Motivational Challenges in E-Learning

at the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools, colleges, and universities switched from their traditional modes of classroom teaching to online/e-learning. This has boosted e-learning culture and made it a common practice in Saudi universities. Blending e-learning and traditional teaching methods in educational institutions empowers today's students with online systems to support their pursuit of academic knowledge and skills. Because this is a recent endeavour in Saudi Arabia, it presents many challenges. There has been very little serious research done on the best practices to improve students' e-learning outcomes. This study investigates the motivational and technological impediments encountered by Saudi students, using a questionnaire as a research tool to explore their real life e-learning experiences and issues at the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. The objective was to identify effective motivational strategies to engage learners. This in-depth study yielded many firsthand insights into issues that impede students' motivations in e-learning. After analyzing each problem, the paper proposes some concrete, innovative tips and teaching strategies for both the teachers and the students to make a feasible and significant difference in the e-learning practice.

Keywords: e-learning, motivations, English language teaching, educational technology, online learning, Saudi students

1. Introduction

This article addresses the most crucial problems Saudi students are facing in the area of e-learning, a recent endeavour by both the Saudi government and private stakeholders to synergize online and classroom teaching practices to help learners acquire continuous learning skills and stay connected to the learning process, even when away from a college and university campus, using various technological platforms. However, little substantial research has been done in the field, especially when compared to research on classroom teaching. The significance of this research lies in its attempt to identify the factors that motivate and demotivate e-learning students. If these challenges are not addressed, students will continue to suffer, and their learning performance will be hindered.

With this in mind, the research focuses on four key factors: learners, infrastructure, e-content, and teachers. The use of a questionnaire as a research tool provides a comprehensive inside view of the students in southern Saudi Arabia, studying at the University of Bisha, collecting data related to their attitudes, motivations, and challenges. In the discussion section, each factor is analyzed from multiple correlated perspectives related to approaches, methods, and techniques, providing an in depth understanding of the problem. Based on the evidence collected, multiple solutions are then proposed for making a substantial positive difference to e-learning practice.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This exploratory research takes the form of a case study on students of the University of Bisha, mining data directly from the students on the campus to identify the motivations and challenges they have encountered in using an e-learning system called Blackboard. More specifically, the objectives are as follows:

(1) Survey students' attitudes, approaches, and motivations regarding e-learning, and use these data to identify strategies for empowering them.

(2) Identify the technical challenges students face, and find ways to help overcome them.

(3) Investigate the quality of the e-learning materials and how they help or impede the learning process.

(4) Explore the crucial role teachers play in the success or failure of e-learning.

1.2 Literature Review

There is great potential for e-learning to prosper in Saudi Arabia. Quoting Al Arabian News, Alsadoon (2012) found that the number of cell phone subscribers in Saudi Arabia had increased very sharply from 20 million in 2007 to 51.6 million in 2010. Summarizing government data, Alsadoon continues:

The number of Internet users in the Kingdom continues to rise rapidly, reaching about 24.1 million at the end Q2-2017, with a population penetration of 76%. Increased demand for Internet services and broadband was observed due to high use of social networking applications, video downloading and gaming. (p. 24)

Since almost all students spend a substantial amount of time each day using cell phones, teachers should aim to take advantage of this by using the technology for learning purposes. Alsadoon (2012) has emphasized that a teacher should explore the possibility of using mobile devices (either cell phones or other such devices) as tools to help students learn:

Cell phones are no longer just phones; they have become multi-purpose tools. People use them to call, take pictures, record videos or audio, play music, browse the internet, check the weather, find directions, translate a word, read an e-book, play a game, attend a virtual class, and even read a product price. (p. 113)

The potential for using cell phones or other electronic devices for e-learning is immense. The term "e-learning" itself has been defined by Urdan and Weggen (2000) as "the delivery of content via all electronic media, including the internet, intranets, extranets, satellite broadcast, audio/video tape, interactive TV, and CD-ROM" (p. 8). Similarly, Zamani (2022) defines e-learning as "a broader word that encompasses technology-based learning through websites, learning portals, video conferencing, YouTube, mobile applications, and a plethora of other free blended learning web sites" (p. 3494).

While researching the prospect of implementing e-learning in Saudi Arabia, Al-Harbi (2010) found that attitudes toward the subject had "a strong impact on the intention to use e-learning among the students," and advised policymakers to "attempt to build positive attitudes among the potential e-learners" (p. 44). This need to emphasis e-learning in all educational spectrum is especially urgent, as Unnisa (2014) proposed, to create ". . . opportunities for [the] increasing population. With over 50% of the country's population under the age of 20, and being one of the highest birth rate countries in the world, Saudi Arabia's higher education institutions have been facing a growing demand for enrolment".

In the article "Vision 2030: A Recipe for Economic Growth," Alhenaki (2017) quotes Prince Mohammad bin Salman: "70 percent of Saudis are under the age of 30" (p. 153). This shows the alarming growth of the population and consequently the urgent need for the nation to generate a learning system to meet the needs of these young people. In her key article "Is Saudi Arabia Ready for E-learning? – A Case Study," Chanchary (2011) notes that "In 2008, Saudi Arabia called for a national plan to adopt information technology across the country. The plan recommends implementation of e-learning and distance learning, and their prospective applications in higher education" (p. 1). Every higher education institute in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been striving to implement this national plan, despite having diverse challenges.

1.3 Significance of the Study in the Saudi Context

A quick survey of the research scholarship on e-learning in Saudi Arabia found the existing literature focused on the importance and significance of e-learning for the growing population; but no serious research has been done on the most crucial issues facing students themselves: how to motivate them to engage into the e-learning process, and how to overcome the barriers to doing so. This study explores these issues by mining data from the students themselves in order to identify meaningful and effective teaching strategies.

1.4 Advantages of E-Learning

E-learning has become a necessity in today's fast-changing world. It has been used to great advantage by technologically developed countries to foster new knowledge and skills, update the workforce, and prolong the hegemony of developed nations. It has many advantages over traditional classroom education. Mitchell (2017) judged it vital to create a secure place, free from authoritative people or influences that could impose decisions or pass judgment on differing viewpoints, to encourage student contributions to the curriculum and sharing of personal experiences. The virtual setting promotes candid discussion and the investigation of many viewpoints (p. 235). In the same vein, Noesgaard (2015) approved the use of e-learning, arguing that repetition is essential to the effectiveness of e-learning because it gives students the chance to apply and practice the knowledge they

have been given. Improving information retention and application in real-world contexts is the aim; simulated practice in e-learning offers a secure atmosphere in which students may hone their skills before using them in high-pressure job environments (p 286).

McKeown noted (2023) "due to geopolitical, economic, and now public health disruptions" (p. 854)—for instance, COVID-19—students cannot move easily from one country to another. This has created an urgent need for e-learning to connect students with their preferred educational institutions, where they can best acquire the cutting edge knowledge and skills based on the latest research in their area of their interest.

The country of Ireland, for instance, announced an initiative to transform its education system and take it to the next level by 2020 using e-learning. As a strategy, as Uhomoibhi (2006) demonstrated, Ireland explored various strategies of "how digital, multimedia and communication technologies are being used to enhance, improve and ultimately to transform education" (p. 6).

