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EFL Students' Perceptions of a Blended Learning Environment: Advantages, Limitations and Suggestions for Improvement

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Abstract

This study explores King Khalid University English as Foreign Language (EFL) students' views regarding the advantages and limitations of merging the features of face-to-face language instruction and online language learning via the Blackboard learning management system in a new pedagogical approach called Blended Learning. The study also examines students' suggestions for improving the quality of Blended Learning courses. The sample consists of 160 male students. The participants completed a 33-item questionnaire. The results indicate the clear advantages of this new experience in broadening students' reading opportunities and enriching their English vocabulary. Moreover, the component on advantages clearly demonstrates how Blended Learning provides an environment for more effective employment of indirect language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990) such as meta-cognitive strategies (arranging and planning learning), affective strategies (confidence enhancement), and social strategies (cooperating with others).The limitations and problems of Blended Learning highlighted by the respondents are followed by a number of practical suggestions for addressing these drawbacks, including solving technical problems, providing proper training to students, increasing the number of labs, and recognizing excellent performance of both instructors and students. Translating these suggestions into an action plan and a road map will enhance the effectiveness of using Blended Learning to create supportive learning opportunities for language learners.

Keywords: E-learning, Blended learning, EFL learners, advantages, limitations, suggestions

1. Introduction

With the advent of Learning Management Systems (LMS), universities began to place courses online, track students' progress and communicate with students effectively in various manners. King Khalid University (KKU) in Saudi Arabia is no exception. The e-learning movement was inaugurated into the teaching-learning process at this university in 2007. KKU, to familiarize its staff with e-learning and its applications, provided the required training for faculty members in various workshops, training sessions and seminars.

KKU adopted a three-level strategy touse and implemente-learning: the first level is supportive e-learning, which is a requirement for all faculty members. In this level, students take classes in traditional classrooms but can simultaneously use LMS (Blackboard) to obtain information regarding their courses such as announcements, course syllabi, and information regarding instructors. Students are also able to share in discussions and forums and send and receive e-mails.

The second level is Blended Learning, which is optional for faculty members. In this level, between 20% and 75% of the course content is delivered online. The third level is complete e-learning, in which the course is delivered completely online. The Department of English began to use supportive and blended e-learning in 2008.

2. Review of Related Literature

Alshwiah (2009) investigated the effects of a proposed blended learning strategy and analyzed students' attitudes toward the English language when teaching medical vocabulary to pre-med students at Arabian Gulf University

(AGU). The sample was divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group. Findings showed no statistically significant differences between the experimental and the control groups regarding achievement or attitude toward the English language. The results also indicated that the experimental group members demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction with the online unit. Akyuz (2009) examined the effects of blended learning on students' critical thinking skills. The sample of this study comprised 44 students in the computer department at Ankara University. This study used the pretest posttest single model. Findings indicatedno significant difference between pretest and posttest results. According to the researcher, this may be attributed to the short durationof the study (five weeks).Badawi (2009) investigated the effectiveness of using blended learning in developing prospective teachers' pedagogical knowledge and performance. The study sample included 38 EFL prospective Saudi teachers at the Faculty of Education and Arts, TabukUniversity. The sample was divided into two groups. The first group studied four TEFL units using the traditional method whereas the second group studied the identical four units using the blended learning model. The results indicated that the blended learning model was more effective than the traditional model in developing prospective teachers' pedagogical knowledge. However, no significant difference was observed between face-to-face learning and blended learning in developing the prospective teachers' pedagogical performance. Artino (2010) examined the relation between personal factors and students' choice of instructional format. Findings showed that students who preferred to enroll in online courses reported greater confidence in their ability to learn online and greater satisfaction with their online learning experience than other students. Adas and Abu Shmais' study (2011), Students' Perceptions toward Blended Learning Environment, used the OCC (Online Course Container: A Course Management System). This study concluded that the students' attitudes toward Blended Learning were positive in terms of the process, ease of use and content. Moreover, their studyreflected the students' extensive Internet and IT skills and interests because of Internet availability and accessibility. Aliweh (2011) exploredEgyptian EFL students' learning styles and satisfaction with web-based materials, and the study showed highly positive perceptions because of an array of benefits (e.g., usefulness, enjoyment, accessibility, convenience, and richness of resources). Althoughstudents' gender had a significant effect on students' learning style preferences, it had no bearing on their satisfaction with web-based materials. Behjat, Yamini and Bagheri (2012) discovered in a study in the Iranian tertiary education context that blending traditional classroom instruction and technology can help learners excel in their reading comprehension. Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2009) studied the effect of computer-assisted instruction on Saudi university students' learning of English, and their findings indicated that the integration of technology into a traditional face-to-face class hada positive effect on the experimental groups' achievement.Alebaikan (2010) studied the perceptions of blended learning in Saudi universities and concluded that the advantage of this hybrid mode of learning was recognized by the Ministry of Saudi Higher Education as a solution to the challenge of providing a college education to arapidlygrowing student population. She also argued that blended learning has the potential to offer a successful learning experience in Saudi Arabia. One of the major conclusions in her study is that a blended learning environment offers Saudi females the flexibility to continue their higher education while maintaining their own cultural values and traditions.Alebaikan and Troudi (2010) investigated online discussions in blended courses at Saudi universities. They noticed that involving the students in online discussions can positively affect their learning when responding to peer questions, sharing new ideas and receiving regular feedback from their instructors.

