

The Use of OUP E-learning System in Teaching English Language in the Preparatory Year at the University of Dammam, Issues and Challenges

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Abstract. E-learning has been around for quite some time. There have been different implementations of e-learning in different learning and teaching contexts ranging from blended learning to fully online delivery. Learning language online has been a new experience to preparatory year students at the University of Dammam. They have been given access to Oxford University Press Online e-learning system that has a complete language course called (QSkills) online where students can fully study online or supplement that with their face to face instructions. However, there have been some issues in this implementation and some pedagogical and technical challenges. This paper highlights these issues and challenges and attempts to propose some practical solutions. The results showed some technical and pedagogical issues and challenges that should be addressed properly by the environment; yet, there was some positive feedback that should be capitalized on to facilitate more the learning process.

Keywords: Elearning · English language teaching · Qskills · Preparatory year · Dammam

1 Introduction

ICT has revolutionize the learning and teaching arena. Not only that but it has expanded the horizons of teaching and learning practices. Educational technologies encompassing e-learning tools have enriched the language learning and teaching. E-learning as identified by Wikipedia to “includes an array of approaches, components, and delivery methods”. E-learning has been introduced to the field of language teaching to offer many advantages like abundant teaching resources, ease of access to information, the effect of direct interest, and teaching students according to their aptitudes [1]. The Internet possibly will offer a defining moment in English language teaching methodology [2]. E-learning in English language teaching has started since the first days of the invention of the internet. Then it evolved exponentially to start using all online technologies such as streaming services like YouTube and social media like Twitter and Facebook. E-learning impacted the learning styles as well as the teaching strategies.

The preparatory year decided to introduce E-learning part in its intensive English language program as a blended learning initiative to empower its students in their learning process. The English language program in the preparatory year is composed of two semesters where a dedicated course is taught for 20 h a week. General English course is offered in the first semester whereas the English for specific purposes is taught in the second semester for the same duration and contact hours. The preparatory year has around 2000 male and female students in its program. Students are admitted into four tracks: health, engineering, science and arts tracks. They are required to obtain an average grade (C) in order to pass to the second year in their respective colleges. They are also empowered by intensive proficiency language test preparation like IELTS and TOEFL in order to prepare the students for their proficiency tests once decided to attend them.

For the last two years, the preparatory year English language program has been using QSkills Course from Oxford University Press. Such a course is a skill based course where language skills are taught separately. QSkills comes with its E-learning companion to enable students access more exercises and foster some learning autonomy. This E-learning part is offered as a blended learning part. This QSkills E-learning platform is a fully fledged language course structured in a way that enables the student to enroll him/herself in his/her designated class and start the course materials wherever he/she wants. It also offers the teacher fully detailed administrative functions where he/she can track the progress of their students and have a full monitor over their learning process.

2 Literature Highlights

2.1 E-learning and Language Learning

According to [3] “the terms online learning, e-learning, multimedia learning, computer-based learning, Internet-based learning and virtual education can be used when talking about computer-assisted language learning”. [4] cited in [3] points out that blended learning offers good potentials to education in general and adult education in particular. Advantages such as saving time and travelling costs, helping students to study according to their own base at their own convenient time. E-learning can be employed by talented and creative teachers to boost teaching and learning conditions [5]. These are used to make learning more interesting, motivating, stimulating and meaningful to the students.

[6] cited in [3] has mentioned some characteristics that blended learning can offer like personalizing learning experience and learning support, encouraging autonomous and cooperative learning as well as increasing student engagement and accommodating variety of learning styles. Not only that but also allowing the students to practice the target language outside the classroom in a less stressful more enjoyable ubiquitous environment.

2.2 E-learning and Language Teacher's Role

In such a new dynamic teaching environment away from the passive approach where students are passive recipient, both teachers' and students' roles have drastically changed. Teachers are obliged to transform their teaching practices in a blended learning context and move from being a knowledge master to a facilitator so students can engage more and take over their learning process. [7] neatly outlines the pedagogical roles and competencies required in a teacher performing in an e-learning environment. They summaries the roles of the teachers to eight main roles. First and most important pedagogical role as the teacher should be aware of instructional designing and development. He should be a content expert, a tutor, an organizer and a facilitator, and a professional practitioner. Then, comes the other roles as social and evaluator, administrator, technologist, counselor, personal and researcher. [8] points out that the role of the teacher today could be an advisor since he is supposed to be an expert in the field in order to support the student's learning progress. Such a role is more resourceful and much more demanding compared to the traditional role. [9] cites in [8] points out that teachers are powerful "*motivational socialisers*".