Because of e-learning facilities, students can now access information even from the remote areas far from the towns and cities, connecting with students from diverse localities. They can exchange their views with fellow students from different walks of life without physically moving from their location.

Learning is an ongoing process, occurring from birth to death, and e-learning facilitates that process. Traditional schools and university education only train students in how to learn within a specific area of specialization. It is like a runway at an airport. To support and maintain their excitement for learning far beyond their university experience, students need to be connected with the online learning systems, which will help them grow professionally and stay updated.

E-learning is a financially viable option both for institutions and students. Thousands of students can participate in a given class simultaneously, which is not possible in the traditional mode of teaching. Audio and video learning materials can be viewed again and again, at the student's own pace, for a more in-depth understanding—all without any extra expenditure.

In the twenty-first century, life has become complex, and many people must struggle for survival. Even when a worker has consolidated their position in the job market, competition remains fierce. Given the fast-changing nature of cutting-edge technology, their skill set may not stay relevant for long; and they may be unable to take time off from the job to go to a university campus to acquire new skills. The best option for staying up to date—a necessity for survival in the workplace—is online learning. The flexibility of online courses allows workers to schedule their learning times to suit their personal, family, and professional lives. They can schedule their time "from anywhere, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week" (Condruz, 2013, p. 75)

E-learning is truly oriented toward learners. The learner can choose the learning materials from among a galaxy of resources available via the internet. To clarify a concept, learners can explore diverse learning materials, from YouTube videos to graphic aids from Google Images to articles from online journals, newspapers, and blogs. Unwin (2008) contends that the e-learning "encourages learner centred approach to learning" (p. 5). A learner can also set the length of the learning period, from a 2-month crash course to a heavier program of 2 to 4 years or even more. Alshahrani (2016) argues that "The Ideal L2 Self . . . is centred around the internal desires of the learner" (p. 146), and because e-learning provides students with a variety of "New Englishes" to choose from, they are more likely to get intrinsically motivated by accessing the variety of English they desire; for instance, some might wish to learn British English while others prefer American English.

By using discussion boards, teachers can better engage all students in discussions. Students can connect to each other and break the barriers of mutual ignorance, clarifying themselves almost instantly. This model of multi-way communications among teachers and students allows for better understanding and education. A student can communicate with another student or with the whole group, and vice versa.

Because a student has the advantage of making multiple attempts to explore any given piece of e-content and can also explore diverse learning resources online, the possibility of perfection is much higher in an online learning environment; space and time are open, so learners can carve out ideal learning conditions for themselves, searching out e-learning content that suits their own needs, interests, and skills. As Brooks et al. (2001) put it:

"The Web is a place where one can read and read, and then read some more—without being forced to respond in ways that demonstrate learning. Much of what is on the Web is ideal for learners who are successful as passive learners. A highly motivated learner may thrive on vast amounts of Web information". (p. 20)

Students are highly motivated by their perception of a direct, proven relationship between their acquisition of information and knowledge and their progress in academic performance as measured by instantaneous feedback and test scores. Many e-learning courses visualize student performance using colorful graphs—for instance, a

marker on a bar moving from red to yellow to green as the student progresses. Grade graphs may also show where the individual student stands in relation with the other students in the course, giving the student a clear sense of direction and progression that helps them stay constantly motivated and engaged.

Different learners have different learning styles. There is an abundance of e-learning contents particularly suitable for visual and auditory learners. With the help of the latest educational tools, educationists across the world have come up with a host of innovative teaching strategies, all are available for online use, and that can make learning more fun and engaging.

Virtual classrooms for e-learning are rich with diverse learner groups. Older students, who otherwise might have avoided attending a regular classroom, are a strong presence in e-learning, enriching the platforms with their unique experiences and expertise. This is a great contribution to the country's knowledge bank.

1.5 Key Challenges in Implementing E-Learning

Any country that wishes to implement e-learning in its educational system must overcome diverse critical challenges. Semlambo (2022) warns that e-learning systems often fail due to "lack of strategic planning, opposition to change, the cost of technology, and inadequate course delivery" (p 114). Condruz (2013, p. 575) argues that perhaps the most crucial challenge in implementing e-learning as an educational tool is the high student drop-out rate; students may be initially motivated to register for online courses, but practical reasons may prevent them from fully following through. E-learning demands rigorous and consistent involvement; but learners may postpone studying, or forego it altogether, in the face of a small distraction or technical or conceptual problem. Consequently, they mismanage their time, fall behind, and eventually drop out entirely.

Creating effective and successful e-content is not an easy task. It requires mastery of the subject matter, along with course design online presentation skills. And the subject matter is not in itself sufficient to ensure that students will stay motivated. It is necessary for the teacher to take counsel from students to find an appropriate context, discover an ideal approach, and orient the learners to the relevant perspectives so that they feel engaged in the learning process. Otherwise, learners may become confused after encountering a small error, leaving them frustrated without any avenue for clarification.

To be successful in e-learning, both teachers and students must have access to modern educational tools. It is complex and costly for any government to support such high-tech computer labs in all its educational institutions; but the lack of adequate infrastructure hampers the quality of e-education.

Even with an excellent e-learning lab, success is not guaranteed. To design effective and successful e-learning courses, teachers need specialized professional training. If the teachers themselves are tentative, confused, or demotivated, the e-learning course is not going to be successful.

Building a professional e-learning course requires a large budget and manpower. Depending on the existing infrastructure, a reliable web-based learning system may need to be purchased or developed, and educational technology infrastructure upgraded. The process can require the services of e-content developers, web designers, software engineers, and other skilled professionals.

Students from remote localities or from a low-income poor background may lag behind in an e-learning program because any such program requires students to have access to broadband internet connections and fast computer processing. Many remote places in Saudi Arabia have no good internet connectivity. Poorer students from those interior localities may not be able to afford personal computers or internet access, and will thus be deprived of the benefits of e-learning.

Students in e-learning programs often suffer from low confidence and poor communication skills (both verbal and nonverbal) when giving presentations regarding their learning outcomes. During a prolonged period of isolated online study, they may fail to develop the ability to argue, present, debate, and discuss. This lack of interpersonal skills and consequent low degree of confidence in presenting their knowledge and skills will make them suffer in the competitive job market.

According to educational psychologists, students learn best by doing; but experimental learning and kinesthetic activities are missing from online learning programs. Students with poor hands-on experience and skills are ill-equipped for the job market.

An ideal educational institution should focus on the holistic development of its students, cultivating each and every aspect of the students' personality. It should, on top of the academic knowledge and skills development, focus on the social, physical, emotional, cultural, spiritual, linguistic, and moral development of the students. On

e-learning platforms, though, the main focus is on academic skills—especially on the theatrical aspects of the subject.