Al-Harbi's study (2011), "E-Learning in Saudi Tertiary Education: Potential and Challenges," showed that e-learning acceptance is influenced by different factors. Astudent'sattitude toward e-learning is the most important factor in determining a student's intention to use e-learning. Students' decision to use e-learning is also determined by their subjective norm, i.e., the influence of the important people around them. Moreover, perceived e-learning accessibility plays a role in shaping the students' behavioral intention regarding e-learning acceptance. Such results support the seminal works in the area of technology acceptance. Bendania (2011) attempted to explore instructors' and learners' attitudes towardteaching and learning online at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Saudi Arabia. The results of the study showed positive attitudes toward the use of ICT in instruction and learning. In this study, the factors related to attitudes, mainly experience, confidence, enjoyment, usefulness, intention touse, motivation and whether students had ICT skills were all correlated. Faqeeh (2011) conducted a studyon the factors influencing e-learners' acceptance of the Blackboard at King Khalid University. The study's findings demonstrated that informants identified the facilitators and inhibitors of e-learning previously recognized in prior research. They also showed that students are ready to accept technology implementation and to shift to an e-learning model of education. In the same context, Al-Dosari (2011) examined the faculty members' and students' perceptions of e-learning in the English department and observed that their responses were generally positiveand indicated that learning improved in an e-learning environment compared with a traditional approach.

The current study attempts to probe deeply into more detailed perceptions of the EFL learners with regard to the effect that the blended learning environment has on their various English language skills development, the perceived advantages of this new experience, the limitations of the new mode of learning and their perceived suggestions for enhancing the quality of web-based learning atthe university.

3. What is Blended Learning?

Blended learning has become a popular form of education. It "means integrating the online and face-to-face formats to create a more effective learning experience" (Brew, 2008, p. 98). With blended learning, teachers can use online resources in their daily classroom activities to engage students and help them become more active and more effective learners. Badawi defined blended learning as "a flexible approach that combines face-to-face learning activities with online learning practices that allow students to exchange collective and individual feedback and responses [in]four specific areas, namely,learner feedback, learner strategies, and alternative assessment synchronously or asynchronously" (Badawi, 2009, p. 15).

Procter defined blended learning as “the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning” (in Yilmaz-Soylu, 2008, p. 26). In addition, Bielawaski and Metcalf (2003) defined blended learning as follows: “Blended learning focuses on optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the right learning technologies to match the right learning styles to transfer the right skills to the right person at the right time.” This definition is based on the following priciples: (Metcalf, 2003)

1) Belnded learning focuses on achievingobjectives effectively.

2) Blended learning should cater toall learning styles.

3) Blended learning should be based on learners’ needs.

4) Blended learning should be availbale to learners when they need it: “The most effective learning strategy is just-what-I-need, just-in-time.”Blended Learning extends teaching and learning beyond the classroom walls and includes two types of interaction: face-to-face interaction and web-based interaction. The latter can be either synchronous or asynchronous. The term synchronous “is frequently used to describe live training online- real time interaction between an instructor and remote students” (Metcalf, 2003). The term asynchronous means “instruction is just-in-time, when you need it” (Metcalf, 2003).

Both face-to-face and online teaching environments have their advantages; however, as Laurillard (1996) indicates, "A mixture of teaching and learning methods will always be the most efficient manner in which to support student learning because only then it is possible to embrace all the activities of discussion, interaction, adaptation and reflection, which are essential for academic learning" (in Towndrow& Cheers, 2003, p. 57). Another important benefit of blended learning is that it saves time. According to McCarthy and Murphy (2010, p. 670), "Students would be able to complete programs in less time".

The significance of this study stems from the idea that knowing students' views and opinions helps teachers evaluate the teaching-learning process. Yilmaz-Soylu states, "The degree of learners’ expectations, satisfaction, opinions or views on courses has played an important role in evaluating the effectiveness of learning processes” (Yilmaz-Soylu, 2008, p. 27). Furthermore, “When students perceive their experience as enjoyable, satisfying, and personally fulfilling, they tend to interact more, which results in enhanced learning” (Esani, 2010, p. 187).

4. Methods

4.1 Research Questions

1) Are there correlations among students' level, GPA, experience with blended learning, computer and Internet literacy and their perceptions regarding the advantages and limitations of Blended Learning?

2) How do KKU EFL students perceive the effect of blended learning on the development of English language skills?

3) What are students’ perceptions regarding the advantages and limitations of blended e-learning?