Learners' responsibility is a major part in e-learning environments. Their learning roles should shift from being passive recipient to an active participant. [10] emphasize that successful e-learners should often be self-directed, have good organization and study skills, and have a high level of learning autonomy where they feel comfortable working independently.

3 Methodology

This study aims to answer the following research questions and support or refute these hypotheses. The research questions are:

1. What are the technical and pedagogical issues faced preparatory year students when using OUP e-learning platform?
2. What are the technical and pedagogical challenges faced prepare year students when using OUP e-learning platform?
3. To what extent these issues and challenges have hindered the learning process?

We also formulated the following research hypotheses:

1. Students will find it difficult to study online!
2. Students will have time management issues!
3. Computer literacy won't affect students when using OUP e-learning system!

3.1 Instruments

To answer these research questions and test the hypotheses, we devised two research instruments, i.e. semi-structured surveys and interviews.

Survey. To collect required data for this study a semi structured survey was constructed. This survey have 6 objective questions using a Likert scale with three responses: disagree, don't know and agree and bad-to-excellent scale. We decided to use two scales to simplify the process and obtain more accurate results. Two open ended questions were also used to ask about technological and pedagogical issues and challenges regarding OUP system to give the students more freedom to explain and add further to their responses should the researcher miss any related part. The survey was written in simple English and students face no issues in responding in English as well.

Interviews. The interview questions where the same as the survey question however it was a more of students responding to these questions by explaining and elaborating more on their survey responses.

3.2 Participants

The participant of this research are volunteers from all tracks. The purpose of this research was explained to all students via a post on the university E-learning portal Blackboard and they were encouraged to participate in this study by answering a straightforward survey. The response rate was acceptable where 230 responses have been collected. This represents about 15 % from the overall preparatory year intake. Then to further validate the collected responses, a group of 10 students were randomly selected and interviewed.

3.3 Procedure

The survey questions were presented to OUP coordinators at the preparatory year to take their feedback and approved them. Then the survey questions were automated using an online survey system QuestionPro used and approved by the university. After that, the link of the survey was posted on the BlackBoard with a detailed explanation of the study so the students are fully aware of the purpose of this research. The availability of the survey online was timed to one week. The students were invited to voluntarily take part in this study. Then after collecting the responses, a random sample of ten students was selected for the interview process. They were scheduled for interview in their spare time. Their consents were obtained in order to record their responses for analysis purposes.

4 Analysis and Discussion

We used both quantitative and qualitative analyses to analyze the output of this research. The descriptive statistics (mean and percentages) where utilized to explain the survey objective questions and the responses of the open ended questions were analyzed qualitatively. Below are the responses to the research questions followed by data analysis to test the hypotheses. The students reaffirm their responses in the individual interviews. The selected interview participants were asked corresponding questions to

address their replies in the survey to clarify and validate their responses. Due to paper space limit, the survey and interviews responses will be analyzed and discussed concisely and precisely together in each section afterwards.

Technical and Pedagogical Issues Related to OUP E-learning System. Students have responded thoroughly to the survey question asking them about the technical and pedagogical issues from their experience when they used OUP e-learning system. From the total number of participants, 125 (about 54 %) did not state that they have neither technical nor pedagogical issues when they used the system. Only 105 Out of 230 (about 46 %) replied to this question in detail. They mentioned various technical and pedagogical issues. Some students mentioned issues like slowness of the system and freezing some of its sections when choosing the certain responses in the assigned exercises. They also mentioned usability issues like some faulty links and buttons. Furthermore, the system might freezes or even shut down accidentally which causes the loss of students' responses. Some students complained that some exercises in certain language skills such as listening did not function properly. There was also further complaints about some hardware defects which led to unpleasant user experience. In addition, the system uses activation codes to enroll students, yet some students mentioned that some codes were incorrect therefore they had to wait for some time to get the new code. By the time they got the new code, their classmates have progressed in their course materials which have slightly impacted such students.