To be successful in e-learning, students should be already highly motivated, committed, IT-trained, and reliable. The process of completing a rigorous e-learning module demands from the students a high degree of perseverance, sincerity, entrepreneurship, and hard work. Soong (2012) lays out some caveats:

[A]s the use of ICT has become more and more popular in English e-learning programs, teachers still need to be warned that technology itself is not a panacea. E-learning is well acclaimed for providing self-paced learning to students who are able to decide where, when and what to learn. (p. 92)

Successful students will have strong problem-solving skills, as they are likely to face many technical and conceptual problems as they progress in their studies.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design of the Study

This paper was exploratory in nature. It is a case study. The ultimate objective is to reorient e-learning practices to maximize students' participation and active involvement. Van (2009) emphasized that the students' active participation and continuous involvement "cannot be imposed. [They] must come from the materials and lessons that are implemented" (p. 9). This investigation is an attempt to assess the extent to which the essential factors—students, teachers, e-content, and technological apparatus—are empowering or impeding the e-learning process at the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. A questionnaire of 12 items served as a research tool to mine data from the students. An analysis of the data collected from the students will fulfill the objectives of the survey. The questionnaire was presented both in English and Arabic for better comprehension by the students.

2.2 Population

The population of the survey constitutes the students at the College of Arts and Letters, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia.

2.3 Participants

The number of the total participants in the survey was 250 students studying English language and literature courses in eight different levels of undergraduate courses in the College of Arts and Letters, University of Bisha. They were not full-time online students; e-learning was only one component of studies, and they attended tradition in-person classes as well.

2.4 Procedure for Data Collection

Given the present study's aim to examine the effectiveness of the e-learning, the questionnaire focused on four key factors: students, technical apparatus, e-content, and teachers. A questionnaire comprising 12 items, each in English with an Arabic translation, was provided to participants; the questionnaire was administered in hard copy during in-person class meetings, in the presence of their respective teachers in the academic year 2021–2022.

2.5 Instruments

The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert-type scale with the following responses: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. The statements in the questionnaire can be grouped into four categories. Items 1–3 survey students' attitudes and motivations.

1. I am interested in using Blackboard.
انا مهتم باستخدام البلاك بورد
2. E-learning is important as it will help me all my life.
التعلم الاليكتروني مهم و سيساعدني طيلة حياتي
3. For Blackboard activities, I accept help from others.
استعين باخرين لحل انشطة البلاك بورد

Items 4–6 assess the technical infrastructure and how it helps or impede the e-learning process.

4. If I encounter any technical problem in Blackboard, I don't know how to fix it.
لا اعرف كيف احل أي مشكلة فنية اذا واجهتها في البلاك بورد
5. I don't have a computer or internet in my house.
لا املك كمبيوتر وانترت في منزلي
6. My mobile phone does not open online tests and quizzes
جوالي لا يفتح الكويزات والاختبارات على الانترنت.

Items 7–9 address the quality of the e-content used by the students

7. E-learning materials are not easy to understand and simple to use.
مواد التعلم الاليكتروني ليست سهلة و بسيطة.
8. E-learning materials are not relevant for the quizzes and the tests.
مواد التعلم الاليكتروني ليست لها صله بالكويزات والاختبارات
9. If there is concept I do not understand, I do not know how to clarify it.
اذا لم افهم أي مفهوم لا استطيع توضيحه

Items 10–12 investigate how well teachers are implementing the e-learning process.

10. Teachers are not interested in engaging us in e-learning.
الاساتذة ليسوا مهتمين بجذبنا واشراكنا في التعلم الاليكتروني
11. There is no regularity and consistency in using Blackboard.
ليس هناك انتظام واتساق في استخدام السبورة
12. If I get lower marks on Blackboard quizzes, I do not know why.
لا اعرف السبب اذا حصلت على درجات قليلة في كويزات البلاك بورد

2.6 Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

All the statements were checked and verified by reliable experts in the department. In the process, some statements were modified, edited, or omitted, and new ones added.

2.7 Empirical/Qualitative Approach and Procedures

An empirical approach was used to analyze the data. A considerable number of perspectives, insights, and views were based on the researcher's direct teaching experience with e-learning, working with thousands of students in the English program for over a decade teaching both language skills and literature courses in a blended learning mode; these insights helped in the analysis of the data. This research is not intended to prove or disprove any theories; it is exploratory in nature and modest in claim.

3. Results and Discussion

This section of the paper describes the questionnaire responses and analyzes their implications for teachers with a view to reinvigorate the e-learning practice of the university.

3.1 Survey Results

The objective of item 1 (I am interested in using Blackboard) is to evaluate students' degree of motivation for using e-Learning in blended mode along with their regular classroom studies.
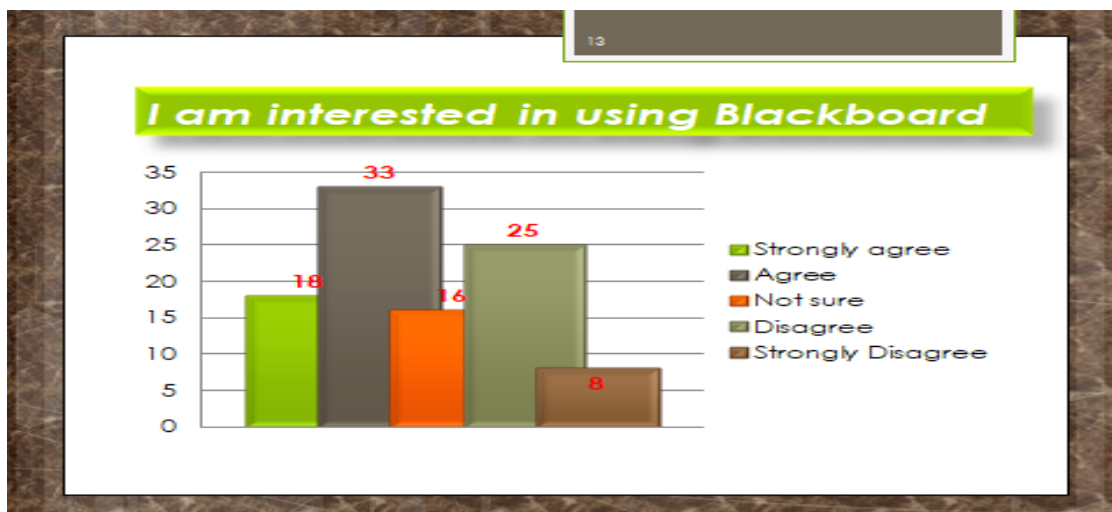
Figure 1. I am interested in using Blackboard

The graph shows just over half of the students are interested in using Blackboard. What we need to do as teachers is to identify the concrete factors responsible for empowering or impeding students' e-learning performance. Note that 16% students are not sure about their prospects with e-learning, and only 8% strongly disagree with the very idea of e-learning; this would seem to indicate that, although there is room to improve students' participation, this uncertainly may be addressed with proper guidance and counseling.