4) What are students’ suggestions to improve the delivery and implementation of blended courses inthe Department of English?

4.2 Sample

As shown in table (1) below, 160 male EFL students from the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, KKU, participated in this study. This table provides a detailed description of the research sample.

Table 1. Description of the study sample

Independent Variables	Categories	N.	%
Level	5	59	36.5
	6	24	15.1
	7	49	30.08
	8	28	17.6
GPA	2 – 2.74	52	32.7
	2.75 - 2.3.74	78	48.4
	3.75–4.49	26	16.4
	4.50 and above	4	2.5
Number of blended courses	1-3 Courses	81	50.3
	4-6 Courses	46	28.9
	7 Courses and above	33	20.8
Computer Literacy	Weak	14	8.8
	Good	75	46.5
	Very good	51	32.1
	Excellent	20	12.6

4.3 Instrument

The research instrument used in this study was a questionnaire divided into four sections (see appendix). The first section collected data regarding the students' Internet skills, computer literacy and e-learning experience. The second section of the questionnare consisted of thirty-three Likert-type statements and focused on language areas or skills that students improved by blended e-learning courses, advantages, limitations and suggestions for improving their e-learning experience. The third section of the questionnaire contained three open-ended questions to elicit qualitative data regarding students' perceptions of the blended learning environment.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, the inter-rater approach was followed. Three professors who teach in the English Department at KKU rated the questionnaire and provided written feedback. The questionnaire was then modified in light of the comments and suggestions of the three evaluators. In addition, Cronbach's Alpha was used to measure the reliability of the questionnaire. For this questionnaire, the calculated Alpha, using SPSS, was 0.79, which indicates a high level of internal consistency for the scale used with this specific sample. In addition, the questionnaire was administered to a group of 40 students during the summer semester of 2012 as a pilot study, which led to a few modifications and improvements and ensured the instrument's validity and reliability.

5. Limitations of the Study

The present study involved only male students because boys' and girls' campuses are separate in Saudi universities and it is not easy for male instructors to approach female students for detailed investigations of various academic issues. Such issues can only be discussed with females in detail on girls' campuses and only by female instructors. Another limitation that requires interpretation is the sample selection, which was confined to levels five through eight because it is at this level that students' mature perceptions have been shaped after four consecutive semesters of learning in the blended mode.

The researchers wish they could have studied the actual effect of blended learning on English language skills development rather than studying the students' perceptions regarding the possible effect. The limited time allotted for this funded research (six months) did not allow for such deep investigation to occur. However, the researchers aspire to continuing this project in future research by delving deeply into the real effects by conducting an experimental study with a control group and an experimental group, a method that is likely to measure the real outcomes of merging face-to-face with virtual instruction.

6. Results

6.1 Perceptions Guiding Variables

To answer the first question of this study, the statistics in this section present the results of the analysis of possible variance (ANOVA) in perceptions based on students' level (5th, 6th, 7th or8th), number of blended courses the participants in the study had taken before the time of data collection, the students' GPA (grade point average) and their computer and Internet literacy. These four variables were expected to guide the respondents' perceptions regarding language areas benefitting from a blended learning environment, advantages, limitations and suggestions for enhancing the hybrid learning experience.

Table 2. Correlation between students' GPAs and their perceptions of Blended Learning (ANOVA)

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Between Groups	3.210	3	1.070	1.411	.242
total_1	Within Groups	118.312	156	.758		
	Total	121.523	159	.679	.944	
	Between Groups	2.037	3			
total_2	Within Groups	112.171	156	.719		
	Total	114.207	159	1.401	2.927	.036
	Between Groups	4.202	3			
total_3	Within Groups	74.640	156	.478		
	Total	78.842	159			

Table 3. Correlation between students' computer literacy and their perceptions of Blended Learning (ANOVA)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Between Groups	1.022	3	.341	.441	.724
total_1	Within Groups	120.500	156	.772		
	Total	121.523	159			
	Between Groups	4.245	3	1.415	2.008	.115
total_2	Within Groups	109.962	156	.705		
	Total	114.207	159			
	Between Groups	6.677	3	2.226	4.811	.003
total_3	Within Groups	72.165	156	.463		
	Total	78.842	159			
	Between Groups	1.505	3	.502	1.687	.172
total_4	Within Groups	46.382	156	.297		
	Total	47.887	159			

The results show no significant effect of these four variables on the students' perceptions of the influence of technology incorporation on English language skills development, the advantages of Blackboard and suggestions for better course design and delivery. The statistical significance is scant in the correlation between the students' GPAs and their perceptions regarding blended learning limitations (alpha=.04); however, the significance is clear in the correlation between students' computer and Internet literacy and their perceptions regarding the limitations of the blended learning environment (alpha=.003). Students with low computer literacy skills may find it more challenging to navigate online courses (Napier et al., 2012).

6.2 Language Areas

Table 4 below shows in order the language skills and areas in which the students in the English department believed blackboard helped enhance their learning.