Time limit was a noticeable complain where exercises are time limited and thus some slow students have experienced a difficulty submitting their homework on time which led to losing some homework grades. There was a slight complain about weak Wi-Fi connection for those people relying heavily on their mobile and tablets devices to access the system. This caused them temporary disconnection and prevented them from punctually turning in their assignments. There was one complain about the accuracy of the system to record grades where an incident happened with a student after submitting his homework and getting the grades, when he revisited the system the grade was not stored correctly. Some students also mentioned that sometimes the OUP e-learning platform is not accessible due to either internet disconnection or the platform being offline. There was a complain about the accuracy of the marking in certain parts of the system where the system deducts mark for awkward irrelevant reasons like capitalization or spacing. There was also a pedagogical issue related to the difficulty of the exercises especially the listening exercises and a student complained about the confusion caused to him by the online exercise and the classroom course book. Some students complained about the lack of connectivity at home and the shortage of time while they are in the university to do the required exercises. Some frequent technical problems such as unavailability of the system and the corrupted links were repeatedly mentioned. Some students raised the issue of the lack of notification alerts when there is a new assignment added or a deadline to meet. Moreover, some students mentioned that the system is not user friendly and they found it difficult to navigate through the system.

An issue was reported by some students related to the usability of the system where it was hard to follow what tasks already accomplished in the reporting and monitoring section so called the "planner". Furthermore, some students mentioned the complexity

of the process needed to access the required exercises where students have to go through many steps to reach their target. There was a common complaint about the sound tracks that are frequently not functioning which in turn impacted the base of the students' progress. Some students mentioned that the lack of monitoring the students' performance allowed some cheating cases where students share their answers with each other. Based on these responses, we can notice that there are serious technical and pedagogical issues. Technical issues such as system unavailability, inaccurate links, navigation complexity, user's interfaces design, invalid access codes, and freezing and hanging system, lack of notification functionality as well as the slowness of the system raise a question about the technical capabilities of the platform. This goes further to impact the student's experience which inhibits the learning from occurring or could adversely demotivate the students. The system also has a technical bug which is saving students responses so when they hit the back button they can view their previous response. In such a case, when the students browse back on the screen, his responses disappear.

In addition to the technical issues, there were important pedagogical issues stated throughout the responses. For example, the shortage of time designated for the e-learning exercises, the inaccuracy in recording the obtained grades, and the mismatch between the hard book and its soft electronic counterparts are counterproductive. These issues might hinder the learning process and cause a mistrust in the system and its capabilities which will impact the learning outcome. It will also reflect inaccurate performance about the students if their grades are misreported or stored. Not only is that but the cheating issue is something that requires attention so it will not impact the learning environment.

Technical and Pedagogical Challenges Related to OUP E-learning System. The second question in the survey tackled the technical and pedagogical challenges faced by students when using OUP e-learning system. Their responses varied from no response to positive responses about the system where the students' experience were good. However, some serious challenges were reported by 60 students (26 %) of the participants. There was a challenge of time management when doing exercises online. Some students reported that it was challenging doing the exercises because of time constraints challenge though they know the responses. This could demotivate the students and hinder the learning process. It might also impact their engagement in the learning activities since they already experienced such unpleasant practice. Some students mentioned the difficulty level of the exercises where some exercises do not consider the students competency level though the students are placed in the system based on their proficiency level. This might be slightly individual and subjective opinion because we could not validate such a complaint through the interview process. There was a technical challenge which was faced by some students related to the quality of sound recorded tracks related to some reading and listening exercises. Students complained that the sound was low and this impacted their listening comprehension. Furthermore, the slow internet connection made some students bored of continue using the system and became frustrated about this experience. There was a technical challenge that was raised by one student which is related to the absence of on-screen timer where the remaining time is displayed. Most students were

complaining about finding time for e-learning activities where they have a very intensive language program comprising different disciplines courses. Some students expressed a challenge of using the system on their tablets and smart phones and requested the company to have a mobile application to ease the accessibility of the system. There were some challenges related to the way the system works with marking writing exercise since it pays more attention on the accuracy rather than the competency such as capitalization and indentation not coherence and argument as such.

These findings yield an answer to the third question about the level of the impact created by these technical and pedagogical issues. They also show that there are some issues and challenges that have impacted the learning process since these issues were encountered by (26 %) of the participants. Furthermore, technical issues such as system unavailability and inaccuracy of grade keeping could seriously impact the learners and discourage them from learning online. Additionally, the pedagogical issues like unmatched difficulty with corresponding materials in class would hinder the learning from occurring and might confuse the students and consequently affect their performance.

