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Exploring English as Foreign Language (EFL) Students' Perceptions on the Use of Blended Learning to Develop Academic English Language Skills in Preparatory Year in Saudi Arabia

A thesis is submitted for the degree of the Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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Declaration

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

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Abstract

The unsatisfactory competence level of English as a foreign language (EFL) among undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia remains one of the country's major concerns. Despite the tremendous projects that aim to develop EFL curriculum, textbooks, and a variety of professional development programs, learning English in Saudi Arabia plays a limited role as targeted learners rarely practice the language outside the classroom. The rapid growth of technology in education has led the Saudi Arabian government to take decisive steps towards blending traditional teaching approaches with technology to enhance language learning.

The purpose of this study is to explore EFL undergraduate students' perceptions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogic tool on the development of their academic English skills (i.e., reading, listening, speaking, writing) as well as their recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in two contexts in Saudi Arabia: students at University A are required to attend 25% of the lectures in person and the remaining 75% virtually whereas students at University B are required to attend only 25% of the lectures virtually and the remaining 75% face-to-face. During the preparatory year in both universities, students complete an extensive English language program as a compulsory entry requirement into their colleges.

An explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design was used, which consisted of gathering quantitative survey data from 310 Saudi students across the two universities, followed by the use of in-depth qualitative data from a focus group interview with 28 participants to explain the quantitative survey results and allow for deeper insights into the research problems from different points of view. The interpretation of results in this study primarily focused on how qualitative findings explained survey data in relation to the study's purpose.

The students in this study indicated that the use of blended learning in preparatory year has the potential to support EFL learning for students in Saudi universities. According to the findings, the students believed that blended learning could maximize EFL learners' opportunities to practise

English language freely, at their convenience. The study concludes the need to focus attention on Saudi universities' infrastructures, students' initial training, and blended learning knowledge as an institutional culture. Finally, a realistic plan to develop preparatory year to avoid any challenges that might occur before and during the implementation of blended learning would be useful for all students as a transitional step between completely different environments. Clearly, there are issues which need to be addressed and/or resolved, such as ensuring that the library facilities are capable of delivering this type of approach, online materials are suitably supportive of the students required to access them, and the design of blended learning approaches take account of the preferred learning methods of students, and the workload required to be successful. As blended learning is in its initial stages in the Saudi educational system, this study contributes to the existing research as it provides guidance for using blended learning to enhance English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia. It can be concluded that the participation of Saudi EFL female students in blended learning is associated with a range of positive consequences, including a higher level of English proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and better cultural connections.

Table of Contents

| | | |
|----------|---|------------|
| 1 | Chapter 1: Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 | Background | 1 |
| 1.2 | Research Problem..... | 1 |
| 1.3 | Purpose of the Research..... | 5 |
| 1.4 | Research Questions..... | 6 |
| 1.5 | Significance of the Research | 7 |
| 1.6 | Overview of the Thesis | 9 |
| 2 | Chapter 2: The Study Context..... | 11 |
| 2.1 | Context of the Study: Saudi Arabia | 11 |
| 2.1.1 | Geography, Religion, and Language | 11 |
| 2.1.2 | Saudi Cultural Dimensions..... | 12 |
| 2.1.3 | Educational System in Saudi Arabia | 13 |
| 2.2 | English in Saudi Arabia | 18 |
| 2.2.1 | History of English Language in Saudi Arabia..... | 19 |
| 2.2.2 | Significance of Learning EFL in Saudi Arabia | 20 |
| 2.2.3 | Problems in Learning EFL in Saudi Arabia | 20 |
| 2.3 | Blended Learning in Saudi Arabia | 24 |
| 2.4 | Education for Women and Blended Learning in the Context of Saudi Arabia..... | 28 |
| 3 | Chapter 3: Literature Review..... | 31 |
| 3.1 | Introduction | 31 |
| 3.2 | Blended Learning | 31 |
| 3.2.1 | What is Blended Learning? | 31 |
| 3.2.2 | Historical Development from Distance Learning to Blended Learning | 38 |
| 3.2.3 | Technology in EFL Pedagogy | 45 |
| 3.2.4 | Potential Challenges of Using BL to Support English Language Skills Development.... | 55 |
| 3.2.5 | Theoretical Perspectives Underpinning Blended Learning | 60 |
| 3.3 | Definitions of EFL and Other Similar Concepts..... | 68 |
| 3.3.1 | Nature of the Four Academic English Skills | 69 |
| 3.3.2 | Using BL to Support English Language Skills | 86 |
| 3.4 | Saudi Students' Perceptions | 100 |
| 3.5 | Current Study | 101 |
| 3.6 | Conceptual Framework..... | 102 |
| 3.7 | Research Questions..... | 106 |
| 3.8 | Summary | 106 |
| 4 | Chapter 4: Methodology | 108 |
| 4.1 | Introduction | 108 |
| 4.2 | Research Philosophy: Pragmatic paradigm | 108 |
| 4.3 | Research Design: Mixed methods | 111 |
| 4.3.1 | Nature of Mixed Methods | 113 |
| 4.3.2 | Data Collection..... | 118 |
| 4.3.3 | Data Analysis | 146 |
| 4.3.4 | Validity, Reliability, and Quality Criteria | 153 |
| 4.3.5 | Validity and Reliability in Quantitative Research..... | 154 |

| | | |
|------------|--|------------|
| 4.3.6 | Ethical Considerations..... | 157 |
| 4.4 | Summary | 158 |
| 5 | Chapter 5: Findings (Quantitative and qualitative) | 159 |
| 5.1 | Introduction | 159 |
| 5.2 | Demographic Information | 161 |
| 5.3 | Findings Related to Research Question 1 (What are Saudi EFL Students' Perceptions Concerning the Benefits of Developing English language skills using Blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year) | 165 |
| 5.3.1 | Academic Reading Skills | 166 |
| 5.3.2 | Academic Listening skills | 182 |
| 5.3.3 | Academic Speaking Skills..... | 194 |
| 5.3.4 | Academic Writing Skills | 205 |
| 5.3.5 | Quantitative Findings about Students' Perceptions Related to the Advantages of Blended Learning | 214 |
| 5.4 | Findings for Research Question 2 (What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year) | 219 |
| 5.4.1 | Poor Internet Connection and Technical Problems | 223 |
| 5.4.2 | Lack of Technical Support | 224 |
| 5.4.3 | Lack of Required Information to Use the University's Online System | 226 |
| 5.4.4 | Long Face-to-Face Class Hours | 226 |
| 5.4.5 | A Great Amount of Written Work | 227 |
| 5.4.6 | Insufficient Computers in Labs | 228 |
| 5.5 | Findings Related to Research Question 3 (What are Saudi EFL students' suggestions on how blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool could be useful to develop English language skills in the preparatory year) | 228 |
| 5.5.1 | Having English Module Unaccompanied by Any Other Subject..... | 229 |
| 5.5.2 | Preparing Students with Orientation Sessions Initially | 230 |
| 5.5.3 | Support Internet Connection and Provide Technical Support..... | 231 |
| 5.5.4 | Enhance Communication Between Students and Instructor | 232 |
| 5.6 | Summary | 233 |
| 6 | Chapter 6: Discussion | 235 |
| 6.1 | Introduction | 235 |
| 6.2 | Reminder of the Nature of the Study | 235 |
| 6.3 | Discussion of First Research Question..... | 236 |
| 6.3.1 | Academic Reading Skills | 236 |
| 6.3.2 | Academic Listening Skills | 241 |
| 6.3.3 | Academic Speaking Skills..... | 246 |
| 6.3.4 | Academic Writing Skills | 252 |
| 6.4 | Discussion of Second and Third Research Questions..... | 255 |
| 6.4.1 | BL Implementation | 255 |
| 6.5 | Theoretical Contribution: Blended learning instructional framework | 262 |
| 6.6 | Summary | 268 |
| 7 | Chapter 7: Conclusions | 269 |
| 7.1 | General Summary of Key Research Findings..... | 269 |

| | | |
|------------|---|------------|
| 7.2 | Key Findings | 272 |
| 7.2.1 | First Research Question | 272 |
| 7.2.2 | Second Research Question | 278 |
| 7.2.3 | Third Research Question | 279 |
| 7.3 | Limitations of the Study..... | 280 |
| 7.4 | Implications and Recommendations for Institutions, Practitioners, Policymakers, and Future Research..... | 282 |
| 7.4.1 | Institutions..... | 282 |
| 7.4.2 | Practitioners..... | 283 |
| 7.4.3 | Policymakers | 284 |
| 7.4.4 | Future Research..... | 285 |

List of Figures

| | |
|--|-----|
| Figure 2.1 Map of Saudi Arabia | 11 |
| Figure 2.2 Virtual classrooms in SEU | 27 |
| Figure 0.1 The blended learning concept..... | 30 |
| Figure 0.2 Diagram of the blended learning definition | 34 |
| Figure 3.3 Community of inquiry framework | 59 |
| Figure 3.4 Study's Conceptual Frmaework..... | 104 |
| Figure 4.1 Explanatory sequential design source (Creswell & Clark, 2011) | 118 |
| Figure 4.2 Interview schedule..... | 131 |
| Figure 4.3 Population and sample of the study..... | 135 |
| Figure 4.4 Data collection..... | 144 |
| Figure 6.1 Blended learning instructional framework on writing | 265 |
| Figure 6.2 Blended learning instructional framework on speaking..... | 266 |
| Figure 6.3 Blended learning instructional framework on listening | 267 |
| Figure 6.4 Blended learning instructional framework on reading | 268 |

List of Tables

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 2.1 Stages in the Saudi Education System..... | 14 |
| Table 3.1 The Eclipse Diagram by Markos Tiris, LSDA, 1999 and the Definitions Used in the Centre for Excellence in Leadership’s Report (CEL, 2003)..... | 41 |
| Table 4.1 Notation System for Mixed Methods Diagrams | 112 |
| Table 4.2 Relation in Questionnaire Items and Main Research Questions | 119 |
| Table 4.3 Chronology of Data Collection..... | 130 |
| Table 4.4 Questions and Purposes | 131 |
| Table 4.5 Information on the Questionnaire Sample in University A | 135 |
| Table 4.6 Information on the Questionnaire Sample in University B | 135 |
| Table 4.7 Information on the Focus Group Sample..... | 137 |
| Table 4.8 Focus Group Interview Questions | 145 |
| Table 4.9 Connections between Main Research Questions and Focus Group Interview Questions | 147 |
| Table 4.10 Phases of Thematic Analysis | 148 |
| Table 4.9 Reliability of the Scale..... | 152 |
| Table 5.1 Students’ Demographic Characteristics..... | 159 |
| Table 5.2 Demographic Comparison for Each University | 162 |
| Table 5.3 Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Reading Skills for Both Universities | 164 |
| Table 5.4 Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Each University .. | 184 |
| Table 5.5 Five Sub-Themes Related to Academic Reading Skills Theme | 195 |
| Table 5.6 Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Listening Skills for Both Universities | 180 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Table 5.7 Frequencies and Percentages for Listening Skills in Each University | 181 |
| Table 5.8 Four Sub-Themes Related to Academic Listening Skills Theme..... | 195 |
| Table 5.9 Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Speaking Skills for Both Universities | 220 |
| Table 5.10 Frequencies and Percentages for Speaking Skills in Each University | 191 |
| Table 5.11 Four Sub-Themes Related to Academic Speaking Skills Theme | 195 |
| Table 5.12 Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Writing Skills for Both Universities | 202 |
| Table 5.13 Frequencies and Percentages for Writing Skills in Each University | 203 |
| Table 5.14 Two Sub-Themes Related to Academic Writing Skills Theme..... | 204 |
| Table 5.15 Frequencies, Means, and Standard Deviations for Advantages for Both Universities | 209 |
| Table 5.16 Frequencies and Percentages for Advantages in Each University..... | 210 |
| Table 5.17 Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Limitations for Both Universities | 215 |
| Table 5.18 Frequencies and Percentages for Limitations in Each University | 216 |
| Table 5.19 Themes about Challenge in Relation to the Second Research Question | 218 |
| Table 5.20 Themes about Suggestion in Relation to the Third Research Question | 224 |