Table 4. Students' Perceptions of the Effect of Blended Learning on the Development of English Language Skills

	SDA		DA		NS		A		SA		Mean	St.D
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Reading	7	4.4	25	15.6	15	9.4	80	50	33	20.6	3.66 A	1.10
Vocabulary	13	8.1	19	11.9	20	12.5	71	44.4	37	23.1	3.62 A	1.19
Writing	15	9.4	39	24.4	12	7.5	55	34.4	39	24.4	3.40 NS	1.33
Spelling	14	8.8	29	18.1	24	15	66	41.3	27	16.9	3.39 NS	1.21
Listening	14	8.8	40	25	17	10.6	65	40.6	24	15	3.28 NS	1.23
Grammar	13	8.1	38	23.8	25	15.6	65	40.6	19	11.9	3.24 NS	1.18
Pronunciation	27	16.9	47	29.4	28	17.5	42	26.3	16	10	2.83 NS	1.26
Speaking	21	31.1	56	35	29	18.1	38	23.8	16	10	2.82 NS	1.22

Reading skills rated the highest with amean of (3.66) followed by vocabulary building with amean of (3.62). Both areas, according to students' perceptions, unequivocally benefit mostfrom integrating the Blackboard learning management system into the traditional face-to-face mode of instruction. Other areas and skills, namely writing, spelling, listening, grammar, pronunciation, and speaking, reveal some skepticism among the subjects under investigation. All of these areas are observed to fall within the (Not Sure) response category by the students with variance in the degree of uncertainty in descending order as shown in the table. It is quite interesting to observe the students' perceptions of the effect of technology on writing and spelling (3.40 and 3.39, respectively) and on pronunciation and speaking (2.83 and 2.82, respectively). Such findings reinforce the research instruments' validity and reliability.

6.3 Advantages

Ten statements in the questionnaire explored the students' perceptions of the advantages of the blended learning experience from KKU EFL students' perspective.

Table 5. Students' perceptions regarding the advantages of blended learning

	SDA		DA		NS		A		SA		Mean	St.D
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Develop comp. &net	7	4.4	9	5.6	12	7.5	82	51.3	50	31.3	3.99A	1.2
Effective use of time	7	4.4	19	11.9	31	19.4	62	38.8	41	25.6	3.69A	1.1
More confident online	13	8.1	23	14.4	22	13.8	55	34.4	47	29.4	3.62A	1.2
More effective modes	7	4.4	19	11.9	32	20	71	44.4	31	19.4	3.62A	1.1
Useful feedback	9	5.6	25	15.6	22	13.8	67	41.9	37	23.1	3.61A	1.1
Improves communication	11	6.9	26	16.3	25	15.6	62	38.8	36	22.5	3.53A	1.2
Interesting & useful	13	8.1	29	18.1	24	15	67	41.9	27	16.9	3.41NS	1.1
Authentic material	7	4.4	32	20	45	28.1	61	38.1	14	8.8	3.30NS	1
Self-paced learning	12	7.5	37	23.1	31	19.4	59	36.9	21	13.1	3.25NS	1.1
More convenient	36	22.5	41	25.6	20	12.5	40	25	23	14.4	2.83NS	1.4

As shown in the table, six important advantages were reported. The highest rated advantage was the development of students' computer and Internet skills followed by the effective use of time that results from the various Blackboard tools used for synchronous and asynchronous communication. The students also appreciated the advantage of the learning management system in enhancing their confidence, providing opportunities for useful feedback from both their instructors and their peers, and improving communication amongstudents and between students and their course instructors. They also agree with the statement that blended learning is more effective than the traditional face-to-face mode of instruction. However, the students' responses revealeduncertainty when they were asked if the blended learning was interesting, useful and convenient. They were also quite skepticalof the effectiveness of Blackboard'sability to facilitateaccess to authentic materials and provide tools and content that suit individual learning paces.

6.4 Limitations

In an attempt to explore the KKU EFL students' perceptionsof the limitations of the blended learning experience, nine statements were allotted to address this component.

Table 6. Student's perceptions ofthe limitations and problems of Blended Learning

	SDA		DA		NS		A		SA		Mean	St.D
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Connectivity major problem	7	4.4	17	10.6	6	3.8	48	30	82	51.3	4.13 A	1.16
Technical problems faced	4	2.5	33	20.6	19	11.9	60	37.5	44	27.5	3.66 A	1.15
Preference for books (hard)	12	7.5	38	23.8	26	16.3	40	25	44	27.5	3.41 NS	1.31
E-learning less effective	14	8.8	31	19.4	27	16.9	57	35.6	31	19.4	3.37 NS	1.24
Facilitates cheating	20	12.5	29	18.1	28	17.5	47	29.4	36	22.5	3.31 NS	1.33
Difficult Bb instructions	20	12.5	52	32.5	29	18.1	40	25	19	11.9	2.91 NS	1.24
Social isolation	18	11.3	56	35	33	20.6	32	20	21	13.1	2.88 NS	1.23
Difficult and frustrating	31	19.4	77	48.1	26	16.3	16	10	10	6.3	2.35 NS	1.09
No computer access	49	30.6	58	36.3	16	10	24	15	13	8.1	2.33 NS	1.27