To test the first hypothesis, we formulated the following four questions. The students' experience about the OUP e-learning system was addressed by asking them about the difficulty of the system. Their responses were as follows (Table 1):

Table 1. Responses to question 1

I find Oxford Learning System difficult to use	Responses
Agree	17.45 %
Don't know	16.04 %
Disagree	66.51 %

The results above show that the majority of the students (66.5 %) and a mean of (2.5) perceive the system as an easy usable system. However, the remaining (33.5 %) should not be ignored. This validates their responses to the issues they mentioned earlier and should be addressed by the English language department and preparatory year management in coordination with OUP to address the issues causing such a negative perception. The overall results of this question refuted the first hypothesis. This question was validated by a further question about the impression of studying online in general to distinguish that students' responses was not affected by the OUP system. The responses were as follows (Table 2):

Table 2. Responses to question 2

Studying online is difficult!	Responses
Disagree	63.38 %
I don't know	17.84 %
Agree	18.78 %

These responses (63.4 %) with a mean of (1.6) reaffirms the previous responses that the students experience was positive in general whether studying online in general or

using a particular system like OUP platform. Student's impression about the system in general was also captured in the second question through asking them how they feel about the system. The responses were (Table 3):

Table 3. Responses to question 3

Oxford Learning System is:	Responses
Excellent	21.03 %
Very good	24.30 %
Good	46.73 %
Poor	4.67 %
Bad	3.27 %

Summing up the good to the excellent responses will give a total of nearly (92 %) and a mean of (2.45) perceiving the system positively. This is a good feedback which entails that the issues and challenges mentioned can be overcome (Table 4).

Table 4. Responses to question 4

Disagree	54.46 %
I don't know	29.11 %
Agree	16.43 %

About (54.5 %) with a mean of (1.6) disagreed about the difficulty of blended learning mode. They mentioned in the interviews that this mode is more useful and it reinforces what they study in the classroom. This is encouraging and should be utilized by the preparatory year management to promote learning autonomy and encourage learners' engagement.

To test the second hypothesis, there following question related to the students' ability to manage their time efficiently online to explore if that affects their perception and experience when using the OUP system. The responses were (Table 5):

Table 5. Responses to question 5

I can't study online because I can't manage my time efficiently!	Responses
Disagree	46.23 %
I don't know	18.40 %
Agree	35.38 %

About (55 %) with a mean of (1.9) has no issue with managing in general their time efficiently online. This could explain the reason about time constrain in OUP exercises and why some students failed to deliver their homework in the due dates. This also refutes the second hypothesis. The difficulty of studying in a blended learning mode is quite important and this was tackled by the following question.

To eliminate the technology illiteracy impact and test the third hypothesis, we asked a question about whether the student knowledge of technology did affect their online study experience. The responses are discussed below (Table 6):

Table 6. Responses to question 6

I can't study online because I don't know how to use technology!	Responses
Disagree	92.06 %
I don't know	4.67 %
Agree	3.27 %

It is quite obvious that the students (92 %) with a mean of (1.1) are computer literate and familiarity with technology did not interfere with their online learning experience. This additionally confirm and validates their responses about the technical issues they faced during their online learning experience and shows the importance of addressing these issues to facilitate more the learning process. This positively supports the third hypothesis and shows that there is no effect of computer literacy on students experience when studying online.

5 Conclusion

This research highlighted the technical and pedagogical issues and challenges face by the students in the English language program students at the preparatory year at the University of Damman. The study used a semi-structured survey and interview to collect data required to answer the study questions. The total participants was 230 in the survey and 10 in the interview. The results revealed some important technical and pedagogical issues and challenges that should be carefully addressed by the preparatory year team in order to facilitate the learning process and keep students engaged. However, the overall users' experience and willingness to use elearning technologies and study in a blended learning environment was positive and encouraging and the preparatory year management should capitalize on that. It is also recommended to assess the efficacy of the elearning environment including all of its components before and after the students commencing their study to measure accurately the interference of elearning in the learning process. We also encourage the preparatory year management to pilot any future solution before introducing that to the environment and prepare professionally the students and faculty by raising their awareness and offering them proper practical training sessions.

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