Next, responses to item 2 (E-learning is important, as it will help me all my life) evaluate whether respondents are properly informed about the value and power of a-learning as a tool for life skills and career development. It is important for all stakeholders to promote engage with lifelong learning.
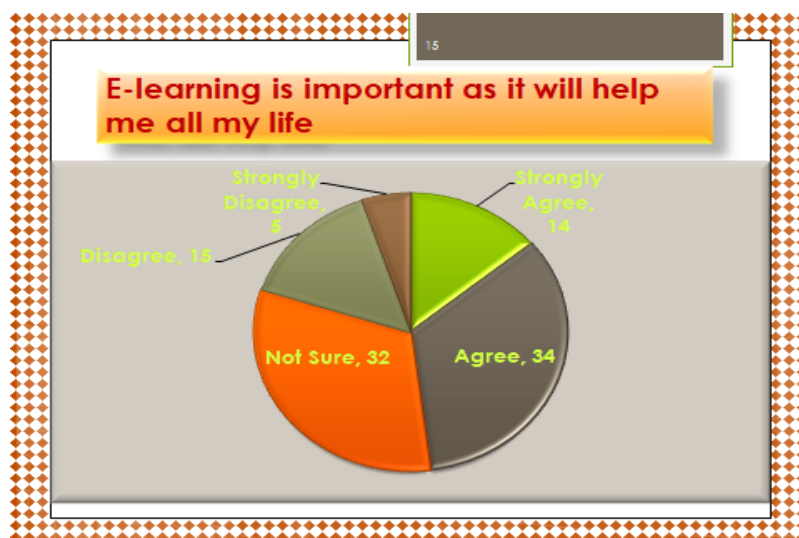
Figure 2. E-learning is important, as it will help me all my life

Figure 2 indicates that less than half of respondents understand the importance of e-learning in their lives and careers, while almost a third are unsure; this might indicate that they are not convinced about the power of e-learning to help them hone new skills, or how it can help them can rebuild their career to survive in the competitive, changing job market. The implication here is that teachers need to counsel their students and motivate them to participate actively in the e-learning process.

Various studies have noted that students in e-learning can quickly lose their motivation and fail to pursue their studies. One reason for this is the occurrence of academic or technical problems that students cannot solve on their own. They need to be connected with each other to stay motivated. Item 3 (For Blackboard activities, I accept help from others) aims to evaluate the extent to which students are helping themselves by creating an online community to provide social and emotional support systems.
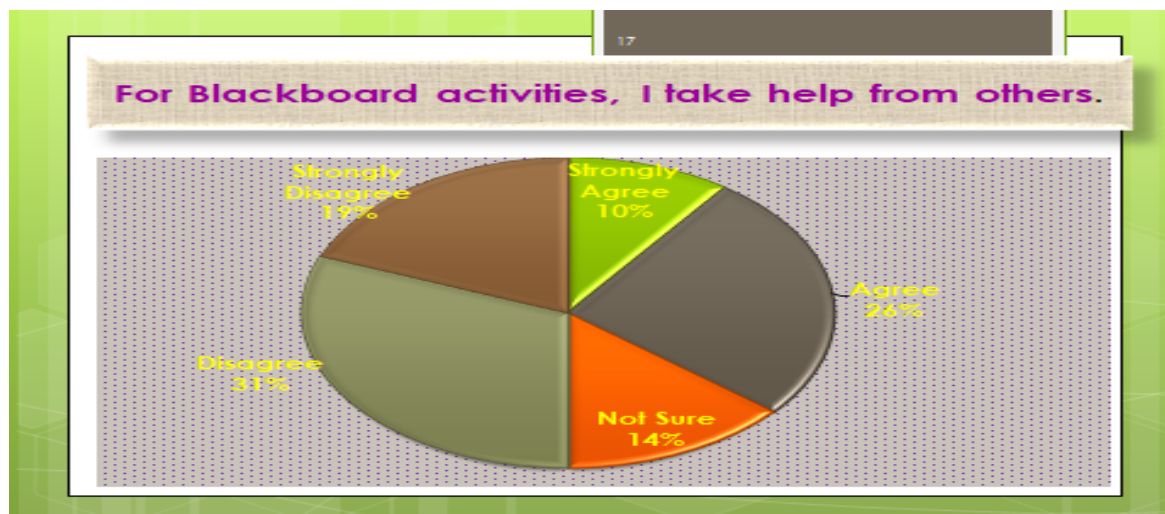
Figure 3. For Blackboard activities, I accept help from others

As seen in Figure 3, half of the respondents are not motivated to accept help from their friends, fellow students, teachers, or anyone else to fix their academic/technical problems in Blackboard. When we include the "not sure" responses, a significant number of students (64%) prefer to work alone in the e-learning platform. There is a large gap here that teachers can help to address. When students start sharing ideas among themselves both online and in the classroom, e-learning participation and performance are boosted. And the e-learning format is in some ways ideal for encouraging participation. In his in-depth research on the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia, Ja'ashan (2015) found that "Blended Learning gives shy students a chance to participate and share their opinions with their classmates on forum or other different ways in Blackboard" (p. 49).

The responses to this section confirm a decade's of empirical research on the use of e-learning in Saudi universities. Many students are not confident in using their university's learning management system (LMS), in this case Blackboard. Some are confused, and need hands-on training. Students who lack basic computer skills coming into university suffer even more; this is particular prevalent among students from remote localities, especially poorer students, who may not have the devices or internet connections necessary to do the activities online from home. In such situations, teachers should book the university e-learning center and take the students for both training and facilitations. There should be guidance and counseling sessions to convince the students of the value of e-learning. Technical orientation sessions and group discussion sessions should be conducted so that students will learn to help each other.

3.2 Survey on Technical Factors

E-learning requires the use of a computer with a fast internet connection and access to ancillary applications and plug-ins—Java, Adobe Flash Player, RealMedia Player, Adobe Acrobat Reader, Microsoft Office, and so on—simply to open and operate Blackboard to its full potential. Some students may lack either the equipment or the computer competencies to manage this, and so may encounter problems in the software and hardware systems or with their respective settings. A computer that lacks any of these features may not be compatible with Blackboard. Item 4 evaluates respondents' ability to address such technical problems on their own.
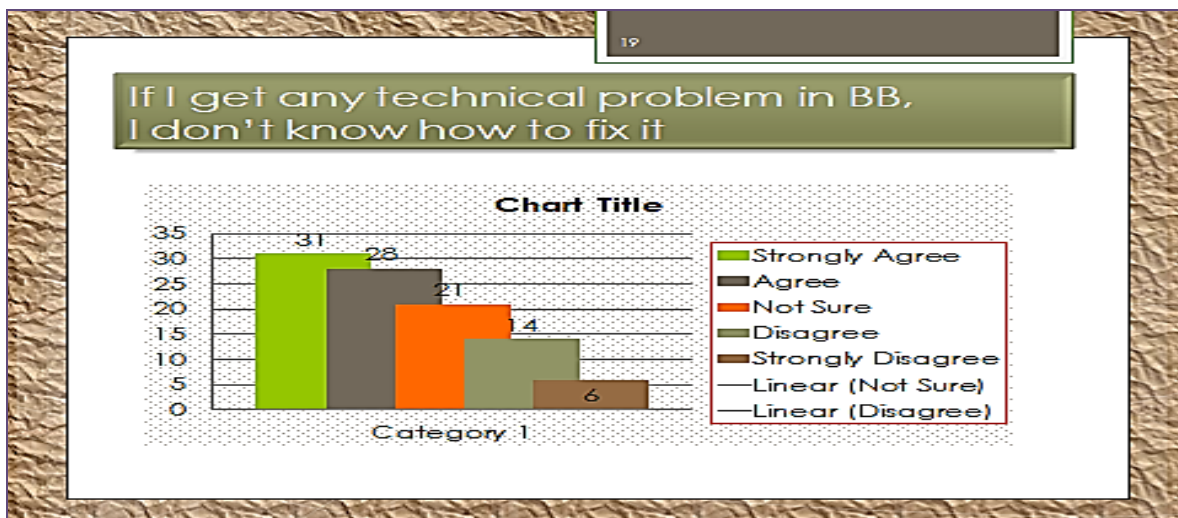
Figure 4. If I experience any technical problem in Blackboard, I don't know how to fix it