According to Davies (1989), actual system use is influenced by the behavioral intentions of the users, which are guided by their perceptions of the ease of using this system and its usefulness.Therefore, investigating the limitations of using Blackboard from the users' perspective can reveal significant insights intothe effectiveness of the experience and the factors inhibiting e-learning (Faqeeh, 2011). The salient limitations reported in this study were Internet connectivity (4.13) and the technical problems (3.66) encounteredby Blackboard users. The other limitations provided in the questionnaire statements were not rated in the same manner as the first two. These are related to the natural tendency and preference of learners to use books rather than technology, the problem of cheating facilitation, the difficulty of Blackboard's inbuilt or teachers' instructions, social isolation, computer illiteracy, and access to private computers. All of these limitations occur in the uncertainty category. In other words, the students are not sure that these limitations create difficulty or prohibit their involvement in using technology for learning. This finding is consistent with Alhawiti (2011), whose study observed that "poor

technical expertise and infrastructure are the major barriers that prevent faculty members from adopting online education," let alone the students.

6.5 Suggestions

With the goal of improving the quality of the blended learning setting in the KKU English department, students' suggestions were surveyed in this study using two methods of data collection: Likert-scale statements and open-ended questions.

Table 7. Students' suggestions for improving the Blended Learning experience

	SDA		DA		NS		A		SA		Mean	St.D
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Solving technical prob.	1	0.6			14	8.8	42	26.3	103	64.4	4.53 SA	0.70
Providing proper training	6	3.8	4	2.5	11	6.9	52	32.5	87	54.4	4.31 A	0.97
Rewarding the distinguished	8	5	6	3.8	18	11.3	35	21.9	93	58.1	4.24 A	1.11
Increasing number of labs.	9	5.6	11	6.9	21	13.1	44	27.5	75	46.9	4.03 A	1.17
Decreasing blended hours	17	10.6	38	23.8	31	19.4	28	17.5	46	28.8	3.30 NS	1.38
Increasing Blended courses	33	20.6	32	20	21	13.1	41	25.6	33	20.6	3.05 NS	1.45

The statistics support the findings of the previous component on limitations. What were considered limitations in the previous section are suggestions for improvement regarding solving technical problems (4.53), providing proper training (4.31) and increasing the number of e-learning labs. These three suggestions scored the highest among all suggestions. An important suggestion supported by the respondents is rewarding distinguished performance by students and teachers (4.24). The last two suggestions are related to the amount of learning that should be provided online in a blended environment. Decreasing blended-learning hours (3.30) and increasing blended courses (3.05) are rated the lowest in this sectionand reveal uncertainty among KKU EFL learners regarding the size of the technological component in the instructional process.

7. Discussion

7.1 Blended Learning and English Language Skills Development

Table (2) answers the second question of the study by presenting English language skills and areas believed by students to have been positively influenced by partial employment of technology in L2 instruction. High ratings in reading and vocabulary may be attributed to the manner in which online teaching is practiced by most instructors in the English department. The majority of them, according to e-learning deanship evaluations, post the course material to students in either a Word or pdf format for reading. *Reading* appears to be understood by students as simple browsing through the course website looking for announcements, posts to discussion boards if any, and course materials for the purpose of doing an assignment. This indicates that reading as a set of skills such as previewing, scanning, skimming, etc., was not what students meant when they voiced their perceptions regarding reading.

Vocabulary ranked the second highest most likely because students are not only exposed to the academic genre of the textbook but also to instructional, social and argumentative types of texts. Moreover, course links frequently lead students outside the course material, and all such multi-modal resources are lexically loaded. The result is more exposure to new vocabulary and more opportunities for vocabulary development and use.

All remaining skills and areas occur below the mean (3.50) and above the mean (2.50). This is the uncertainty category in which statistics reveal that the students are not sure whether writing, spelling, listening, grammar,

pronunciation, and speaking can really be enhanced by incorporating technological pedagogy as a part of language instruction. This finding again reveals the possible inadequacy of English language instructors' employing technology. Previous studies confirm the advantage of using technology to support writing, listening, grammar and speaking skills. Warschauer and Liaw (2011) argue that the development and diffusion of software for producing, uploading, downloading and playing digital audio files (i.e., podcasts) render the flexible use of a wide range of audio materials easier than ever for language learners. Miyazoe and Anderson (2012) report in a paper the qualitative changes in writing proficiencies in response to using three online writing tools, i.e., discussion forums, blogs and wikis, in an EFL blended-format course. Ibrahim and Yusoff's study (2012) indicated that the students in their study observed that using wiki in a blended learning environment facilitated theirreceiving feedback and improvedspeech delivery in a public speaking course.Nutta's (1998) study showed that for all levels of English proficiency, the computer-based students scored significantly higher on open-ended tests covering the structures in question than the teacher-directed students.

The low rating that pronunciation and speaking skills received in students' perceptions may also be attributed to the inadequate utilization of interactive tools integrated into Blackboard learning management systems. Different synchronous and asynchronous tools are available that can maximize interaction opportunities and ultimately lead to improving students' pronunciation and speaking.

Another interpretation is the inability of students to cope with the abrupt pedagogical transition from traditional teacher-led teaching to technologically enhanced learning. Students are accustomed to the physical presence of their instructors in the classroom and feel more comfortable learning pronunciation and speaking in a face-to-face setting.

For further confirmation of the results of the first component, an additional survey was administered to fifty level 6 and level 7 students three months after the administration of the first survey. The students were requested to order the skills and areas in relation to how blended learning enhanced their own learning experiences. The new survey results corroborated the SPSS analysis results with 75% of the respondents placing reading and vocabulary at the top and pronunciation and speaking at the bottom of the scale. The same interpretation provided at the beginning of this section applies to this finding.

7.2 Advantages of E-Learning

The statistical presentation of data meant to answer the third question of the study is revealing and corroborates similar previous studies. Of the ten options measuring KKU EFL students' perceptions of the advantages of blending technology and face-to-face instruction, six statements clearly emphasize the students' growth with relatively high mean scores (3.99, 3.69, 3.62, 3.61, and 3.53). The intensive contact with Blackboard obviously helps students in developing their computer and Internet skills. Students are learning by doing. Students also appear to have observed the importance of Blackboard in their time management. Technology renders it easy for learners to properly manage their learning time by adhering to assignment deadlines, contacting their instructors online for queries and academic consultations with no time restrictions, and immediate updates regarding learning and assessment activities, etc.

Students' confidence appears to be reinforced using technology for language learning. Students'contributions to discussion boards, the possibility of repeated listening and watching of online recordings, and the private space to make mistakes enhance students' confidence.

The other advantages emphasized by KKU EFL students are "useful feedback" and "more opportunities for communication" with instructors and peers. In fact, "feedback" falls under effective communication between instructors and their students. Emails, chat, instant messaging, SMS, discussion boards, feedback on students' assignments, journals, wikis and collaborative projects by students are all available tools on Blackboard that are obviously used for practical feedback and effective communication.

The last four statements are categorized by the statistical analysis results under the (Not Sure) category,which indicates students' hesitancy to judge. Perhaps the generality and vagueness of these statements can explain the respondents' hesitant perceptions. The statements asking whether Blended learning is "interesting, useful, and convenient" sound general to students at this juncture becausethe students have not yet acquired the critical ability to voice their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the new mode of instruction. The responses to the statements that are meant to elicit students' opinions regarding the significant contribution of Blackboard in providing access to authentic materials and promoting self-paced learning opportunities indicate uncertainty. This ambivalence may be attributed either to the semantic vagueness of the statements or to the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of current online teaching practices in the KKU English department. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Uncertainty regarding Blackboard's advantage of providing easy access to authentic

online materials and supporting self-based learning is an indicator of instructors' failure to develop their students' awareness of the basic functions of learning management systems.

The qualitative analysis of the students' responses to the open-ended question regarding the advantages of Blended learning strongly support the analysis presented in this section. Many more advantages were mentioned; however, the order of their frequency is not substantially different from the SPSS analysis.

7.3 Limitations and Problems

The third question of this study investigates the KKU EFL students' perceptions of the limitations and problems they encounter as a result of taking blended courses. Nine statements were presented in the survey in this category, and the students were requested to express their opinions using the five-point Likert Scale as explained in the methodology section. Of these nine statements, Internet connectivity problems and technical problems rated the highest and were the most serious challenges. This finding is quite significant and must be seriously considered by institutions before and during introduction of technology to EFL students if students are to accept technology in their learning. In a recent survey conducted at KKU by the ROI Institute (Canada), lack of technical skills was the first barrier to success from the students' perspective (Schell and Phillips, 2012). This survey included samples of students from different colleges and programs in the university. Moreover, in the students' answers to the open-ended question regarding the problems and limitations of the e-learning mode, 48% of the students mentioned technical and Internet problems as the major challenge to their successful learning via Blackboard.

The remaining limitations and problems as shown in table (4) are less significant. However, the manner in which statistical analysis presents them requires a deeper interpretation and more reflection because all of the rest of the responses are categorized under (NS) responses according to the analysis scale. These problems are listed in order from highest to lowest: the students' preference for books rather than online references, their feelings regarding the ineffectiveness of e-learning, the ease of cheating, the difficulty in understanding some of the Blackboard instructions, social isolation, a feeling of frustration and the problem of not owning personal computers. These problems most likely occur as a result of the first two major problems: Internet connectivity and technical problems. All of these limitations from the students' perspective that fall under the (uncertainty) category maybe interpreted as natural result of inconvenient online practices by both faculty and students. In other words, current practices in online teaching and learning do not contribute effectively to an environment conducive to optimal Blended Learning.