List of Appendices

| | |
|---|-----|
| Appendix I: Ethical Approval Forms | 242 |
| Appendix II: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form | 252 |
| Appendix III: Focus Group Interview Transcripts | 256 |
| Appendix IV: Questionnaire | 264 |

Acronyms

| | |
|-------|---|
| EFL | English as foreign language |
| ESL | English as a second language |
| BL | Blended learning |
| KSA | Kingdom of Saudi Arabia |
| F2F | Face-to-Face |
| PYP | Preparatory Year Program |
| ESP | English for Specific Purposes |
| EAP | English for Academic Purposes |
| ICT | Information Communication Technology |
| IT | Information Technology |
| ILT | Information and Learning Technologies |
| L1 | First Language or native tongue |
| L2 | Second Language |
| DL | Distance Learning |
| eL | Electronic Learning |
| KFUPM | King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals |
| KSU | King Saud University |

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|-------|--|
| JU | Jouf University |
| QU | Qassim University |
| PNU | Princess Nora University |
| KKU | King Khaled University |
| LMS | Learning management system |
| KAUST | King Abdullah University of science and Technology |
| CMC | Computer mediated communication |
| CALL | Computer Assisted Language Learning |
| MOOC | Massive Open Online Course |
| CLT | communication Language Teaching approach |
| VLE | Virtual Learning Environment |
| COI | Community of Inquiry |
| ZPD | Zone of Proximal Development |

1 Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia has emerged as a powerful platform for Saudi Arabian students to adjust to the globalized realm, engage in international competition, and succeed in their careers (Alrabai, 2016; Faruk, 2013). The Saudi Arabian government recognizes that knowledge of English is crucial for several reasons, including its position as an international language and *lingua franca*, the language of information technology, participation in global foreign economics, and the spread of religion and cultural values outside the country (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015; Alrabai, 2016).

For economical purposes, many large Saudi Arabian companies and banks (e.g., Saudi Airlines, Aramco, Dallah, Saudi American, and Samarec) that engage in international business require employees to have high levels of English proficiency (Aljuhney & Open, 2015). As such, they organize English language centres to improve employees' English language skills—especially communicative skills (Habbash & Troudi, 2014). The rapid global technological progression has contributed to increasing the utilization of English as the language of communication on the Internet (Liton, 2012). For example, if anyone chooses to learn online anywhere in the world, English is the only common language in this situation by default (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015).

1.2 Research Problem

Despite the tremendous number of projects that aim to develop EFL curriculum, textbooks, and a variety of professional development programs, the level of English language competence among EFL students remains unsatisfactory in Saudi Arabia (Alrabai, 2014; Fareh, 2010). Previous studies have reported that the deficiency in learning EFL stems mainly from the absence of communication in English inside and outside the classrooms, among other key issues, such as the dominance of passive learning, which remains deeply rooted in the Saudi educational system; the use of traditional methods of teaching; and learners' lack of enthusiasm (Alrabai, 2014; Khan, 2011; Rabab, 2005; Troudi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014).

A key issue is that most traditional Saudi classrooms are teacher-centred; as a result, students are not used to arguing, participating in open discussions, or questioning others. Instead, they simply sit, listening and accepting whatever the teachers say (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015; Alrabai, 2014; Liton, 2012). A large-scale study by Alrabai (2014) found that most EFL school students in Saudi Arabia are anxious learners because they are used to being memorizers and being highly dependent on their teachers; as a result, they appear unresponsive to communicating in classroom conversations and unwilling to ask or even try to speak in English. Al Rashidi and Phan (2015) found that the dominance of teacher-centred approaches in EFL classes in Saudi Arabia is the leading cause of students' lack of participation in class and ineffective language competence. For example, EFL teachers spend the greatest amount of time providing explanations while students remain passive, simply copying what is written in the board. Fareh (2010) pointed out that "teachers talk most of the time and they rarely give students a chance to speak or ask questions" (p. 3602). Supporting this view, Smith and Abouammoh (2013) stated that the Saudi educational system has long been criticized for failing to satisfy learners in developing critical thinking and fundamental self-development skills. Furthermore, a case study by Alhmadi (2014) identified some school-level factors that have contributed to the deficiency of speaking among EFL students in Saudi Arabia, including ineffective traditional teaching methods, inadequate number of English classes, untrained English teachers, and poor curriculum. She concluded that students graduate from high school with a low level of English skills, which prevents them from carrying out simple conversations in English. As a result, at the university level, students encounter serious difficulties in English modules and lectures, such as anxiety, decreased attendance, and reticence.

A lack of motivation also exists among EFL students. Saudi learners often show no interest in English classroom activities (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015; Khan, 2011; Liton, 2012). Liton (2012) found that Saudi students in EFL classes suffer from a lack of enthusiasm and motivation. For example, long English class hours—up to five hours daily in some universities—with the same teacher and same class location to focus on only two language skills can result in demotivating students towards EFL. Similarly, Alhaisoni and Rahman (2013) pointed out that, although EFL in Saudi Arabia is presented as a mandatory subject

from the fourth year in the elementary level (when learners are 10 years old), there is a lack of motivation to help learners develop their English skills (listening, speaking, writing, reading) and change their attitude towards English.

Almost every study on EFL challenges in Saudi Arabia includes a section relating to the lack of social environment in which students can use the language in conversations and communications. The classroom is the only place where students hear the language (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Alhaisoni & Rahman, 2013; Alhmadi, 2014; Fareh, 2010; Khan, 2011). All these problems will be discussed in the next chapter.

The Ministry of Higher Education has introduced an obligatory introductory course known as the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) as an entry requirement in order to enhance Saudi students' English language proficiency, among other goals, such as to help develop students' range of learning skills to understand specific disciplines in which they are registered and to prepare them for studies in higher education establishments (Daif-Allah & Alsamani, 2013). Although a number of researchers (e.g., Al-Jarf, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Al Zumor, Al Refaai, Bader Eddin, & Aziz Al-Rahman, 2013; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Ja'ashan, 2015) have explored teaching and learning EFL in schools and universities in Saudi Arabia, little published data exist on EFL students' views about blended learning in relation to their English language development during the preparatory year.

The rapid technological developments in education have spawned a renewed interest in blending traditional methods of teaching and learning with technology to enhance language teaching and learning (Poon, 2013). *Blended learning* (BL) is a term frequently used in the literature, but to date there is no consensus about a comprehensively agreed-upon definition of blended learning, although the most common definition refers to the integration between online learning and conventional face-to-face learning. For Osguthorpe and Graham (2003), BL refers to integrated methods of interaction through the Internet and the meeting of teachers and learners via face-to-face sessions. Singh and Reed (2001) pointed out that "blended learning focuses on optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the 'right' learning technologies to match the 'right' personal learning style to transfer the 'right' skills to the 'right' person at the 'right' time" (p. 2). This definition highlights that the

ultimate goal of learning has to be focused on the use of the most efficient learning approaches that support students' skills needed in several learning purposes. Boelens, Voet, and De Wever (2018, p. 199) emphasised this characteristic in their definition of blended learning as “an instructional approach that combines online and face-to-face instructional activities, to create more flexible modes of education, and personalised learning trajectories”. Therefore, in addition to the notion of time and place flexibility, blended learning also provides students with ample opportunities to cater their individual needs and attain real personalised instruction.

However, Young and Lee's (2010) definition of blended learning is the most precise one and most relevant to the current study:

[Blended learning is] bringing together the positive attributes of online and offline education, including instructional modalities, delivery methods, learning tools, in relation to language teaching and learning approaches and methods in order to reinforce learning process, to bring about the optimal learners' achievement, and to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. (p. 180)

In Saudi Arabia, one reason for shifting to BL as a pedagogical tool is to address the expansion of undergraduate students in face-to-face courses, which exceeds the capacity of public universities (Al Zumor et al., 2013; Alaidarous & Madini, 2016). The Saudi Arabian government has taken decisive steps towards substituting traditional educational approaches for new approaches, which are more consistent with today's highly technological world. According to Alawairdhi (2016), incorporating blended learning into higher education demonstrates the intention of the Saudi Arabian government to “encompass the strengths of both traditional and virtual education while minimising the difficulties and disadvantages of both models” (p. 1). Blended learning is considered especially beneficial for female students as it enables them to balance their family commitments and education; it is also helpful for those who live far away from campus.

This section has reviewed three key issues of the deficiency in learning English among EFL students in Saudi Arabia: the dominance of passive learning, the lack of motivation among students, and the absence of a social environment in which students can use the language in conversations and communications.

1.3 Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to explore EFL undergraduate students' perceptions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool on the development of their academic English in each language skill (reading, listening, speaking, writing) as well as their recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia.

Blended learning in this study was used as a pedagogic tool that merges both face-to-face learning with the technologically enhanced learning possibilities of the online setting. In this study, students use a wide range of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which includes virtual learning classes, e-mails, Blackboard, online chat, discussions held synchronously (occurring at the same time) and/or asynchronously (not occurring at the same time) to enhance English language skills, active learning, access to knowledge, social interactions, and facilitated communications.

The Ministry of Education has encouraged the adoption of blended learning in universities as a pedagogic tool to enhance and support teaching and learning in the country as well as ensure the rapid growth of the number of undergraduate students despite the limited capacity of Saudi colleges. In this setting, students join classes, meet the teacher of the course, accomplish online activities, contribute to online negotiations, and receive feedback via the Internet, ultimately becoming independent learners (self-directed learners).

Dzakiria, Mustafa, and Abu Bakar (2006) identified several learning features associated with BL programs: students join classes, meet the teacher of the course, accomplish online activities, contribute to online negotiations, work independently, and ultimately receive feedback via the Internet. More importantly, blended learning maximizes language practice opportunities to enable EFL students to communicate with each other through synchronous

and asynchronous chatting and video conferencing. In other words, students acquire an opportunity to engage in face-to-face interactions with the teacher and to use a range of technologies to get access to the teacher outside the classroom, using a wide range of online activities that enhance English practices and facilitate communications (Thang et al., 2012). In this environment, the teacher helps students become more responsible for their learning, supports them in deciding how and when to learn, and chooses suitable resources for their learning needs (Liu & Yu, 2012). Therefore, blended learning is not just bringing technology into the classroom or upgrading textbooks with tablets or laptops; it is redesigning the instructional model, changing how teachers work with students, and giving students more control.

Dzakiria et al. (2006) noted that, when an educational institution takes the decision to shift to blended learning, the most significant factor that has to be considered is understanding learners' needs and intensively investigating their perceptions about learning experiences. As students are considered a cornerstone in the educational process, examining their perceptions concerning key benefits and challenges through the use of blended learning on the development of their English language skills in the preparatory year will be significant in different aspects. First, preparatory year is considered a crucial and challenging stage in the undergraduate student's life, as it is the transition from high school to the completely different university level (Khalil, 2010). Second, EFL students' suggestions in this study provide insights into how EFL learners should be supported in this new learning environment in order to successfully pursue their specialized fields of study and future careers as well as pass the preparatory year as competent learners.

1.4 Research Questions

As previously mentioned this study focuses on exploring EFL students' perceptions during their initial year to understand the advantages of blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool to develop each academic language skill (i.e., reading, listening, speaking, writing) as well as challenges, recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, an explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design was used, which consisted of gathering quantitative survey data

followed by the use of in-depth qualitative data from a focus group interview to explain the quantitative survey results and allow for deeper insights into the research problems from different points of view. The research questions of this study are as follows:

1. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the benefits of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?
2. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?
3. What are Saudi EFL students' suggestions on how blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool could be useful to develop English language skills in the preparatory year?