The graph shows only 20% students can fix their own technical problems. A huge majority, 61%, face technical problems in using Blackboard; that frustrates their performance. This emerges as one of the most crucial areas teachers need to address to improve e-learning participation. The situation is so critical that Ali (2017), in a study conducted at the same university, suggests that "some courses/workshops/training on computer literacy/skills and Blackboard techniques should be added to the university syllabus and it must be done in the first year (level one and two)" (p. 150).

Not all respondents are from urban areas. As noted, some are from remote localities and/or from economically challenged families. They may be unable to access a computer at home; even if they can, they may not have an adequate internet connection, either because it is expensive or because of inadequate infrastructure in their villages. Item 5 (I don't have any computer or internet at my house) aims to quantify how common this problem is so that we can analyze the implications for the e-learning practice.
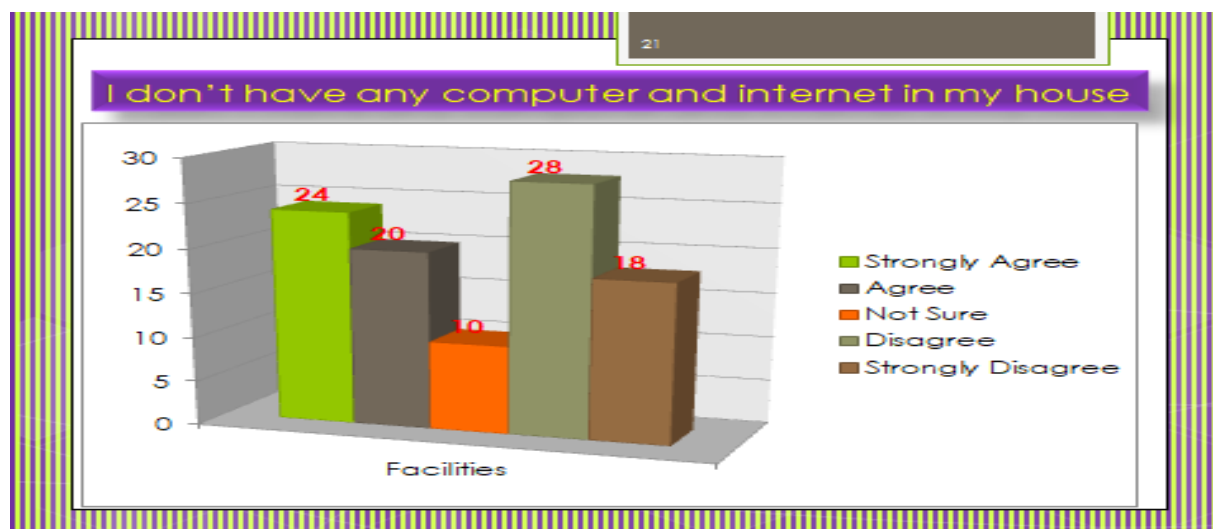

Figure 5. I don't have any computer or internet at my house

As Figure 5 shows, 44% students have no computer or internet (or either) at home. This means we need to motivate them to buy one or use the university's e-learning lab in their free time. Until we address this problem, a substantial improvement in the e-learning performance is not possible.

There is one piece of technology that is ubiquitous, though; nearly every present-day student in Saudi Arabia has an Android mobile phone, and most use social media extensively. This introduces a great potential for educators to tap. Integrating Blackboard into mobile social media platforms, or even developing a standalone version of

Blackboard optimized for mobile phones, would go a long way toward addressing this issue, providing students with a better, faster way of connecting with their university learning systems.
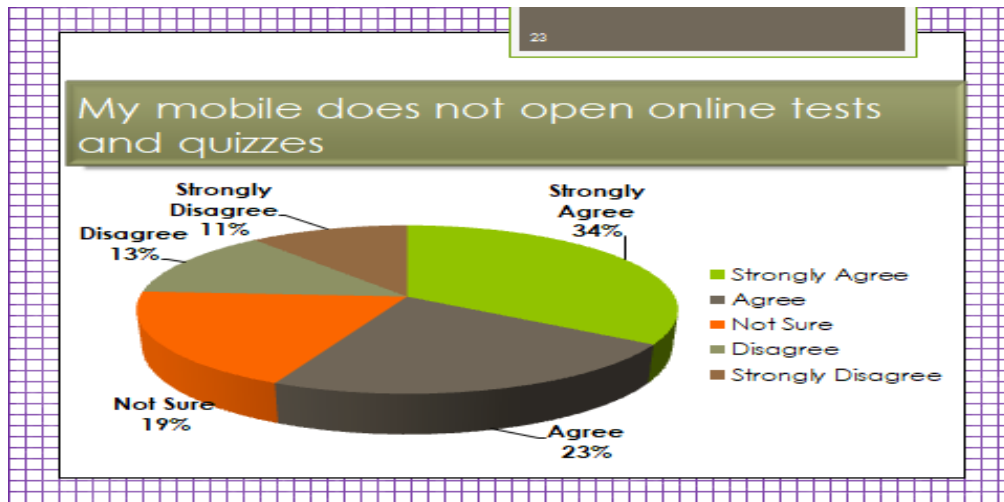

Figure 6. My mobile phone does not open online tests and quizzes

Figure 6, breaking down the responses to item 6 (My mobile phone does not open online tests and quizzes), shows that three out of four students either cannot or have not tried to use Blackboard on their phones. Given that students spend a lot of time on social media and go online via their mobiles, making our e-learning system more mobile-compatible and adding social features will help embed e-learning into students' daily lives.

Students from rural areas face particular problems with Blackboard activities. Even some who have access to a computer at home cannot open the e-learning site because they lack the necessary software related applications. Slow connectivity is another pain point. Students feel their valuable time is being wasted, yielding no productive result—which is especially frustration under the pressure of a timed test. Even with high-quality e-content, activity-based interactive tools, and excellent communication methods, the e-learning project has not achieved the desired result for impoverished students due to the sheer lack of logistic support.