The open-ended question elicited more limitations and problems that appear to be valid. Eleven students considered Blackboard burdensome, nine respondents mentioned the restricted time for assignment submission as a challenge, eight respondents highlighted the insufficiency of labs compared to the numbers of students at the university, six responses stigmatized e-learning as a waste of time, and significantly, five respondents believed that blending technology with face-to-face learning minimizes students' real contact with their courses.

Users' acceptance and readiness to use technology are crucial to academic institutions if these institutions want their learners tohave positive attitudes and become active technology users. If a technology-assisted system such as Blackboard is to be perceived by the user or student as an appropriate alternative to classroom instruction, it must demonstrate its usefulness so that the student considers it useful (Fageeh, 2011).

The gloomy situation of Blended Learning in the English department is alarming and requires rapid interference. Eighty-eightrespondents (55%) felt that both synchronous and asynchronous interactions using Blackboard were less effective than face-to-face interactions in the classroom.

Eighty-four respondents (52.5%) preferred to learn from the physical course book rather than from the course website. Eighty-three students (52%) believed that e-learning facilitates cheating and plagiarism. Fifty-nine students (37%) expressed their frank perceptions that the instructions on Blackboard are difficult to follow. Instructors must improve the quality of their teaching in a Blended Learning course. According to the e-learning deanship evaluation report on blended courses in the English department of the college of languages and translation in the second semester of 2013, only 39% of the instructors passed the requirements, meaning that 61% failed to meet the requirements established by the university for blended courses.

All of these figures indicate the general dissatisfaction among students with their experience with Blended Learning thusfar. The students' voices must be heard by the administration and faculty members, especially because nearly 65% of the courses in the English program appear to be blended and 30% of classes and activities are supposed to be taught virtually.

7.4 Students' Suggestions

The centrality of students in the instructional process has become integral in academic institutions of higher education today. Surveying students'suggestions for improving their learning environment is expected to be crucial in enhancing students'satisfaction. According to Seymour (1972), "Developing many happy satisfied customers, whether they are students, parents of students, alumni, or industry employer[s], should be a primary goal of higher education. Thus, focusing on enhancing the customer satisfaction at colleges and universities is crucial in developing customer value".

This theme encompasses the KKU EFL student' opinions regarding the suggestions they proposed to enhance the usefulness and ease of use of Blackboard for Blended Learning. Table (5) shows the students' suggested priorities for a better Blended Learning environment. Solving the students' technical problems, providing them with proper training, and increasing the number of labs are believed by students to be key suggestions for creating an environment conducive to successful and fruitful Blended Learning. That students agree with these suggestions indicates their dissatisfaction with the manner in which the current infrastructure serves their desired purposes. Recognition of students' distinguished performance is effective in contributing to their increased use of technological systems for learning. Bandura (1986) notes, "It is difficult to conceive of a society populated with people who are completely unmoved by the respect, approval, and reproof of others".

The students' responses to the open-ended question regarding their suggestions to improve the Blended Learning experience are consistent with their responses in Likert Scale statements. However, more interesting suggestions appear in the qualitative data. Seven percent of the respondents' suggested cancelling Blackboard because of its uselessness. Providing the students with personal computers was another important suggestion supported by 6% of the respondents. Five percent of the respondents were frank enough to suggest encouraging their instructors to use Blackboard, which is an indication of the students' evaluation of their teachers' attitudes toward using technology for language learning. Schell and Phillips (2012), in their KKU study that measured the effect of ROI of e-learning, identified several barriers preventing faculty from using e-learning:

a. Lack of time to develop e-learning

b. Lack of incentives to use e-learning

c. Concern regarding cheating

d. Concern regarding the quality of learning

e. Lack of knowledge regarding e-learning and tools

The responses to the suggestions of "decreasing virtual hours" and 'increasing blended courses' are neither supported nor rejected by the students. These responses occur in the uncertainty area most likely because the institution's making a decision on these two issuesis likely to influence the status of Blended learning with consequences unknown to students. Students are not sure whether decreasing blended hours or increasing blended courses is going to help them. If Blended learning hours are decreased, students may lose the advantage of not going to the campus on Wednesdays. Similarly, increasing the number of blended courses may lead to aggravating students' suffering with an experience with which they are not fully satisfied as demonstrated in the "Limitations" component.

8. Conclusion

Blended Learning remains a relatively new concept at many academic institutions; however, recent research appears to indicate that when "appropriately" implemented, blended learningcan significantly improve the learning experience (Marsh, 2012). The present study has contributed to proving the strengths of blended language learning for EFL learners. The first two components of this study demonstrate how Blended Learning can contribute to bridging the gap between teaching and learning. No matter the quality of Blended Learning practice in the KKU English department, participants in this study consistently noted the clear advantages of this new experience in widening their reading opportunities and enriching their English vocabulary. They do not disagree that Blended Learning can enhance their writing, spelling, listening, grammar, pronunciation and speaking skills, which indicates that the possibility of enhancing these skills exists, not yet, however, to their satisfaction. Moreover, the component on advantages clearly demonstrates how Blended Learning provides an environment for more effective employment of indirect language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990) such as meta-cognitive strategies (arranging and planning learning), affective strategies (confidence enhancement), and social strategies (cooperating with others). The limitations and problems rated and identified by students can be controlled by the institution. Some of these limitations and problems are technical, others are related to students' readiness, and some maybe caused by how the online activities are handled by instructors. Both students and

instructors require appropriate orientation and training. The limitations and problems mentioned by students indicate a general feeling of dissatisfaction. These limitations and problems caused more than half of the students to believe that Blended Learning is less effective than face-to-face learning. Such perceptions must be taken quite seriously by both the English program management and e-learning deanship at King Khalid University. To address these problems, students' suggestions for solving their technical problems, providing proper training to students, increasing the number of labs, recognizing excellent performance of instructors and students, etc., should be translated into an action plan and a road map to enhance the effectiveness of using Blended Learning to create supportive learning opportunities for language learners.

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Appendix

Part I

Questionnaire

Dear student,

This questionnaire aims at exploring your opinion regarding the use of blended e-learning in teaching certain courses: advantages, limitations and suggestions for improvement. You are kindly requested to fill out this questionnaire and return to us as soon as possible. Your objective and truthful answers will help us get a realistic assessment of this experience.

Thanks

Part I

1. Level: ……

2. GPA: …….

3. Number of blended courses you have taken so far: ……

4. How do you rate your computer literacy?

◯ Weak ◯ Good ◯ Very Good ◯ Excellent

5. Do you have a computer at home?	Yes ◯	No ◯
6. Do you have access to the internet at home?	Yes ◯	No ◯
7. Where do you prefer to use the internet for e-learning?	◯ At home ◯ At the uinversity ◯ At an internet café	
8. Do you enjoy talking with others about e-learning?	Yes ◯	No ◯
9. Do you agree with those who say that e-learning is a waste of time	Yes ◯	No ◯

Part II

For each of the statements below, please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement by ticking (√) the appropriate box. Where, SA= strongly agree, A= agree, UD= undecided, DA= disagree, SDA= strongly disagree.

Statement		SA	A	UN	DA	SDA
Language areas	1. I think that using e-learning helps me to improve my listening skills.					
	2. I think that using e-learning helps me to improve my speaking skills					
	3. I think that using e-learning helps me to improve my reading skills.					
	4. I think that using e-learning helps me to improve my writing skills					
	5. I think that using e-learning helps me to improve my pronunciation.					
	6. I think that using e-learning helps me to improve my spelling.					
	7. I think that using e-learning helps me to improve my grammar.					
	8. I think that using e-learning helps me to improve my vocabulary.					
Statement		SA	A	UN	DA	SDA
Advantages	9. E-Learning is more convenient for me than face-to-face learning.					
	10. E-Learning improves communication between students and teachers.					
	11. E-Learning makes teaching and learning more effective; because it integrates all forms of media, print, audio, video, and animation.					

	12. I find e-learning interesting and useful.					
	13. I like e-learning because I can work according to my own pace.					
	14. E-learning helps me to develop knowledge of computer and internet.					
	15. I feel more confident when I use English online than when I use it in the class.					
	16. E-learning helps me to use time effectively.					
	17. I benefit from the feedback given by my instructor through Blackboard.					
	18. E-learning gives me access to authentic second language materials.					
Statement		SA	A	UN	DA	SDA
Limitations	19. I think socially isolated when I use e-learning.					
	20 E-Learning is difficult to handle and therefore frustrating to use.					
	21. Slow internet connectivity is a major problem I face in using e-learning.					
	22. I face technical problems when I use e-learning.					
	23. I prefer to learn from the book rather than from the course website.					
	24. E-Learning facilitates cheating and plagiarism.					
	25. Both synchronous and asynchronous interaction through Blackboard are less effective than face-to-face interaction in the classroom.					
	26. I do not have a computer and therefore I find it difficult to use e-learning.					
	27. The instructions provided on Blackboard are difficult to follow.					
Statement		SA	A	UN	DA	SDA
Suggestions	28. Our department should increase the number of online blended courses.					
	29. The number of internet labs should be increased.					
	30. All technical problems should be solved.					
	31. E-learning training should be provided to all students.					
	32. Our department should reduce the number of e-learning courses.					
	33. Rewarding the distinguished users of e-learning.					

1. In your opinion, what are the advantages of e-learning?

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2. In your opinion, what are the limitations of e-learning?

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3. What are your suggestions concerning the improvement of e-learning at the university?

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