1.5 Significance of the Research

Most studies in the field of blended learning in higher education in relation to English language in Saudi Arabia have focused on certain areas in terms of general benefits or challenges. The present study aims to fill a gap in the literature as few previous studies have investigated the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning in the development of academic English in greater detail in each specific skill (i.e., reading, listening, speaking, writing) during the preparatory year.

As such, this study makes an original contribution in several important areas. First, this study provides new insights about the perceptions of EFL students enrolled in the preparatory year—a critical stage in the educational journey in Saudi Arabia—as few studies have investigated in this area. It is important to assess students' consideration of this key subject area in their educational process and explore their perceptions to allow their voices to be heard in a conservative society that deeply rooted to traditions, and culture. Recognizing how they learn, which activities they appreciate the best, and how they collaborate in this new environment is vital to creating effective programs. How students gain essential academic

skills and pass the preparatory year as competent learners is important to understand. Second, as the use of blended learning is in its initial stages in the Saudi educational system, the findings of this study could be used to promote the efficient implementation of blended learning by providing useful suggestions to address the challenges faced when implementing blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia. The literature has emphasized the importance of understanding individuals' perceptions, particularly in the educational context. Cope and Ward (2002) argued that understanding lecturers' and students' perceptions of learning settings is directly linked with quality of learning outcomes. Oliver and Trigwell (2005) strongly recommended examining diverse learners' perceptions in a blended learning environment. Accordingly, investigating students' perceptions will provide insights into the use of blended learning as a new approach to improve the quality of education in Saudi higher education institutions.

This study also offers some important insights into how participation in blended learning programmes allow Saudi women to further their studies and establish cultural connections among themselves and with other across the world, and achieve a wider level of inclusivity when it comes to assimilating knowledge in the English language even if they are married or live in rural areas. As noted by Mulhim (2014, p. 487), e-learning in general and blended learning in particular enable students to practice their foreign language in a stress-free setting, which significantly contributes to their knowledge and proficiency. Furthermore, this study sheds new light on how blended learning allows the learner to become autonomous and engaged in the construction the knowledge, rather than acting as passive absorbers. It is expected that this research will contribute to enhance the body of knowledge that exists in the area of blended learning; specially as it applies to the issue of the acquisition of knowledge in the English as a foreign language by female Saudi students.

The findings of this study aim to contribute to this growing area of research by using predominantly qualitative mixed methods research. Such an approach best addresses the research questions by explaining participants' perceptions about the usefulness of blended learning on language development, thereby providing an in-depth understanding of the problem under study. Finally, this study contributes to knowledge of blended learning in

relation to EFL by suggesting a BL instructional framework based on the learning theories. This framework could serve as a guide to support each language skill in both online and offline settings.

1.6 Overview of the Thesis

This study is divided into seven chapters. This first chapter has outlined the background about EFL in Saudi Arabia and identified a research problem. The research purpose, significance of the study, and research questions have also been presented. This chapter next offers an overview of all the remaining chapters in this study.

Chapter 2 (The Study Context) delivers an overview of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia from geographic, religious, and some cultural dimensions. It also provides an overall view about the country's education system since its inception. It then discusses EFL in Saudi Arabia from a historical perspective, its significance, and some problems that affect English language development. This is followed by a discussion of blended learning in Saudi Arabia.

Chapter 3 (Literature Review) describes in greater detail blended learning, including its history, how blended learning can support English language skills development, and potential challenges of using blended learning to support English language skills development. Theoretical perspectives underpinning blended learning are also explained. Then, reviews the nature of each language skill (reading, listening, speaking, writing) and discusses some key issues around each skill. The chapter ends by presenting the importance of investigating EFL perceptions in the current study.

Chapter 4 (Methodology) provides the justification for the chosen research paradigm that underpins the design of the study. The rationale of the data collection and the data analysis will be also presented. Finally, reliability and validity, in addition to ethical issues, are considered.

Chapter 5 (Quantitative and Qualitative Findings) merge both data and presents the findings from the statistical analysis of EFL students' perceptions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning in the development of their English language skills. Then,

describes the themes, sub-themes, and interpretation of participants' perceptions from open-ended questions and from the focus group interviews. Chapter 6 (Discussion) discusses and interprets the study results using the themes that emerge from the qualitative phase in light of each research question.

Chapter 7 (Conclusion) presents the key findings for each research question. It then discusses the implications and recommendations for implementing blended learning in Saudi higher education.

2 Chapter 2: The Study Context

2.1 Context of the Study: Saudi Arabia

This section provides a concise overview of Saudi Arabia from geographic, religious, and some cultural dimensions as well as its educational system.

2.1.1 Geography, Religion, and Language

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is currently headed by King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz. Saudi Arabia occupies more than 2,150,000 square kilometres—almost 80% of the Arabian Peninsula (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015). Located in the southwest corner of Asia, it is surrounded by the Red Sea to the west, Yemen and Oman to the south, the Arabian Gulf and the United Arab Emirates and Qatar to the east, and Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait to the north (see Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 Map of Saudi Arabia

(<http://ontheworldmap.com/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-location-map.html>)

Riyadh City, the capital of Saudi Arabia, is located in the central region of the country. As the birthplace of Islam, Saudi Arabia is also home to two holy cities: Makkah and Medina. The Islamic Committee in Saudi Arabia is similar to how parliaments function in the West. The Council of Ministers is usually led by the king. Arabic is the official language, while English is also commonly spoken and understood.

2.1.2 Saudi Cultural Dimensions

Saudi culture is primarily determined by the dominant Islamic religion, which means “peace” and complete submission and obedience to God. Before proceeding to examine the nature of blended learning, it is necessary to identify some specific aspects of Saudi Arabian culture. According to Hofstede (2001), cultural factors have a great effect on the ways people think and acquire knowledge. Hofstede developed a specific scale for assessing cultural values in various countries of the world in accordance with five dimensions: *power distance*, *individualism*, *masculinity*, *uncertainty avoidance*, and *long-term orientation* (Hofstede, 2001). He recently added a sixth dimension, which is *indulgence*.

Drawing on Hofstede’s scale, Saudi Arabia scores 95 on the Power Distance Index. Such a high score on this index signifies that the Saudi Arabian society is hierarchical and thus education is based on a teacher-centred approach (Karolak & Guta, 2014). This particular feature, among others, is the main cause that deters students from being self-directed learners (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015). With regard to the individualism dimension, the score is 25, which means that collectivism is a characteristic feature of this society and that group learning is valued more than individual learning (Karolak & Guta, 2014). In the Saudi collectivist culture, loyalty is the dominant value. The masculinity score of 60 highlights that men occupy a dominant position in Saudi Arabia and that opportunities for women’s education are significantly lower compared to men’s (Karolak & Guta, 2014). Regarding long-term orientation, Saudi Arabia scores 36, which indicates that this society is highly concerned with traditional values.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia has high uncertainty avoidance, with a score of 80 (Hofstede, 2001). In other words, due to this conservative environment, people are unwilling and strongly

resistant to change or to adopting anything that contradicts their traditional norms. Smith and Abouammoh (2013) stated that “traditional Saudi culture and religious teachings, however, are based on adherence to standards and norms, structured life style, and reluctance to engage strongly in open collaboration and exchange ideas with the outside world” (p. 182). Accordingly, challenges to adopting a new approach, such as blended learning, continuously emerge (Hamad, 2017). As it will become apparent later in this study, the nature of blended learning involves virtual classes including both genders (male and female), and this type of interaction is inappropriate for the conservative Saudi culture. Due to the aforementioned cultural dimensions, Baki (2004) suggested the need to reevaluate the extent of cultural conservatism and its consequences in the educational system.

This section has highlighted that the dominance of some cultural values leads them to have a great influence on the ways people think and acquire knowledge. Some of these cultural values based on Hofstede’s (2001) scale of cultural dimension have also been presented, such as *power distance*, *individualism*, *masculinity*, and *uncertainty avoidance*.

2.1.3 Educational System in Saudi Arabia

2.1.3.1 Overview

Prior to 1925, public education in Saudi Arabia did not exist. The only schools at the time were privately owned elementary level schools. The leader at the time, King Ibn Saud, viewed education as a tool for national cohesion, and he sought to enlighten the citizens as people had high illiteracy rates (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017). During the 1930s, the first education system was established. The system was similar to the Egyptian system, whose main aim was to construct schools that would reinforce Islamic teachings as well as disseminate knowledge (Elyas & Picard, 2010).

In 1933, the system witnessed many reforms with the formation of rules that governed private schools and the establishment of the first secondary school as well as the first religious sciences school. The General Directorate of Education gained control over the education system in 1938. In the 1950s, more schools were established, including the Teachers College, the College of Arabic Language, and the College of Sharia in Riyadh (Elyas & Picard, 2010).

More recently, with the rapid technological growth and increasing population, Saudi Arabia plans to shift from total dependence on oil as a main source of financing to a focus on other strengths of the country. Several developments have been made in Saudi Arabia's tertiary education system since the Ministry of Education was established in December 24, 1953, as part of the Council of Ministers. The Ministry of Education is responsible for three areas: all aspects of Islamic values to create beneficial members of society (Oyaid, 2009); a centralized system of control and educational support responsible for curriculum improvement; and the state of funds to support public education financially and ensure it remains free at all stages in Saudi Arabia.

Reforming the education system fell to the minister in charge. Some of the reforms included the introduction of modern education sources, the incorporation of a uniform system, and the introduction of a particular department aimed at countering adult illiteracy. The education system comprised a six-year elementary level that was mandatory for all, a three-year intermediate level, and a three-year secondary education (see Table 2.1). At the elementary level, students start at the age of six; this stage lasts six years. The intermediate level starts at age 12 and lasts three years. The final stage of schooling is the secondary level, which starts at the age of 15 and also lasts three years (Alhmadi, 2014). At the end of this stage, students are qualified to enrol in the university.

Presently, the educational environment is gender-segregated due to the Islamic regulations; lectures and lessons for each gender are taught on separate campuses (Alamri, 2011). In higher education, for example, university campuses for female students are completely operated and supervised by females, and lectures are taught by females or males through closed circuit TV. Despite the single-sex education, females and males have shared the same qualities of educational services, materials, and three levels of schooling (elementary, primary, secondary), where they are taught the same subjects, with slight differences to suit the specific needs of each gender (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015).

Table 2.1

Stages in the Saudi Education System

| Stage | General Characteristics |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Elementary level | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compulsory • Lasts for six years • Males and females study in different schools • Students' ages range from 6 to 12 years • Each school year is two semesters of 15 weeks each • Each school day comprises six lessons, with a single lesson lasting 45 minutes • Curriculum focuses on Arabic, history, geography, and arts and crafts • Government owns all public schools, and all of them are day schools • Schooling is free |
| Intermediate Level | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lasts three years • Students' ages range from 12 to 15 years • Curriculum is similar to the elementary level, apart from the inclusion of English • Aims to develop students' knowledge and skills to develop intellectual, logical, and scientific thinking |
| Secondary Level | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lasts three years • Free education • Students choose regular secondary education or vocational training • Common curriculum in the first year, but specialization in the fields of administration, natural science, and Sharia and Arabic studies • Vocational training is available in agriculture, industry, and commerce |
| Higher Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universities and colleges, with a number of courses • Programs include bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees |
| Vocational/ Technical Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides specific professional skills • Technical fields include electrical, machine mechanic, architectural drawing, and electronic repair • Agricultural institutions train on horticultural farming, plant nutrition, agricultural economics, and animal husbandry • Commercial institutions offer economics, accounting and financial management, secretarial, and business studies |
| Special Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentrates on individuals with special needs or disabilities • Offered in both public and privately owned institutions • Ensures that individuals with disabilities receive education at a pace at which they are comfortable |
| Adult Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to combat illiteracy among adults • Focuses on basic reading, writing, and simple arithmetic • Standard curriculum; classes are flexible to accommodate all participants |

2.1.3.2 The Reform

The government recently launched its Saudi Vision 2030, which was developed by Saudi Arabia's Cabinet (Burton, 2016). Saudi Vision 2030 requires significant overall changes in many aspects of Saudi Arabia. Educational changes are a top priority in this vision. The shift towards a knowledge-based economy was highlighted in the Saudi Vision 2030. According to this plan, the focus during the next 14 years will be on the reinforcement of the country's sustainable development and the implementation of technologies to satisfy people's needs with regard to education and work (Burton, 2016). As part of this plan, the Saudi Arabian government will put much effort into introducing new approaches to teaching and transforming some Saudi Arabian universities into internationally recognized universities.

Unlike in the past, massive investments have been made in educational projects around the kingdom. For instance, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) aims to be one of the leading research institutions in the world by inviting and developing geniuses from within the country and abroad (<http://www.kaust.edu.sa/about-kaust.html>). It is based on collaborative learning. King Abdullah donated \$10 billion to KAUST, making it one of the richest universities in the world while highlighting the significant role of education in KSA to develop and sustain its future. In addition, more than 148,000 Saudi students have travelled overseas after receiving a government scholarship to continue their education all over the world (Ministry of Education, 2013). The King Abdullah Public Education Development Project (Tatweer project), another recent project, pursued the comprehensive development of public education. According to Mitchell and Alfuraih (2017), the Tatweer project played a pivotal role in the development of the English teaching curriculum to sustain technological evolution and labour market requirements. The Saudi electronic library was also established in 2010 as a result of a huge investment in educational resources. Its enormous resources can make a fundamental contribution to supporting reading skills.

Recently, King Salman issued a royal decree to merge two ministries (education and higher education) in an extraordinary decision, underscoring Saudi Arabia's motivated plans for education. The king's decision was perceived as a forward-looking plan to achieve comprehensive growth and a prosperous future for the country and its citizens. It also unified

the supervision of educational bodies and the centralization of decrees while enhancing the quality of educational outputs. The efforts of the combined operational system will control this fundamental sector to ensure effective harmonization of its policies and programs. Supporting this view, Smith and Abouammoh (2013) asserted that continuous change in Saudi Arabia's higher education might overcome enormous challenges in the future.

Institutional changes in Saudi Arabia have already passed a number of developmental stages, such as the merger of male and female education in 2002 under the authority of the Ministry of Education, which supervises all K–12 education in the kingdom. Between 2003 and 2009, several colleges merged to create larger institutions: Teachers' Colleges (females) merged to create PNU (Princess Nora University), community and teachers colleges merged to create Jouf University (JU), and KSU (King Saud University) and IMAMU merged to create Qasim University (QU) (Sack, Jalloun, Zaman, & Alenazi, 2016).

2.1.3.3 Preparatory Year Program

The Preparatory Year Program (PYP) is considered a crucial and challenging stage in the undergraduate student's life, as it is the transition from high school to the completely different university level (Khalil, 2010). Yushau and Omar (2007) indicated that preparatory year strongly affects undergraduates' acceptance into their specialized field of study. The main reason for the creation of PYP is that most high school graduates were not ready for university life because they were lacking in essential skills for success at the university level (Khoshaim, 2017). As Daif-Allah and Alsamani (2013) pointed out, "the main purpose of this program is to facilitate a smooth transition from Arabic as the medium of instruction in secondary schools to English at the college level" (p. 129). Globally, there is evidence that preparatory year plays a fundamental role in developing students' skills and abilities to create autonomous learners able to take decisions, overcome challenges, and achieve their learning goals (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007).

In Saudi Arabia, the beginning of preparatory year was associated with launch of King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in 1963 (Alghamdi, 2015). At KFUPM, which is science and engineering based, students are not officially admitted until they pass the

minimum requirements in particular modules. However, the scores that students earn during this preparatory year are not calculated into their grade point averages (GPAs), as most other universities in Saudi Arabia do (Yushau & Omar, 2007). In addition, the rapid growth observed in Saudi higher education necessitated development in the educational process, and higher quality outputs resulted in the creation of the preparatory year across the kingdom.

PYP is a mandatory year which consists of two terms. During this year, English knowledge is required, and special attention is paid to improving students' English language development. To this end, most Saudi universities have cooperated with different international specialized companies which provide high-quality courses for beginners and advanced learners. They offer different training services to develop students' speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills in English as well as develop their learning skills to help students succeed academically during this year. At the end of the preparatory year, students have to score at least 500 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and at least 5 on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to be accepted into an undergraduate program.

Although each institution has its own PYP, they all share the key objective of developing students' English language skills to enable them to succeed in different academic programs (Khoshaim & Ali, 2012). Alnassar and Lee Dow (2013) listed the main objectives of the preparatory year in Saudi universities: preparing students to manage this new stage with regard to study skills, training them in the essential communication skills required for particular programs, developing English for academic purposes (EAP) skills, and improving research skills. Furthermore, students have to acquire minimum grades in the English language module as well as some other modules.

This section has outlined the different stages in Saudi Arabia's educational system, from public and higher education to the recent reforms. The nature and significance of the PYP were also presented.

2.2 English in Saudi Arabia

As mentioned earlier, Arabic is the formal language in Saudi Arabia and the medium of instruction in some colleges and universities. Since the 1920s–1930s, when English was

implemented in the Saudi Arabian educational system (public and higher education), it has been greatly valued within Saudi Arabian society (Alrabai, 2016; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

2.2.1 History of English Language in Saudi Arabia

This section explores the history of English in Saudi Arabia, its significance, its application to higher education, and the various challenges experienced whilst learning English language in Saudi Arabia.

According to Mahboob and Elyas (2014), Turkish was the first foreign language used in Saudi Arabia, although Saudis boycotted it, citing oppression and invasion from Turkey. In the 20th century, the kingdom experienced rapid growth, changing people's attitudes towards foreign languages, including English. Mahboob and Elyas (2014) pointed out that one school was opened in Makkah in 1936 to facilitate the School Preparation School (SPS) program for Saudis studying abroad. This school was the origin of modern education in Saudi Arabia's high schools because that is where English was introduced. Invitations were issued for qualified teachers, especially from the Middle East, who were then recruited to become instructors of English language in this school due to the lack of qualified Saudi English teachers (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017). English and French were also introduced in the newly developed mid-level education system, although French was removed a decade later.

Both public and private schools teach English as a core subject. Liton (2012) stated that English in Middle Eastern nations like Saudi Arabia emerged as "the chief foreign language to be encountered in schools, colleges, and universities" (p. 129). In their overview of English learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia, Al Rashidi and Phan (2015) asserted that fourth-through sixth-grade students study new subjects, including English, computer, and social studies. In addition to the Ministry of Education curriculum, which allows students to take English as a core subject, international schools have been established to cater to children of expatriates working in the country but likely to relocate later (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015).

The expansion of EFL taught in elementary schools in Saudi Arabia started in 2013, after continuous complaints about learners' low English proficiency (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017). These complaints stemmed from the fact that students only started to learn the basics of the

language (e.g., letters, numbers, and very simple grammatical rules) when they were 12 years old (seventh grade) (Al Nasser, 2015). As the status of English grew due to its gradual progress and improvement, it became preferred as an essential course in all schools across the country. It was also made a priority channel for carrying out training in many organizations and enterprises in the country, such as the Saudi ARAMCO, Saudi Airlines, and Saudi Telecommunications (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

2.2.2 Significance of Learning EFL in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's citizens have affirmed that English plays vital roles in the lives of people as well as the development of the country at large. Its integration into the curriculum of higher education connotes a great benefaction to Saudis. According to Mahboob and Elyas (2014), one of the key reasons why English is regarded as essential is its perceived economic value. The large companies operating in Saudi Arabia significantly contribute the country's economic development. Expatriates other than Arab nationals have made significant establishments in terms of hospitals, shopping malls, and restaurants (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Integrating English into the curriculum of both high schools and higher education centres would help Saudis gain competent, communicative technologies, thereby preparing them for jobs in these economic enterprises and bringing about the necessary developments in Saudi Arabia. In addition, Bawazeer (2015) asserted that English has provided opportunities for Saudis who studied abroad in Western education contexts to acquire jobs. On the political front, English helps with communication between Saudi Arabia's armed forces and the American military powers, as well as coaches and technicians (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). It facilitates and enhances the delivery of training programs between the two countries.

2.2.3 Problems in Learning EFL in Saudi Arabia

Despite English being studied for almost nine years in school in Saudi Arabia, a number of researchers (Alrabai, 2016; Fareh, 2010; Khalil, 2010; Rabab, 2005) have reported an inadequate level of language competence among EFL learners. Al Rashidi and Phan (2015) identified the main challenges to learning EFL in the Saudi context: the domination of the teacher-centred approach, the absence of enthusiasm among learners, and some traditional

ideas about English which might negatively affect Arabic language. These problems will be explained in the next three sub-sections.

2.2.3.1 Students' Perceptions about Learning EFL in Saudi Arabia

Generally, most EFL school students have negative attitudes and a lack of enthusiasm towards the English language; they consider it a hard subject to learn, so they learn it just enough to pass the exam (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Researchers such as Al Rashidi and Phan (2015) noted that, in the classroom, EFL learners are mostly scared of creating errors when speaking; thus, they prefer to keep silent instead of being embarrassed in front of their peers. This is mainly because teachers tend to be critical instead of encouraging students' gradual developments. Alrabai (2014) mentioned that unwillingness to participate in class and reliance on teachers as the only source of knowledge are common features in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia. He further added that a "collectivist country" like Saudi Arabia makes the teacher the centre in the learning process while the students instead become memorizers (p. 82). Indeed, in EFL classes, students are often given part of a written paragraph, a new grammar point, or new vocabulary to memorize in order to pass the final exam (Alkubaidi, 2014). As a result, students tend to be concerned only with improving their memorization skills without thinking critically or even trying to develop their ideas—important skills, especially at the university level (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015; Fareh, 2010). Therefore, the absence of motivation in learning English is considered a serious challenge in the EFL classroom (Liton, 2012).

Learners' lack of interest is another problem influenced by traditional beliefs. Despite the objectives of cultural preservation, the education system—inclusive of the policy, curriculum, and course syllabus—is greatly tied to Islamic values, all concepts of Islam, and living according to the Islamic ways (Al Rashid & Phan, 2015). Saudis have a strong bond to this Islamic culture and are resistant to learning other languages, like English, which are perceived as diluters to their culture (Payne & Almansour, 2014).

2.2.3.2 EFL Curriculum

Previous studies examining problems in the EFL curriculum in Saudi Arabia have reported that the major causes for the deficiency of teaching and learning of English related to the focus on conveying knowledge instead of language practice, limited time in lessons, and the lack of appropriate learning resources (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Alhaisoni & Rahman, 2013; Khan, 2011).

The current EFL textbooks present information, but fail to provide students with abundant opportunities to use and practise the provided knowledge. Greater emphasis has been placed on grammatical rules, new vocabulary, and reading texts (Al-Seghayer, 2014). In other words, the precise development of an EFL curriculum from primary to secondary level was overlooked when linking each level and preparing learners with the key skills they needed for the next levels of learning. The same scenario also occurs at the university level, as several modifications of the EFL textbook have occurred due to the breakdown for achieving learning objectives that clearly focus on developing students' linguistic and personal abilities (Alhmadi, 2014). This author further argued that, at University, the English textbook was changed several times because it was unsuccessful in meeting the desired learning objectives. The main focus was on reading and writing, with no effort made to develop actual speaking skills. Therefore, the teacher becomes the presenter of the lesson using a teacher-centred approach (Fareh, 2010). The teacher-centred approach is common in Saudi Arabia, where teachers lack new pedagogies inclusive of new teaching aids; thus, students end up learning passively instead of actively through participation in various activities. In such a setting, teachers dominate the majority of the lecture while students are just responsive, passive, and memorizers. In other words, the teachers infrequently provide students with the space to talk, interact, or question (Al Rashid & Phan, 2015).

Previous studies (e.g., Alkubaidi, 2014; Khoshaim, 2017) have indicated that the predominant teacher-centred approach has resulted in a lack of student engagement and attention. For example, some students talk with each other during the lesson, use their laptops or mobile phones, or fall asleep so the lesson becomes quite boring (Fareh, 2010). In addition, such challenges have caused Saudi students to become dependent on teachers as the only source of

knowledge (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). Moreover, the teacher-centred approach accentuates students' unwillingness to interact with others in English during or after the class period. In her case study of English speaking difficulties in Saudi Arabia, Alhmadi (2014) mentioned some reasons behind the reluctance to speak among students—namely, the predominance of the teacher-centred classroom, a lack of appropriate vocabulary, anxiety, and a lack of self-esteem. She recommended that EFL teachers change the conventional teaching methods to methods that enhance opportunities to increase communication and encourage students to speak in English.

Furthermore, an insufficient amount of time in English lessons (only 45 minutes, three lessons per week) at the intermediate and secondary levels, with a large number of students (40 to 50) in each class, results in little opportunity for students to practice the language inside the classroom (Khan, 2011). As Alhaisoni and Rahman (2013) pointed out, the absence of a social environment to interact in English in daily life might deter students from developing English fluency or expressing themselves easily in English. In addition, EFL classes only contain Arab students; thus, there is no opportunity to speak English directly with native speakers, especially in schools (Faruk, 2013). In fact, Khan (2011) alluded to the fact that learning English in Saudi Arabia serves a limited role as targeted learners rarely practice the language outside the classroom.

Another challenge that negatively affects EFL teaching is the lack of suitable teaching resources, such as e-learning resources, audio and visual supports, posters, well-equipped language labs, and language learning software (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Furthermore, most of the existing resources, such as audio tapes and posters, are in poorer conditions because there is a lack of maintenance (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015). As result, EFL teachers rely heavily on reading from textbooks and writing on the blackboard to deliver information to students.

2.2.3.3 Use of Traditional Methods in Teaching EFL in the Classroom

Teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia mostly employs the audio-lingual method, which depends on the production of suitable sound, and the grammar translation method, which focuses on grammatical rules and translation into the native language. Khan (2011) stated that, although

EFL teachers still use traditional teaching methods, students seem to be passive and inattentive while simply copying what teachers write on the blackboard into their notes. When introducing a reading passage, for example, the teacher reads aloud while students listen and translate the difficult words; students then either repeat or translate the words into Arabic. As a result, students are unable to use English language in different real-life situations as they were not taught how to produce appropriate language for different communication purposes.

Another challenge is the constant use of Arabic language to teach English, particularly grammar and vocabulary (Alhawsawi, 2013). The use of Arabic, Saudis' mother tongue, in the classroom negatively affects EFL in Saudi Arabia. Arabic and English come from different language families, so they are very different. They are distinct in various aspects, such as sounds and letters in the alphabet (Rabab, 2005). Arabic-speaking people often find it difficult to pronounce English words correctly. In Arabic, each letter has its own independent sound, whereas in English a letter may involve more than one sound or none at all. It is thus difficult to learn English completely due to this mother tongue interference.

Moreover, the use of the mother tongue in the classroom leads to several negative consequences, such as learners' dependence on Arabic to translate English words (Khan, 2011). Relying on translation from English to Arabic prevents students from developing language competence. Richards and Rodgers (2001) criticized the use of first language (L1) in second language (L2) classes, as "students who learnt the target language in this way might be deficient in speaking as they would first begin to think in L1 and then translate their ideas into L2" (p. 96). Rabab (2005) justified the use of Arabic language in most EFL classrooms among teachers mainly due to their deficiency of linguistics knowledge and to facilitate their teaching.

Thus far, this section has presented the history of English in Saudi Arabia, its significance, its application to higher education, and the various challenges experienced by EFL students which lead to several negative consequences.

2.3 Blended Learning in Saudi Arabia

Historically, the use of blended learning in the Arabic educational system emerged with the

Arab Open University (Troudi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, the first attempt to introduce blended learning in higher education was made by King Saud University in 2007 (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010), when it developed five introductory courses using blended learning for its College of Applied Studies and Community Services. One course was specifically dedicated to English learning. Blended learning in this course consisted of 70% e-learning and 30% traditional face-to-face classroom learning. Another Saudi Arabian university, King Faisal University, subsequently developed courses based on blended learning.

In 2009, after the First International Conference on E-Learning was organized in Riyadh, further important steps were taken to spread blended learning within the realm of higher education (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2011). Recently, in 2017, the first conference of blended learning, organized by Saudi Electronic University (SEU), was held in Riyadh and has been considered a fundamental step towards exchanging ideas and experiences between educators to move this field forward. It should be noted that the term *blended learning* is “an unrecognised term in almost all institutions in Saudi Arabia” (Troudi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014, p. 36). Instead, the term *e-learning* is the more commonly used actual meaning of blended (Alshathri, 2016).

As previously stated, the Ministry of Education has encouraged the adoption of blended learning in universities as a pedagogic tool to enhance and support its e-learning project in the country and to ensure the rapid growth of undergraduate students despite the limited capacity of Saudi colleges. Smith and Abouammoh (2013) stated that “Saudi Arabia has received sustained international criticism over many years about the quality of its education system, with major concern directed at the content of its curriculum and the didactic nature of its pedagogy” (p. 6). SEU is another example of a university that offers blended learning courses. It has increased the number of students enrolled to more than 5,000 and has introduced blended learning in management, health sciences, information technologies, and English (Alawairdhi, 2016; Alshathri, 2016). Blended learning in these courses consists of 25% traditional learning and 75% e-learning.

The use of the Blackboard as a learning management system (LMS) in most Saudi universities came about through the wide range of options the system offers to satisfy students' and teachers' needs. LMS can be defined as "a software application for the administration, tracking, and reporting training programs, classrooms and online events, eLearning programs, and training content" (Nedeva & Dimova, 2010, p. 22). It can be used on campus or accessed from home. Developed by Blackboard Incorporated, the Blackboard system creates a virtual learning environment "for communicating and sharing content" (Zaki & Zawaidy, 2014, p. 142). For example, in SEU the system is effectively employed to spread important information, materials, announcements, and assignments as well as to allow for collaborating and online chatting with peers, discussing assignments and ambiguous issues, submitting homework, sending e-mails, and participating in virtual classes. Figure 2.2 shows a virtual classroom in SEU, which contains several bars, including menu, audio, video, chat panel, collaboration tools, and content area. VLE helps students acquire more communication and time management skills and further improves the ongoing interactions between students and teachers (Zaki & Zawaidy, 2014). What distinguishes the Blackboard LMS from traditional learning strategies is that the system reinforces easy access to materials and quick feedback from teachers, helps students acquire communicative and time management skills, and improves interactions among students and teachers (Zaki & Zawaidy, 2014). The use of blended learning in this study refers to all online elements, including instruction, assignments, discussion board, live chat, virtual classes, feedback, downloads from online lessons, and mobile learning.

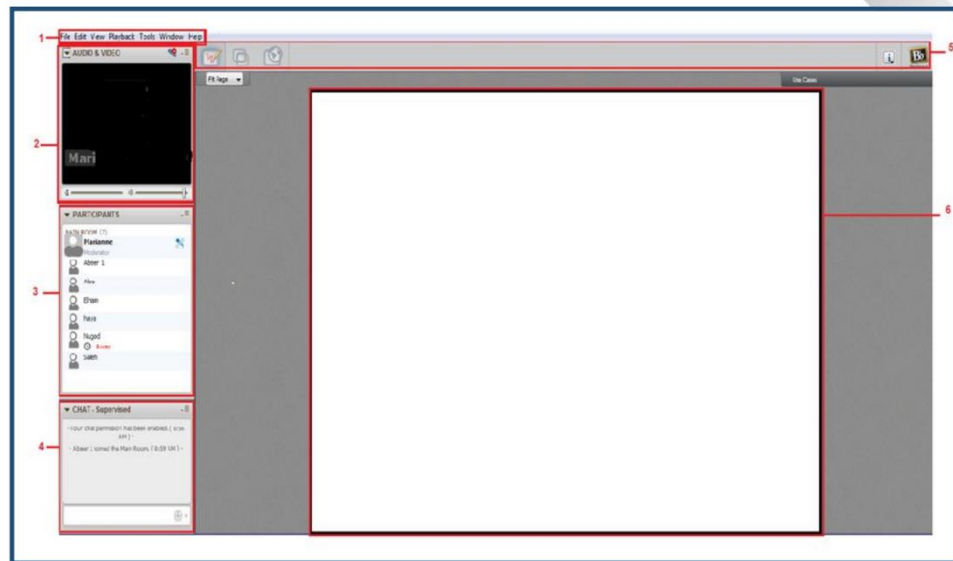


Figure 2.2 Virtual classrooms in SEU (<https://www.University A.edu.sa/sites/en/Services/>)

Taibah University is another Saudi university that offers blended learning courses to students, providing them the opportunity to engage in blended, more flexible learning. With regard to English learning, students receive both traditional and virtual instructions. In the case of virtual instructions, students acquire full access to all written, audio, and video materials. In contrast, in traditional learning, students have to wait several days to receive teachers' feedback. In this regard, blended learning motivates students more than traditional learning (Aljuhney & Open, 2015). In addition, blended learning provides Taibah University students with the ability to interact with their peers and discuss assignments. Such communication improves their English language and social skills, which will be necessary for their future careers. However, exams at Taibah University cannot be taken online; the university requires students to be physically present to avoid any mistakes when assessing students' skills and knowledge, as there is a risk that students may ask more qualified peers to do the online assessment tasks for them. Therefore, in this communicative environment integrating computer technology into language learning, both students and teachers can work collaboratively to enhance EFL and create independent learners.

2.4 Education for Women and Blended Learning in the Context of Saudi Arabia

Over the last decade, the culture of learning in Saudi Arabia has witnessed a significant shift due to the globalisation and internationalisation processes as well as the growing proliferation of the internet (Alzahrani, 2017). Today, more than 45%, or 23 million, of Saudi Arabia's population are active internet users (Statista, 2018). However, given that the government invests heavily in the development of the information technology infrastructure as well as the education sector, higher education is still not available to all individuals (Alojaiman, Alturise & Goodwin, 2014). This contradiction can be explained by a range of factors. For instance, Saudi Arabia scores high on the uncertainty avoidance dimension of Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework (Hofstede Insights, 2018). This means that Saudi Arabia is a very conservative society deeply rooted in culture and traditions. In turn, these traditions, including Islamic law, produce a strong impact on all aspects of social and cultural life, including education (Al-Alwani, 2014). There is a gender-segregated education system in the country, where male and female students are treated differently. Furthermore, women are expected to stay at home, which creates certain challenges to their ability to get a university degree (Mulhim, 2014). Finally, many individuals, especially women living in rural areas, have no access to higher education.

Regardless of the reason why females are not capable of being admitted to a university or completing their education in Saudi Arabia, blended learning provides these individuals with an opportunity to develop their skills, qualities, and competencies, including foreign language proficiency (Alzahrani, 2017). Today, many Saudi universities, such as King Khalid University and King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals, offer their students e-learning options to complete education programmes and courses (Aldiab, Chowdhury, Kootsookos, & Alam, 2017; Alshehri, 2017). As Mulhim (2014) noted, e-learning in general and blended learning in particular allow students to practice their foreign language in a stress-free environment, which significantly contributes to their knowledge and proficiency. Therefore, by participating in blended learning programmes, Saudi women can further develop their English language skills, even if they are married or live in rural areas. At the same time, although the popularity of e-learning in Saudi Arabia has been growing, there are still few

female lecturers or professors capable of carrying out blended learning programmes (Bueno-Alastuey & López Pérez, 2014).

Al-Hassan and Shukri's (2017) relevant empirical study explored the impact of blended learning on the performance of EFL female students in the context of Saudi Arabia. The researchers analysed primary data obtained from 96 students who studied English as a foreign language during the preparatory years at two Saudi universities. The findings revealed that the use of the supplementary materials of blended learning was beneficial for the majority of those surveyed. However, the researchers also found that more than half of the female students were reluctant to participate in blended learning programmes in the future. These outcomes suggest that students may lack the skills (e.g., autonomous learning and time management) necessary to effectively deal with the blended learning mode, which causes dissatisfaction (Mulhim, 2014). Yet the findings can also indicate that professors and teachers running blended learning programmes may experience certain difficulties when performing their duties in such environments (Aldiab et al., 2017). The lack of teacher guidance and support is another potential explanation for Al-Hassan and Shukri's (2017) empirical findings.

Tamim (2018) provides a qualitative study which explored female students' reaction to blended learning courses in a Saudi university. The results of this study suggested that there was a strongly positive perception of blended learning, together with a view that it had a positive impact upon female empowerment. Nevertheless, Tamin (2018) notes that for the female learners in the study, joining university was the first opportunity to engage in blended learning. Tamin (2018) notes that there is a perception that people's increasing familiarity with technology will translate effectively to the tools that are used for teaching and learning. The study founds some further weaknesses in the blended learning style that are not always noted in the literature. Tamin's (2018) participants suggested that the effectiveness of blended learning was conditioned by the ability of the instructors and their technological ability in delivering the instruction. The problem means that the instructors role in an online classroom was undermined by the distraction of poor technological ability, undermining the delivery, involvement and engagement. It was recommended that some instructors might overcome

these limitations by being more involved in the learner's involvement, and adapting a more integrative learning style that elicited more responses from students (Tamin, 2018). Tamin's (2018) study demonstrates how blended learning constitutes a new pedagogical approach that requires adaptation by the learner and teacher, rather than simply involving the transmutation of traditional approaches to online forums. Overcoming these limitations represents a particular opportunity for female learners in particular, because the online learning environment was perceived as being a space in which learners might more effectively express themselves and engage more thoroughly in the learning process, thus offering the potential for learner empowerment.

The benefits of blended learning in response to women's education in particular is also conditioned by the significant upturn in the demand for tertiary education by women in Saudi Arabia. The previously accepted roles of women as simply the wives or mother have been changing rapidly and women now constitute 27.9 per cent of the labour force, and are particularly well-represented in public sector jobs where they comprise 66 per cent (Tamin, 2018). Nevertheless, the taboos on contact with males, and other factors that limit women's opportunity for tertiary education remain.

In Saudi Arabia, blended learning should be implemented while taking into consideration cultural and social characteristics and features, such as the high level of student segregation and the heavy influence of Islamic law on social life (Hubackova, 2015b). Saudi EFL female students' participation in blended learning is associated with a range of positive effects, including a higher level of English proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and better examination scores (Alojaiman et al., 2014). At the same time, Saudi professors and teachers should further improve and enhance their capability for carrying out blended learning programmes in the online environment in order to contribute to the motivation and satisfaction of Saudi female students and help them successfully achieve their academic objectives (Vasileva-Stojanovska, Malinovski, Vasileva, Jovevski, & Trajkovik, 2015).

3 Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature into blended learning as a technology enhanced pedagogical tool, inclusive of its use in the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and how the Internet has been used for online and digital language learning. The chapter comprises four main parts. It first presents the conceptualisation of blended learning with a brief historical background that led to the advent of this particular approach. The discussion then describes in greater detail how blended learning can support English language skills development. The literature review also examines the theoretical perspectives underpinning blended learning are explained. Next, the chapter moves on to describe the nature of each language skill and the most effective strategies and practices in each core skill that contribute to learners' language development, and previous studies on the impact of BL on each academic English skill are also presented. Finally, the chapter presents the importance of exploring EFL students' perceptions and ends with a summary of conceptual framework of the study and reiteration of the research questions.

3.2 Blended Learning

3.2.1 What is Blended Learning?

The emergence and growing popularity of the internet have significantly changed teaching and learning processes (Ellis, Pardo, & Han, 2016). E-learning is commonly considered one of the most prominent trends to emerge from the internet proliferation. According to Yalçinkaya (2015), the use of electronic educational technology allows for adjusting learning programmes and courses to individual learners' needs, wants, and capabilities, which positively affects their performance and academic achievement. At the same time, purely online courses and learning programmes have been criticised for a low level of socialisation as well as the lack of support benefits of traditional teaching styles and approaches (Güzer & Caner, 2014). This discrepancy has led to a blended learning approach which combines both online and offline instruction.

Given that the blended learning concept is relatively new, there is still no consensus among researchers and scholars on what constitutes blended learning. For example, Stein and Graham (2015) defined blended learning as “a combination of onsite (i.e. face-to-face) with online experiences to produce effective, efficient, and flexible learning” (p. 12). Although this definition provides the reader with the main idea behind the blended learning concept, it does not consider its focus on personalisation. Boelens et al. (2018) emphasised this characteristic in their definition of blended learning as “an instructional approach that combines online and face-to-face instructional activities, to create more flexible modes of education, and personalised learning trajectories” (p. 199). Therefore, in addition to the notion of time and place flexibility, blended learning provides students with ample occasions to attain actual personalised instruction. The blended learning concept is presented as follows:

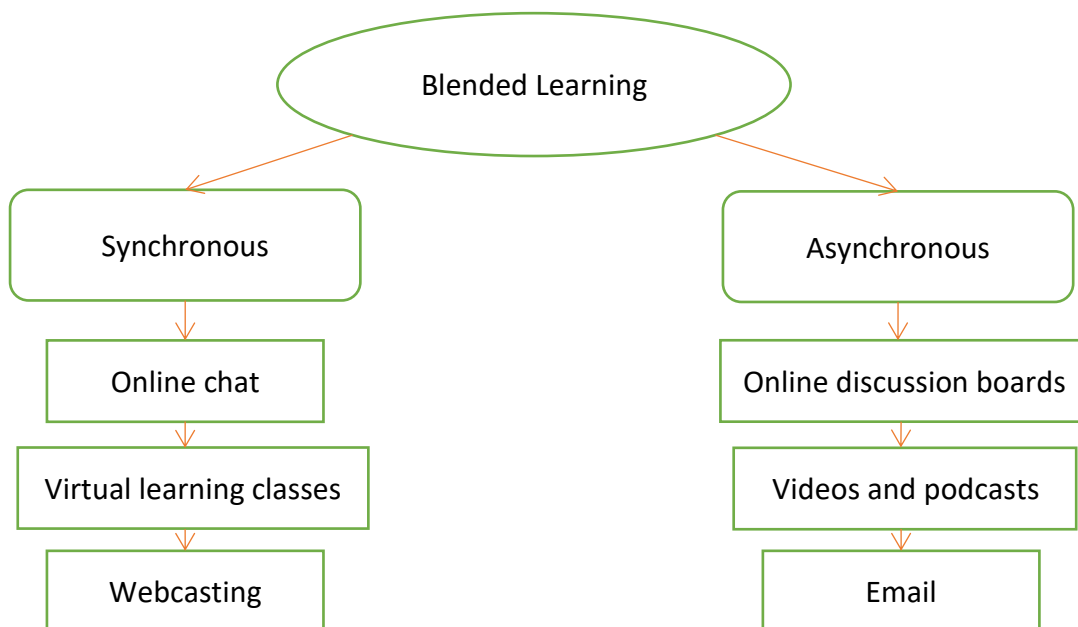


Figure 3.1 The blended learning concept (Ellis et al., 2016; Ricci & Pritscher, 2015)

Another important characteristic of the blended learning approach is the nature of learning activities, which can be either synchronous or asynchronous (Tosun, 2015). The face-to-face learning portion refers to synchronous learning. During face-to-face learning events, several students are engaged in the learning process at the same time. This learning can be conducted through various channels, including webcasting, virtual learning classes, and online chat

(Ricci & Pritscher, 2015; see Figure 3.1). This dimension of blended learning allows for maintaining a high level of students' socialisation, which is an important factor that can affect their performance and achievement (Yalçınkaya, 2015). By contrast, synchronous learning lags behind asynchronous learning in terms of convenience. In addition, synchronous learning limits students' flexibility as they are not able to access the knowledge and instructions at their convenience time from any place (Boelens et al., 2018).

Asynchronous learning, on the opposite end of the spectrum, can be viewed as a teaching method, which facilitates information sharing regardless of time and location constraints using various online learning instruments and media (Stein & Graham, 2015). For example, in the blended learning domain, asynchronous learning can occur through videos, podcasts, emails, blogs, and online discussion boards (Ellis et al., 2016). As an alternative to the synchronous learning approach, asynchronous learning allows students to get access to learning materials from any place at any time, which significantly adds to their flexibility (Zacharis, 2015). However, poor internet connection, costly technical maintenance, and the lack of support from learning providers are usually viewed as important limitations of asynchronous learning (Güzer & Caner, 2014).

According to Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal's (2004) definition, blended learning is a pedagogical tool that combines traditional f2f opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced learning possibilities of the online setting. In this study, the term blended learning is used as a pedagogical approach to describe the integration of face-to-face instructions with computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as virtual learning classes, online chats, and discussion boards, to help students use a range of online synchronous activities (occurring at the same time) and asynchronous activities (not occurring at the same time) that can enhance English language skills, activate learning, and facilitate communications.

The dramatic demographic changes in remote areas and the growth of part-time learners are indeed significant reasons for the occurrence of this particular type of learning (Bonk & Graham, 2012). The literature recognizes some features to define BL as a mixture of virtual

and physical platforms (see Figure 3.2). For Osguthorpe and Graham (2003), blended learning refers to integrated methods of interaction through the Internet and the meeting of teachers and learners via face-to-face sessions. Singh (2003) pointed out that “blended learning is not just a one-time event—learning is a continuous process” (p. 52).

Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) agreed that the nature of BL consists of contemporary learning that engages e-learning using information technology (IT) and interaction tools, such as online activities, where learners have the chance to communicate with the teacher and other students in the classroom. Accordingly, both traditional face-to-face (f2f) learning and e-learning settings are shared and combined together to achieve the anticipated objectives. In assessing what is meant by the term blended learning, Oliver and Trigwell (2005) found that its definition varies markedly. In addition, the term is often misapplied to situations in which e-learning components are clumsily integrated into otherwise offline courses or where practice within the same course varies significantly among educators who have different attitudes toward digital education. For these commentators, a reconfiguring of digital education is required so that control over the social and interactive aspects of courses resides with learners rather than educators. With such control, the interactional aspects of teaching and learning can be fostered organically by students rather than being corralled or ignored per the approach of different teaching figures (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). These commentators drew on variation theory, which posits that, for learning to occur, “variation must be experienced by the learner. Without variation there is no discernment, and without discernment there is no learning. Discernment is at the core of our ways of experiencing the world” (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005, p. 22). Meanwhile, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) emphasized the effective integration of both types of learning: “thoughtful integration of classroom f2f learning experiences with online learning experiences” (p. 96). Therefore, BL is not just bringing technology into the classroom. It is not replacing textbooks with laptops or tablets. It is redesigning the instructional model, changing the way of working with students, and giving students more control.

Young and Lee's (2010) definition of blended learning is the most precise one and most relevant to the current study:

[Blended learning is] bringing together the positive attributes of online and offline education, including instructional modalities, delivery methods, learning tools, in relation to language teaching and learning approaches and methods in order to reinforce learning process, to bring about the optimal learners' achievement, and to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. (p. 180)

The idea of blended learning rests on the idea that the technology should not displace the traditional learning, but should add an additional dimension to the learning experience. Part of the value of blended learning is that mutual support arrangements that exist in the classroom and in other offline contexts can transfer to the e-learning elements of the engagement and vice versa (Collis & Moonen, 2002). For Collis and Moonen (2002), there is a need to focus less on digital technology in and of itself and more on the value of flexible approaches to teaching and learning; here, the idea is to use the digital technology as part of a wider suite of approaches.

Considering all the definitions provided above, it seems that BL does not simply mean f2f and online learning integration. The current study adopts the definition of Young and Lee (2010), because it is suitable for the study's context as blended learning is a technology enhanced pedagogical approach that merges effective tools of both online learning and face-to-face learning, decreasing the time of traditional learning to foster interactions while promoting collaboration between students to enhance language skills. In this setting, students join classes, meet the teacher of the course, accomplish online activities, contribute to online negotiations, and receive feedback via the Internet, ultimately becoming independent learners (self-directed learners). In this regard, Sriarunrasmee, Techataweewan, and Mebusaya (2015) defined self-directed learning as "a procedure where the learner considers and decides on the learning topic based on his/her own interests and abilities" (p. 156). In BL settings, where the teacher is physically absent for a large part of the time, two essential issues must be considered: (1) the design of materials and activities must be clear and purposeful and (2) the teacher's role is crucial in encouraging and supporting learners in their learning decisions and choices (Sriarunrasmee et al., 2015).

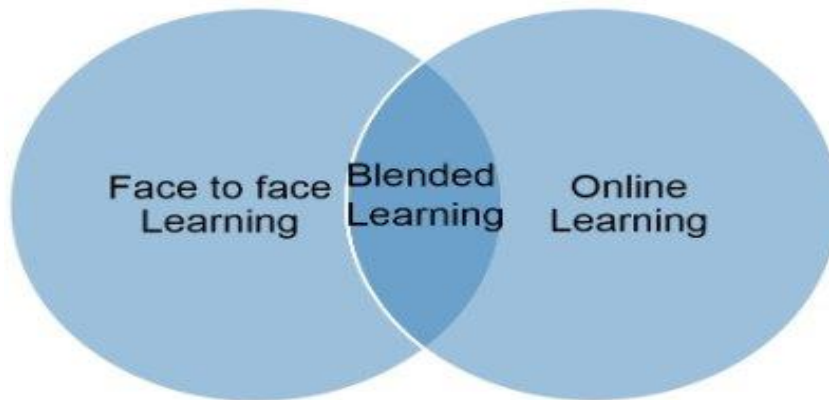


Figure 3.2 Diagram of the blended learning definition (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2011)

In light of Garrison and Kanuka's (2004) definition of BL—namely, “thoughtful integration of classroom f2f learning experiences with online learning experiences” (p. 96)—the use of Khan’s (2001) octagonal framework is suggested to ensure appropriate systems, services, and support for the implementation of BL. Singh (2003) pointed out that Khan’s octagonal framework is useful for the effective application of BL: “The model consisted of eight dimensions; institutional, pedagogical, technological, interface design, evaluation, management, resource support, and ethical” (p. 59). First, the institutional dimension is concerned with organizational issues in regard to planning a learning course, students’ services, and readiness of the institution’s infrastructure. Second, pedagogical dimension analyses look at the connection between course content and course objectives with appropriate teaching methods. Third, the technological dimension addresses issues about technical support and infrastructure as well as establishing an appropriate learning management system that suits a BL program. In this regard, more consideration should be made to ensure the capabilities of required technical resources in the programs. Addressing infrastructure obstacles earlier could avoid any workload pressures and learning anxiety later (Thang et al., 2012). Similarly, Poon (2013) suggested that “the first suggestion for institutions that intend to implement blended learning is that they must be realistic about the investment of time, efforts, and resources that are required for developing and implementation” (p. 282). Fourth, interface design can address how best to facilitate students’ use of both learning environments (i.e., offline and online). Fifth, the evaluation dimension addresses BL program competence. Sixth, the management dimension is concerned with

program administration issues. Seventh, the resources support dimension addresses technical issues, such as how to use the university's online learning support system that facilitates learning. Students need to be assisted in acquiring the skills necessary for learning to ensure successful blended learning implementation (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The last dimension addresses ethical issues, clarifying cultural and equal opportunities issues in the program. For example, students and teachers have to be taught about what plagiarism means and the serious consequences of plagiarism.

3.2.1.1 Blended Learning Categories

To better understand the BL environment, Bonk and Graham (2006) classified blended learning into three types: *enabling blends*, *enhancing blends*, and *transforming blends*. *Enabling blends* can be offered as further flexible opportunities for learners to suit their needs in which online programs or blended programs are presented. For example, blended learning facilitates accessibility for students in distance learning lectures. Meanwhile, *enhancing blends* focus on minor modifications of the curriculum, such as adding supplementary online materials within the course level (e.g., LMS). In the early stages of blended learning in Saudi higher education, the main focus was on the enhancing blend (Al Zumor et al., 2013). It was mainly concerned with communication between students and instructors through (LMS) Blackboard. Finally, *transforming blends* provide a radical change in the way of teaching and utilizes both approaches as the main method of teaching which concentrates on learners' active role to construct knowledge throughout technology with f2f learning to construct knowledge via interaction between learners. The nature of BL in this study is the *transforming blend* of mixing both approaches (online instruction and f2f) as the main approaches of teaching.

3.2.1.2 Blended Learning Levels

In terms of levels, BL is generally classified into four levels: activity level (when the combination of f2f and online learning occurs within the activities, such as operating virtual learning within the activities), course level (when the mixture happens as a part of the course), program level (often when the students choose between online or f2f learning), and institutional level (when the university establishes a BL model as an institutional change)

(Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). In the context of this study, BL occurs at the course level as students have both f2f classes and courses taken online. In Saudi Arabia, higher education BL occurs at three levels: supportive e-learning (f2f and use of LMS online to get all the information about the course), BL/e-learning (between 20% and 75% of the course is delivered online), and complete e-learning level.

3.2.2 Historical Development from Distance Learning to Blended Learning

3.2.2.1 Distance Learning

Prewitt (1998) traced the development of distance education during the 19th century, explaining that universities in Pennsylvania and Chicago led the revolution of distance learning by presenting correspondence courses that provided students with wide access to important skills needed to develop their knowledge. Casey (2008a) indicated that the first university course adopted distance education in several developments; for example, regarding correspondence courses, the first one was the Pitman Shorthand training program in the United States. Panchabakesan (2011) listed four purposes of correspondence learning: students had specific circumstances that prevented them from continuing their education, students lived in remote areas, qualified students did not enrol because they could not find a place in universities, and some individuals had a desire to continue their education in a particular field of discipline. The majority of attendees in such courses were female. Following the advent of radio, lectures broadcast in the 1920s attracted many students, particularly Wisconsin's School of the Air, as it was the first distance learning American program.

In the 1970s, educational television (ETV) was beneficial mainly in rural and remote areas. During this period, the use of technological methods was without interactions. In the 1980s, the Open University in the United Kingdom served as an example to shift to distance learning and improve the quality of teaching and learning. It mainly concerned adult distance learners. This stage uses two methods of communications media, video conferencing and the Internet, to enhance learners' skills by increasing interactivity. Hoskins (2013) added that the evolvement of online learning dramatically changed the nature of education by enhancing communications to simplify collaborative interactions between learners: "the traditional sage-

on-the-stage has been replaced with the guide-on-the-side” (p. 189). In addition, the widespread use of distance learning at the time resulted in the creation of some virtual universities, such as Jones International University (www.jonesinternational.edu), the first completely online university, and Western Governors’ University (www.wgu.edu), which aimed to develop students’ aptitudes (Olson, 2001). The following paragraph presents some definitions of distance learning.

An expansive definition of distance education from Sauve (1993) can still account for much of the technology-enabled learning pedagogy in use today. Sauve used the term *distance education* to refer to “an umbrella concept covering correspondence courses, televised teaching, radio-broadcast, open learning, computer-assisted instruction, individualized learning and self-learning” (p. 102). This definition takes into account the major purpose of distance learning as a teaching method containing several technological communications. Similarly, Greenberg (1998) defined distance education to refer to “a planned teaching learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning” (p. 36). This definition is close to Willis’s (1994) definition of distance education as “[a] basic level... [and] takes place when a teacher and student(s) are separated by physical distance, and technology (i.e., voice, video, and print) is used to bridge the instructional gap” (p. 4). This means students and teachers are geographically distant, and learners work independently with the learning materials.

Distance education opened opportunities to women and persecuting minority ethnic groups, changing the culture of campus life. Distance and part-time learning opened up access to the professions, and a new competitiveness among students—particularly working-class and female students—rejected the “just getting by” study habits of the elites (Horowitz, 1988). Horowitz (1988) further argued that students studying at a distance or by occasionally coming onto campus were setting new standards of student professionalism, hard work, and academic rigour that challenge the status quo.

Distance learning became more than simply offering students passive consumption; it was opening universities up to change. Casey (2008b) argued that this has improved the quality of

university education in general in countries such as the UK, Australia, and Hong Kong. At the individual student level, initial snobbery at students gaining degrees without physically going to university was similarly replaced by respect for those students demonstrating greater self-discipline, motivation, and self-management (Lowes & Lin, 2015).

Unfortunately, this trend seems less prominent outside Anglophone countries. For example, online education is generally seen as less prestigious than campus-based instruction in the Middle East (Elango, Gudep, & Selvam, 2008), with a study of employers in Oman and Egypt indicating that the quality of such education was deemed inferior (Sadik, 2016). To some extent, Knight (2014) explained this as unfair stereotyping that non-native English speakers (NNES) take advantage of online education in order to cheat. This may also help to explain why online learning does not have this same stigma in these countries in subjects such as engineering (Ahmed & Zaneldin, 2013) and medicine (Masters, Ellaway, Topps, Archibald, & Hogue, 2016).

Professional areas where English is a lingua franca or subjects where English is the language of instruction may therefore not regard online learning as lacking prestige. Enthusiasm for online learning has similarly been linked to enthusiasm for innovation and student-centred learning (Randeree, 2006), so the denigration of online learning in such countries may be more about traditional compared to modern tensions or resistance to English-medium instruction rather than online education per se.

A particularly useful perspective on this tension is offered by Richardson (2000), who argued that the learning itself is similar whether online or campus-based and that differences are more about the backgrounds of students attracted to each mode. Richardson's study used a sequence of surveys and inventories to look for differences in terms of study habits, student progress, approaches to study, and even the much-maligned concept of learning styles. As such, Richardson provided a strong rationale for looking more at the kinds of students attracted to online study rather than expecting to find differences based on how students are taught. Richardson essentially argued for a demand-side understanding rather than a supply-side understanding.

Such an approach has been further strengthened by a recent systematic review of longitudinal research (Asikainen & Gijbels, 2017) drawing on Richardson's (2000) work to look at the development of deep approaches to learning (Entwistle, 2000; Marton & Saljo, 2005) in higher education—namely, online versus campus-based. Concluding that there was no consensus, Asikainen and Gijbels (2017) showed that deep approaches to learning were not stimulated more in one mode than another, and both could be done well or poorly. This supported Richardson's (2000) earlier finding that distance-learning students “resemble older students at campus-based institutions and differ from younger campus-based students” (p. 178), but it seems that much of this has to do with older and more emotionally mature students being attracted to distance education rather than distance education itself having a causal effect on student maturity.

Such findings also highlight the criticism that online education is under-theorised (Garrison, 2000) and uses imprecise terminology (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011), making it difficult to find rigorous explanatory frameworks for such findings.

3.2.2.1.1 Technology-enhanced learning and distance education

One of the most influential organisations in distance education is the UK's Open University, which has established a global reputation for distance learning from its origins as a correspondence school through cutting-edge online and blended learning opportunities (Daniel, 2015). Indeed, Daniel (2015) pointed out that the Open University initially lacked prestige because of its widening participation agenda—indeed, it still accepts many students without traditional qualifications—but the quality of education soon established its status.

With this rise in the status of a technology-focused university came the rise of the status of online education such that, today, world leaders in education, such as Harvard and Yale, now offer some of the best online, and even blended, learning opportunities (Lazaroiu, Popescu, & Nica, 2016). Indeed, these highly exclusive universities even offer these courses free to anyone who wants to study them and in many cases even invite the public to campus or offer tutorials, thereby demonstrating the potential for online learning to democratise education

(Voigt, Buliga, & Michl, 2017). However, the dominance of these English-speaking institutions has arguably led to idiosyncratic practices in distance learning which neglect parallel innovation in Eastern Europe and Asia (Keegan, 2013).

Nevertheless, these examples of the Open University and the Harvard and Yale collaboration through EdX also reflect historical trends in distance education in which expanding participation becomes inextricably linked with very high-quality provision. Although some initial distance education provision was intended as a next-best alternative for those living in remote areas or otherwise unable to come to campus or find a place (Panchabakesan, 2011), widening participation soon showed just how many people could benefit from and enrich the university experience.

3.2.2.2 E-learning

E-learning is a term frequently used in the literature, but without consensus about its universal definition (Brook & Beauchamp, 2015). Since 2002, e-learning has become an umbrella term covering web-based instruction, online learning, networked learning, computer-assisted learning, and computer-mediated learning (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). Each definition focuses on specific aspects, such as content, technology, and communications (Mason & Rennie, 2006). The Open and Distance Learning Quality Council of the United Kingdom defined the difference between course content and the practice of e-learning as “[an] effective learning process created by the compilation of digitally delivered content with learning support and services” (Mason & Rennie, 2006, p. 2). The multiple terms associated with e-learning and rapidly changing technology might justify the disagreement about a generally accepted definition. In the context of Saudi Arabia, for example, the two terms *online learning* and *e-learning* are used interchangeably (Alebaikan et al., 2010).

The gradual development of the term e-learning has affected the practice of e-learning in education, such as the relationship among e-learning, IT, and information and communication technologies (ICT), as classified in the eclipse diagram by Tiris (1999). Table 3.1 shows the gradual expansion of the term e-learning.

Table 3.1

The Eclipse Diagram by Markos Tiris, LSDA, 1999 and the Definitions Used in the Centre for Excellence in Leadership's Report (CEL, 2003)

| | |
|---|---|
| Information technology (IT) | The computer infrastructure, hardware, and software used to process data and deliver information. |
| Information and communication technologies (ICT) | The combination of computing and communication technologies (including computer networks and telephone systems) that connect and enable some of today's most exciting systems (e.g., the Internet.) |
| Electronic learning (e-learning) | Learning supported or enhanced through the application of information and communications technology. |
| Information and learning technologies (ILT)—the current term is e-learning and technology | Used in further education colleges to refer to the use of information and communication technologies to support the core business of colleges: the delivery and management of learning. |

With the advent of this type of learning, various universities created online lectures to link students. King Khalid University (KKU) in Saudi Arabia was the first university in the kingdom to implement an e-learning program in the teaching and learning process in 2007. More recently, in 2011, UNIVERSITY A considered another example of the environment based on ICT, e-learning, and distance education.

3.2.2.2.1 Examples of E-learning that Support Learning Communication

Having defined e-learning, the discussion next moves on to some examples of the variety of software and e-learning environments which developed to support learners in active communications with their tutors. These include synchronous and asynchronous learning, the virtual learning environment (VLE), and LMS. VLE refers to “the mix of hardware and software that is used to create online learning opportunities within the classroom situation” (Mason & Rennie, 2006, p. 124). VLE simplifies e-learning processes and offers many administrative features, such as uploading, downloading, supervising, and assessing of

students' learning outcomes. Another advantage is that feedback can be provided at any time and in any place by VLE. It does not require physical study places or costly education tools. It is useful in potentially reducing teachers' loads and administrative paperwork, as they do not need to provide follow-up for attendance, absences, or recorded grades as all this is done electronically.

As mentioned earlier, synchronous learning occurs when learners interact with each other at the same time through live videoconferences or audio conferencing, chat rooms, and white boards (Mylott, 2008). As interactivity happens at the same time, this type of e-learning requires modern equipment and a suitable network connection. Clarke (2004) argued that synchronous learning is broadly similar to traditional classrooms as students might work together and take notes while listening. The advantage of this type of learning is immediate feedback from tutors. Meanwhile, asynchronous learning can be accessed at any time; an example is online text-based discussions. The benefit of asynchronous e-learning is that students can select the appropriate time to access what they need. Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) claimed that one of its greatest advantages is time flexibility. Supporting this view, Bates (2005) posited that the consequence of this type of learning is that it allows learners to be in control and study materials as often as they like. Yet one major drawback of this approach is students do not receive immediate feedback from the instructor; it can also be more isolating than synchronous e-learning. All these tools are used by EFL students in this study in the BL setting.

The effectiveness of the use of VLE was exemplified in Osgerby's (2013) study, which used an exploratory qualitative case study to assess the importance of blended learning as a new approach in students' perceptions in accounting and financial management modules at a British university. The research focused on developing a deeper understanding of the views of undergraduate and postgraduate students using VLE in the learning modules. The results indicated that students appeared to appreciate blended learning settings and were progressive about their skill development. These results are consistent with other research findings (e.g., Burgess, 2007; Concannon, Flynn, & Campbell, 2005), which generally found positive students' attitudes towards blended learning. One unanticipated finding was the extent of unwillingness to use VLE among group work students.

Blackboard, an example of a learning management system, is considered one of the most widespread systems used by universities and educational organizations worldwide (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). This system offers a number of advantages, particularly for the teacher. With the possibility of using multimedia, the teacher can prepare and publish the curriculum via images and videos in addition to PowerPoint presentations. The teacher can also download helpful links for students in relation to their studies while the feedback feature offers direct responses to students.

In Saudi Arabia, delivering feedback to the students using Blackboard is crucial for their active learning. Hamad (2017) indicated that affording immediate feedback to students relating to their online collaboration could support the entire learning process. Therefore, the exploration of Saudi students' experience in blended learning courses in the current study offers the opportunity to determine whether they receive immediate and appropriate feedback from their lecturers. As feedback from lecturers promotes student commitment in the learning process, examining students' satisfaction with feedback received would enable the development of the blended learning environment in Saudi universities.

The rapid development in technology has resulted a growing trend towards blending both types of teaching (f2f and online) which have been detached for a long time. Bonk and Graham (2012) outlined the initial stages in which BL received considerable attention. First, in 2002, the president of Pennsylvania State University mentioned that BL had become a well-recognized term. In 2003, the American Society for Training and Development acknowledged BL as one increasingly important delivery method (Rooney, 2003).

3.2.3 Technology in EFL Pedagogy

In the field of English as a foreign language (EFL), however, pedagogy has long focused on constructivist principles and the importance of communicative competence (Forsman, 2010; Hymes, 1972), so the focus has primarily been on how technology can reduce the distance between teachers and students or encourage peer learning.

This means that technology in EFL is much more precisely focused on technology as a tool to give students “access to a teacher or a curriculum in a single physical space” (Mihai &

Purmensky, 2016, p. 300). This is most commonly expressed in the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which Warschauer (2000) helpfully described as developing in three stages since the 1970s. Bax (2003) linked each stage to the dominant pedagogy of the time, such that mainframe technology was used in a grammar-translation pedagogy for drilling and practice. PCs then developed in tandem with communicative pedagogy emphasising communication exercises in the 1980s and 1990s before integrative pedagogy and discipline-specific communication developed alongside multimedia and internet capabilities to give access to authentic learning materials. Thus, the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) literature draws close links among medium, pedagogy, and learning philosophy in a way which is arguably more broadly absent in the higher education literature.

It has also been argued that TESOL has a strong culture of innovation and experimentation, perhaps rooted in a tradition of action research, in which new approaches are more quickly tested and then normalised (Bax, 2003) such that “it is no longer a question as to whether... but how effectively” technology is used in EFL (Mihai & Purmensky, 2016, p. 302). A good example of this is in technology used to aid with learning reading in English in Thailand. Technology more efficiently supports “coordinated utilisation of multiple strategies to negotiate the meaning of the text” (Akkakoson, 2013, p. 423) to the extent that students taught using CALL were less likely to adopt the unhelpful bottom-up and passive reading strategies overly focused on unknown vocabulary which are commonly associated with EFL reading strategies of Thai students studying in the US (Sitthitikul, 2011).

Similarly, innovation in teaching writing within EFL has used technology not just to find more authentic models, but also to produce multi-modal texts and writing in different formats, thereby implicitly focusing students on the need to consider an audience when writing (Edwards-Groves, 2012). At its most innovative, writing pedagogy in EFL has also integrated peer-learning, self-directed learning, or widening participation agenda in projects such as the student-led Open Textbooks (Gruszczynska, Merchant, & Pountney, 2013) which conceptualises writing as part of a broader digital literacy.

3.2.3.1 Use Technology to Support the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

At a time when modern technology appears to monopolise people's time, whether it is being utilised for shopping, leisure, or work (Trinder, 2017), it is important to recognise the opportunities that it presents for those learning the English language. Trinder (2017) pointed out that students have easy access to an array of different technologies they can employ for communication with others, entertainment, and research. She added that the internet, with its facility to download and stream films and television series, provides exposure to English language usage in genuine settings and contexts, which has previously not been possible. Many people make extensive use of the internet, with much of the interaction conducted using English as the communication medium, making this a useful addition to formal classroom activities (Sockett, 2014). Young people spend more time learning and making use of the English language online than within the confines of the classroom (Toffoli & Sockett, 2015). This part of the literature review will highlight research into blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogic tool, inclusive of its use in the learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) and how the internet has been used for online and digital language learning.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to recognise that this concept is in a constant state of flux and evolution requiring continuous revision as technology improves (Tucker, Wycoff, & Green, 2017). In terms of English language teaching (ELT), Whittaker (2013, p. 12) stated that blended learning is “the term most commonly used to refer to any combination of face-to-face teaching with computer technology (online and off-line activities/materials).” Access to and learning with/from computer technology as part of the blended learning process can take place away from the face-to-face classroom environment, on a student's own time, or within a setting's confines utilising educational software in a computer room or a specifically designed technology area (Hockly, 2016). Hockly (2018) argued that it is important that both researchers and practitioners consider the meaning of the term blended learning in the context of ELT as well as having an appreciation of why there is a need to provide blended learning opportunities in language learning. It is equally important to understand the reasons behind using technology for teaching and learning, which can range from looking at the use of

specific technology or technologies used within a specific area or discipline (Papastergiou, 2009, cited in Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

Kirkwood and Price (2014) also highlighted the fact a number of studies have attempted to provide a meta-analysis of findings from both quasi-experimental and experimental studies into the effects of technology enhanced learning (Tamim et al., 2011, cited in Kirkwood & Price, 2014) whereas others seek to explore the ideas behind educational practice (Hrastinski, 2008, cited in Kirkwood & Price, 2014) and investigate teachers' motivation and aims (Jump, 2011, cited in Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

One such study, by Price and Kirkwood (2011, cited in Kirkwood & Price, 2014) noted that there were problems with the notion of enhancement and the evidence for this, which they felt required further investigation. Kirkwood and Price (2014) highlighted these issues and the merging of the two separate aims—that of changes in the nature of teaching approaches and modifications in how teachers teach and learners learn. In addition, they noted that many studies concentrated on the former, but not on how this teaching happens. They concluded that the potential for technology to have a transformational impact on teaching and learning has not yet been realised in research as the majority of studies focus upon the reproduction or reinforcement of existing practice. They also highlighted the fact that research needs to be carefully targeted, and indeed analysed, within a specific educational context in order to ascertain whether learning has in fact been transformed.

Bralic and Divjak (2018) contended that blended learning programmes can be perceived differently depending upon their context, their overall goals, the ratio between online and face-to-face learning, and the methods of delivering content. Morris (2014) made the point that a good number of blended learning courses are moulded and adjusted to fit with traditional courses that are positively enhanced as a result of the materials that can be accessed via the Internet. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have the potential to enrich traditionally taught courses, thereby simultaneously achieving both practitioners' and students' goals (Bralic & Divjak, 2018).

Some studies have already been conducted into how MOOCs can be effectively employed to enrich a classroom-based course (Firmin et al., 2014; Griffiths, Mulhern, