learning refers to and how it can be assessed.

To sum up, this study highlights the benefits and challenges that VLLEs bring for students. This study has shown that students prefer learning via asynchronous tools to learning via synchronous tools, a finding that confirms Fageeh and Mekheimer's (2013) study and contradicts other studies on VLEs (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Guo, 2013). Due to challenges experienced by students in this study, such as the lack of physical interaction and having technical problems, it is concluded that online learning cannot fully replace traditional in-class teaching, a point confirmed in other studies (e.g., Fageeh & Mekheimer, 2013; Vonderwell, 2003). By understanding students' experiences with BB learning, institutions can produce a back-up plan for replacing traditional teaching with VLEs in a time of an emergency. Institutions are now required to increase the number of online teaching development courses provided for their instructors, so instructors should always be on standby in case education is shifted online for any reason, as in the case of the COVID-19 quarantine period. Instructors should open a discussion channel with their students in order to become aware of their needs and understand barriers to online learning. Such open discussions will lead to constructive innovation in teaching practices. Also, as part of their commitment to society, local organisations should contribute to the advancement of education by providing educational institutions and their students with technical support (e.g., laptops, iPads or headphones) to reduce the stress of learning in a time of unease. Finally, students should be aware of their responsibility as learners who must spare no efforts when engaging in VLLEs in order to achieve their learning outcomes. The following figure, proposed by the author, identifies all of the parties involved in the success of university students' learning in VLEs.

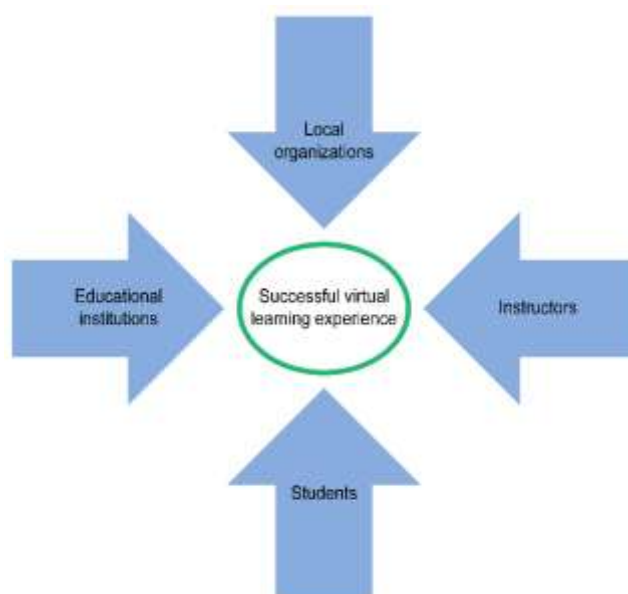


Figure 1. Advancing VLLEs in a time of unease

Figure one shows that successful virtual learning experience requires the active collaboration of all involved parties: local organizations that are known for their contribution to the community service activities and who can support learners with their educational needs, the educational institutions who are responsible for providing students with all necessary needs of IT services and knowledge resources, the students who are aware of their needs and who can lead their learning journeys and the instructors who can facilitate learning and can guide their students towards effective learning.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study represents a thin slice of the world's concerns associated with the educational shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Issues regarding students' readiness for this mode of education have been of concern in many countries. The case study reported in this article investigated the perceptions of Saudi university students towards learning via BB. The students' learning logs that evaluated their own learning experiences with asynchronous and synchronous tools formed the main source for the study data. The study revealed that the students were aware of the benefits and challenges associated with VLLEs, and that they favoured traditional in-class learning to VLLEs. When comparing asynchronous and synchronous environments, students preferred the asynchronous environment due to its flexibility. Unlike some existing studies, this study explains that motivated students can become more anxious students in VLLEs, and that many students prefer physical interaction. The fact that some of the findings reported in this study were not in line with findings of studies conducted in similar contexts highlights the need for carrying out further investigations of university students' perceptions and experiences with VLLEs. Such investigations will inform the plans of institutions when education shifts fully online in critical situations. Also, these investigations will contribute to the development of teaching practices and the design of professional development courses aimed at higher education instructors faced with unusual circumstances.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all the participants for their endless cooperation during the conduction of this study.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

About the Author:

Haifa A. Al-Nofaie is an associate professor of applied linguistics from Saudi Arabia. She holds a PHD in Applied Linguistics from Newcastle University, UK. She is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK, since August 2018. Dr Al-Nofaie was a series cultural advisor to ELT Oxford University Press between 2014 and 2015. She has published research papers on language teaching and learning in international journals produced by well-known publishers (Elsevier, Taylor and Francis and EQUINOX). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8984-8777>

References

- Ali, J. (2017). Blackboard as a motivator for Saudi EFL students: A psycholinguistic study. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 7(5), 144–151. Doi:10.5539/ijel.v7n5p144
- Alkhazim, M. A. (2020). Distance education is more than blackboard. *Al-Jazirah*, 5 May . Available at: <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2020/20200405/ln22.htm>
- Al-Mubireek, A. (2019). E-learning in the english classroom: Comparing two e-learning platforms impacting preparatory year students' language learning. *CALL-EJ*, 20(2), 19–37.
- Anas, A. (2020). Perceptions of Saudi Students to Blended Learning Environments at the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on CALL* (6). 261-277. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call6.17>
- Bailey, D., Lee, A., & Vorst, T. (2018). An investigation of differences and changes in L2 writing anxiety between blended and conventional english language learning contexts. *CALL-EJ*, 18(1), 22–39.
- Billing, D. (2007). Teaching for transfer of core/key skills in higher education: cognitive skills. *Higher Education*, 53, 483–516. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-5628-5>.
- Chen, J., Dobinson, T., & Kent, S. (2020). Students' Perspectives on the Impact of Blackboard Collaborate on Open University Australia (OUA) Online Learning. *Journal of Educators Online*, 17(1). Available at: https://www.thejeo.com/archive/2020_17_1/chengchiang_chendobinson__kent
- Cornelius, S. (2014). Facilitating in a demanding environment: Experiences of teaching in virtual classrooms using web conferencing. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 45(2), 260–271. Doi:10.1111/bjet.12016
- Duff, P. (2008). *Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics*. New York, NY: Erlbaum/Taylor & Francis.
- Fageeh, A., & Mekheimer, M. (2013). Effects of BlackBoard on EFL academic writing and attitudes. *JALT CALL Journal*, 9(2), 169-196. DOI: 10.29140/jaltcall.v9n2.154

- Gamble C (2018) Exploring EFL university students' acceptance of e-learning using TAM. *Kwansei Gakuin University Humanities Review*, 22, 23–37. Doi:<http://hdl.handle.net/10236/00026403>
- Guo, S. (2013). Applying web-conferencing in a beginners' Chinese class. In *Proceedings of Electric Dreams. Proceedings ASCILITE 2013 Sydney* (pp. 345–349). Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education. Retrieved from <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/171148/>
- Haskell, R. (2001). *Transfer of Learning: Cognition, Instruction and Reasoning*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Heirdsfield, A., Walker, S., Tambyah, M., & Beutel, D. (2011). Blackboard as an online learning environment: What do teacher education students and staff think?. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(7), 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n7.4>
- Hrastinski, S. (2008). Asynchronous and synchronous e-learning. *Educause Quarterly*, 31(4), 51-55. Retrieved from: <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2008/11/asynchronous-and-synchronous-elearning#fn7>
- Huang, X. S., & Hsiao, E. L. (2012). Synchronous and asynchronous communication in an online environment: Faculty experiences and perceptions. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 13(1), 15–30. Retrieved from: <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/131977>
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for Language Teaching*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lavar, J., & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mc Brien, J. L., Jones, P. & Cheng, R. (2009). Virtual Spaces: Employing a synchronous online classroom to facilitate student engagement in online learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(3), 1–17.
- Miyake, N., & Kirschner, P. D. (2014). The social and interactive dimensions of collaborative learning. In R. K. Sawyer (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Sciences* (pp. 418-438). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Morphy, L. (2008). Learning logs and strategy development for distance and other independent language learners. In S. Hurd, & T. Lewis (eds), *Language Learning Strategies in Independent Settings* (pp. 199-217). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Mroz, A. (2014). 21st Century virtual language learning environments (VLEs). *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 8(8), 330–343. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12089>
- Ogbonna, C.G., Ibezim, N.E. & Obi, C.A. (2019). Synchronous versus asynchronous e-learning in teaching word-processing: An experimental approach. *South African Journal of Education*, 39(2). Doi: 10.15700/saje.v39n2a1383
- Pusuluri, S., Mahasneh, A., & Alsayer, B. (2017) The application of blackboard in the english courses at Al Jouf University: perceptions of students. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 7(2), 106–111. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0702.03>
- Reese, S. A. (2014). Online learning environments in higher education: Connectivism vs. dissociation. *Education and Information Technologies*, 20(3), 579–588. Doi:10.1007/s10639-013-9303-7
- Ross, J. (2020). Crisis-driven online exam shift ‘chance to boost academic integrity. *Times higher education*, Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/crisis-driven-online-exam-shift-chance-boost-academic-integrity>

- Rudd, D. P. II., & Rudd, D. P. (2014). The value of video in online instruction. *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies*, 13, 1–7.
- Schwienhorst, K. (2002). Why virtual, why environments? Implementing virtual reality concepts in computer-assisted language learning. *Simulation & Gaming*, 33(2), 196–209. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878102332008>
- Sfard, A. (1998) On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one. *Educational Researcher*, 27(2), 4–13. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X027002004>
- Shaw, P. A. (2009). The syllabus is dead, long live the syllabus: thoughts on the state of language curriculum, content, language, tasks, projects, materials, wikis, blogs and the World Wide Web. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 3(5), 1266–1283. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818X.2009.00154.x>
- Thompson, L., & Ku, H.Y. (2005). Chinese graduate students' experiences and attitudes toward online learning. *Educational Media International*, 42(1), 33–47. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523980500116878>
- Tunceren, L., Kaur, A., Mullins, C., & Slimp, M. (2015). Technology review: Personalizing the online enterprise of college learning through synchronous activity. *The Community College Enterprise*, 21(2), 103–106. Available at: <https://www.schoolcraft.edu/cce/search-archives/362>
- Vonderwell, S. (2003). An examination of asynchronous communication experiences and perspectives of students in an online course: A case study. *The Internet and higher education*, 6, 77–90. Doi:10.1016/S1096-7516(02)00164-1.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, T., & Whitlock, D. (1998). Monitoring the online behavior of distance learning students. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 14, 91 – 99.
- Zhao, N., & McDougall, D. E. (2008) Cultural influences on Chinese students' asynchronous online learning in a Canadian university. *Canadian Journal of Distance Education*, 22(2), 59–80. Doi: <http://hdl.handle.net/1807/30067>

Appendix: Guiding questions for writing the learning logs

- At what moment have I realized the importance of studying morphology?
- At what moments did I feel most engaged? (You need to mention examples of activities/discussions or assignments you did in the synchronous and asynchronous environments).
- Which information did I find most helpful in understanding the relationship between morphology and other courses that I'm studying now or will study in the future?
- Which information or experience did I find most confusing or challenging? Why?
- What thinking skills did I practice and master in this course? What should I need to do in the future to develop these skills?
- Finally, do you think that learning via BlackBoard has helped you much in achieving the course outcomes. If you choose yes or no, you need to support your answers with reasons and examples.