3.3 Survey on E-Learning Materials

Since students read online learning materials individually, they need to be interesting, easy to understand, simple, and self-explanatory. If the e-contents are not easy to understand and simple to follow, students will feel frustrated and soon quit the class. Teachers need to tailor and customize the learning materials to suit the proficiency and needs of the students.
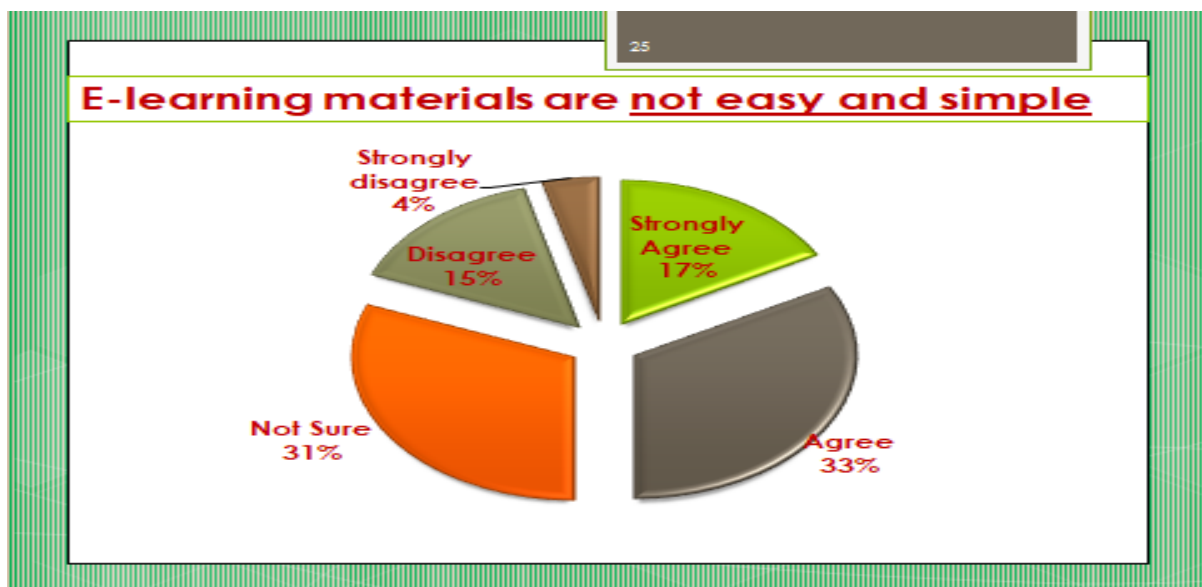

Figure 7. E-contents are not easy to understand and simple to follow

Figure 7 indicates that 50% of respondents agree that their learning materials are not easy and simple. The difficulty may be related to the complexity of the content, or to the language itself. The implication is that the e-content needs to be reoriented to the students' level to engage them. There should be variety and diversity in both the content and its presentation; materials should be appealing to both the auditory and visual learners.

E-learning materials need to be relevant to the students' university curriculum. The learning items should essentially be taught in the classroom and embedded into the regular classroom quizzes and examination to generate students' motivation and sustain their interest.
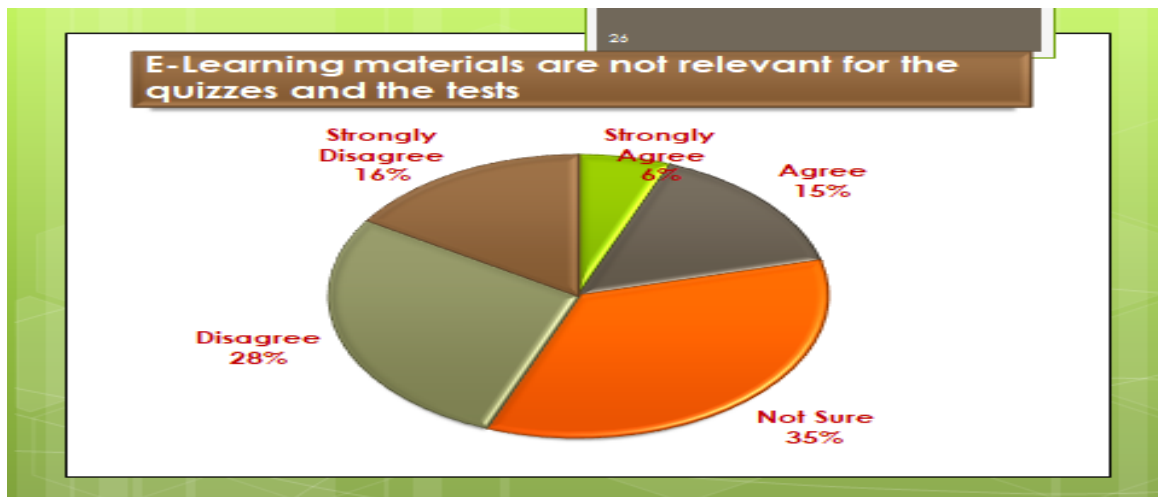

Figure 8. E-learning materials are not relevant to the quizzes and the tests

The graph shows 21% students agree with the statement in item 8 (E-learning materials are not relevant to the quizzes and the tests), while 44% disagree. We may infer that some teachers are using material covered in e-content for their classroom tests and examinations. A high percentage of respondents (35%) are not sure about the relevancy of the e-content to their classroom tests and quizzes. This might indicate that they have not read the online learning materials at all, believing them to be relevant even for their online tests and quizzes. The teachers need to make sure that the learners go through the online learning materials to do their both online and classroom tests. It is one of the areas teachers need to address.

E-content needs to be autonomous and self-explanatory in nature. Being remotely located, students have no opportunity to question the teacher directly or to request clarification of any confusing or difficult concepts. There should be clear and graded e-content that answers their questions. A teacher should predict potential difficulties and illustrate concepts likely to require clarification. And there should be some mechanism for instant communication with the students, should there be any need for further clarification.

Figure 9. If I encounter a concept I don't understand, I do not know how to clarify it

The graph shows that 57% students are at least occasionally confused by e-learning content. Accordingly, both the language and the texts should be graded to suit the competency and proficiency of the students.

Creating good quality e-content is a highly specialized task. Students grow motivated when they see the relevancy of the e-content to their in-person classroom testing and evaluation, and are more willing to master Blackboard materials if they know their hard work will be tested and awarded in terms of points and grades. Teachers therefore should strive to develop e-content based on university-prescribed texts only. This requires consistent hard work, time, perseverance and, of course, professional skills; teachers should predict the pitfalls and problems students might face in reading e-content, and assist them accordingly. E-content should be as self-explanatory as possible to help learners grasp the texts autonomously. The language of the contents should be easy to understand and simple to follow as per the proficiency levels of the students.

3.4 Survey on Teacher Role

Student feedback about their perceptions of teacher performance is vital as it relates to e-learning. For a successful e-learning practice, teachers need to be sincere, committed, and hardworking. The teachers should take initiative, motivate students, and engage them throughout the e-learning process.
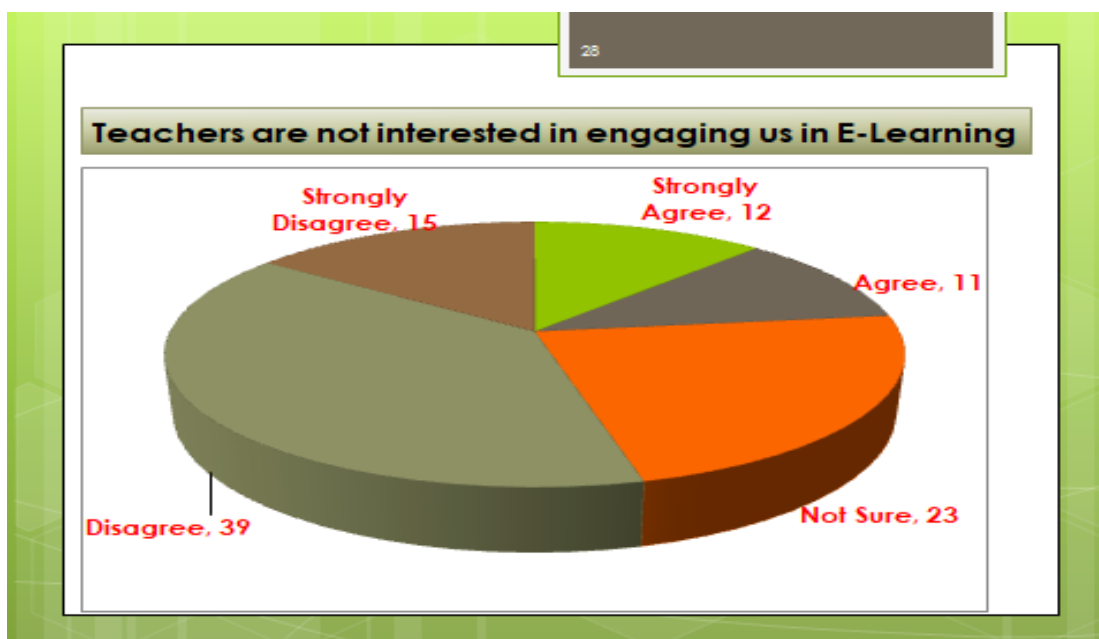

Figure 10. Teachers are not interested in engaging us in e-learning

In response to item 10 (Teachers are not interested in engaging us in e-learning), over half of the students disagreed, meaning it is the teacher who initiates the e-learning activities in the classes and engages the students in the process. That said, nearly a quarter of students (23%) believe that teachers are not taking enough interest in e-learning activities, and around the same number of students are not sure.

For a successful e-learning experience, it is very important for teachers to use Blackboard regularly and consistently. There should be instant feedback to the students' quizzes and tests. Regular online activities will help learners feel confident and at home in e-learning. Regular and consistent practice helps them develop competency, proficiency, and skills.
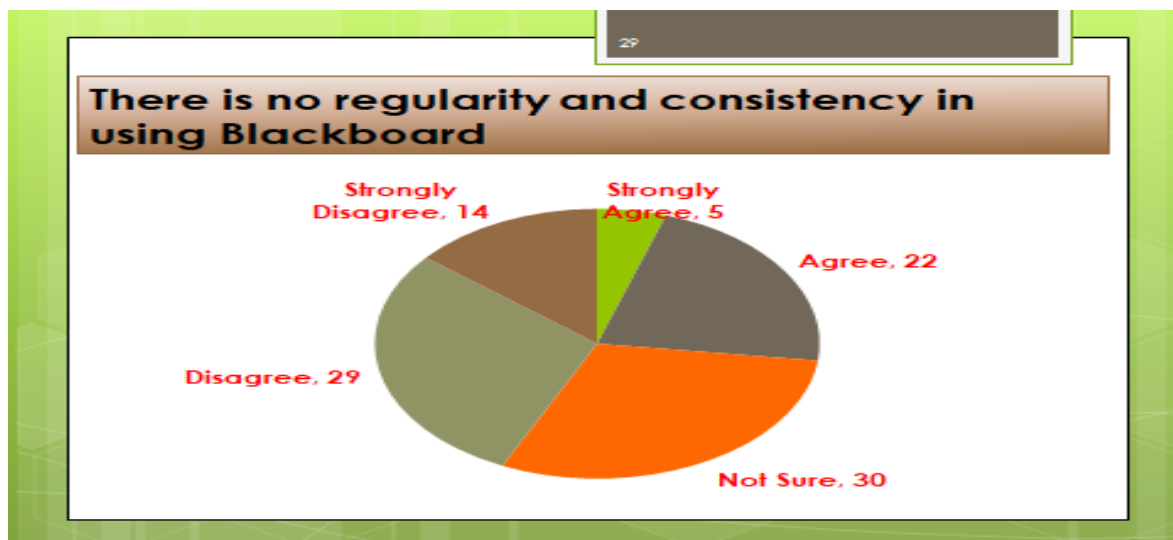
Figure 11. There is no regularity and consistency in using Blackboard

In response to item 11, 43% of respondents agreed to some extent that Blackboard has been used regularly and consistently in the university. More than a quarter (27%) believe there is no consistency and regularity in using Blackboard and another 30% are not sure. This indicates that teachers should take proactive measures to revamp e-learning practices in the university.

One reason why e-learning is motivating to students is because it provides almost instant results. If the students get feedback instantly on their learning and progress, they become more motivated because they feel assured of and confident about their new learning.
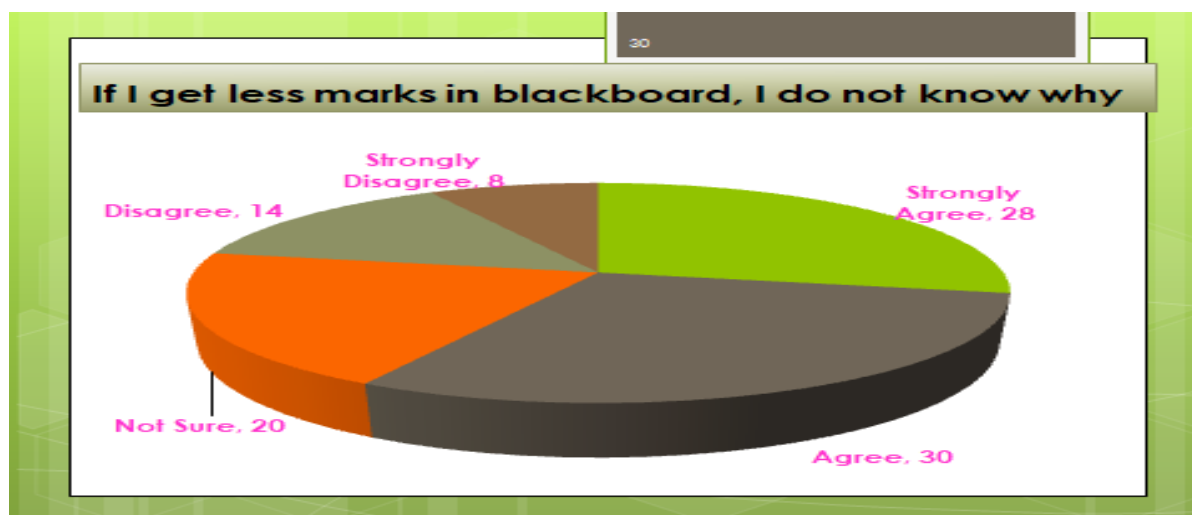

Figure 12. If I get lower marks in Blackboard, I do not know why

Item 12 surveyed whether respondents understood why they got unexpectedly lower marks in their online tests and quizzes. The corresponding graph shows that 58%—that is, the majority of the students—cannot figure out the reasons. This causes a degree of frustration and demotivation amongst them, and the teachers need to address this issue. We should provide them with instant feedback and model answers, along with taking remedial measures.

For a successful e-learning program, all teachers should be equally motivated to engage their students online. Activating and creating online activities requires a substantial investment in time. To motivate their students, teachers need to create diverse activities and facilitate interactions among the students by using tools like discussion boards, email groups, and blogs. Teachers will also have to be regular and punctual in monitoring and maintaining students' enthusiasm. He is at the center of the Blackboard and the key to success.

4. Discussion and Recommendations for Revitalizing E-Learning in Saudi Arabia

E-learning, though a relatively recent endeavour, has great potential to reinvigorate not only the existing workforce but also future generations in the path of progression and development. Like other educational methods, e-learning is consistently growing, empowering millions of learners worldwide. Teachers at all levels, IT professionals, e-learning business partners, educational policy makers, and research scholars across the world have collaborated and cooperated to facilitate the development and success of e-learning ventures.

It is essential that all the stakeholders of a university work together to make e-learning a success. There should be regular meetings and workshops to engage and activate all participants in the e-learning process. The aims, objectives, and goals of e-learning should be made clear and shared to motivate the participants. For smooth and successful implementation of e-learning, it is vital to hear the views, wants, needs, and attitudes of all stakeholders. Through these meetings and workshops, participants can share ideas and experiences, discover the strengths and challenges of e-learning in a particular teaching situation, and take the necessary steps to empower stakeholders to address the challenges.

If e-learning is to succeed, students and teachers both must cultivate their time-management skills. Online tests and assignments that are irregularly timed or of uncertain value are a source of frustration for students. Teachers need to carve time out of their busy schedules to facilitate e-learning. It takes a major investment of time to produce diverse e-learning content, build online tests and assignments, and subsequently evaluate student performance—but it is worth spending the time. Teachers can help each other by supporting the soft copies of the e-content and train each other in other technical aspects of e-learning.

It is essential for teachers to make key decisions related to online teaching with the motivations, linguistic proficiency, and available infrastructure in mind. For instance, e-content should be appropriate to the socio-cultural background of the students so that they can connect it to their lives and experiences. The difficulty level of the tests and assignments should be neither too difficult (which can make students they feel frustrated) nor too easy (which can instill overconfidence and complacency). While in the classroom, it is easy for teachers to make judicious decisions, because they get input from their students instantaneously, both verbally and from their body language. In online situations, though, it is the teachers' judgments that will make or break e-learning.

It is time that teachers reorganized their study tables to reinvigorate their professional skills. It is true no teacher can master graphic design and web design instantly; but teachers cannot ignore some basic computer skills. It is often said that technology will not replace teachers, but it is true that the teachers with technological skills will replace those without. The organization should invest time and money in developing teacher skills so that they can delegate various aspects of any given e-learning project. Staff training and delegation of work is absolutely necessary to get e-learning projects going and averting the mental blocks and confusion of less technologically skilled teaching staff. Chitanana et al. (2008) argued that "[t]he e-learning support strategy should emphasise the importance of partnership between Faculties and Universities' IT department in providing e-learning infrastructure and support to lecturers and students" (p. 30).

No matter how high the quality of the e-learning materials, if the students are not convinced and motivated, the whole effort will go in vain. We need. Then, to consistently use motivational strategies to engage learners in the e-learning system. "Motivational strategies," as Dornyei (1998) explained, "refer to those motivational influences that are consciously exerted to achieve some systematic and enduring positive effect" (p. 117). Effective strategies to motivate learners include making the aims, goals, and objectives clear; using interactive tools like discussion boards; designing quick navigation systems with links available in more than one place; employing self-clarified e-contents, games, and story-telling; providing instant e-certificates; using self-assessment systems; and rating students' positions on a leaderboard.

What the students are looking for when consulting e-content on Blackboard is whether the materials are useful and relevant to their classroom quizzes, tests, and semester-end examinations. With this is mind, teachers should connect e-content with their classroom teaching, and inform the students that these learning materials will have to be studied for the midterm and final examinations. The language of the e-content should be short, simple to understand, and easy to follow. All learning materials should be self-explanatory and clear. Diverse learning materials (e.g., videos, audio, and slide presentations), goalposts showing the directions, achievement mileposts with visual colors, and visual graphs will help students get motivated for the learning.

To help learners become autonomous in acquiring new skills even beyond their university experience, educational institutions will have to empower them with e-learning skills. To achieve that objective, traditional classroom teaching time and activities will be compromised for the greater benefit of the students. E-learning content may also need to be customized so that students are comfortable exploring without the help of a teacher.

Teachers will have to offer many options for the learners to choose from, and allow students to make multiple attempts at their online tests and assignments so they can build confidence, thus ensuring their engagement in the e-learning process.

Every individual student is unique. Their socio-cultural, linguistic, economic, and geographic backgrounds are different. To engage each student, the e-learning teacher should arrange personal meetings when possible to address any problems they encounter with e-learning and provide appropriate counseling. Some students may be inhibited and confused; others may fail to understand the importance the e-learning experience to their future careers; others may simply be unmotivated; some might need a little personal computer skills training to get started. What really matters is that the teacher should contact the students, either in group counseling or one-on-one, to provide required guidance and counseling; it works.

In the twenty first century, when technology and its related skill sets become rapidly outdated, learners need to be armed with learning skills that helps them quickly transfer their training to new situations almost instantaneously. E-learning is the help at hand. The students should clearly understand that they will rapidly become obsolete in the labor market if they do not hone their online learning skills. These skills will also equip them to perform their regular work duties with the various Ministries of their Government.

It is not enough for teachers to upload e-content, tests, and assignments to Blackboard. Teachers will facilitate greater e-learning success if they plot their online activity schedule in such a way that its enhances regular classroom tests and quizzes, rather than working against them. Allowing students ample time and multiple attempts for online tasks can provide the flexibility that will inspire even inhibited students to give it a try.

5. Conclusion

Concluding this article, the researcher can state that e-learning in Saudi Arabia has a promising future. Almost all the higher education institutions are taking e-learning seriously to make the educated people computer literate and autonomous in e-learning. This study has gone some way toward understanding the benefits of e-learning and the problems in the implementation of e-learning in Saudi Arabia. A number of key issues have been addressed related to the diverse nature of the students and their requirements, the challenges and opportunities for e-learning infrastructure, the nature and qualities of e-content that motivate students, and the role of teachers and their professional reorientations. The article has also offered some relevant strategies to revitalize e-learning practice in Saudi Arabia.

Acknowledgments

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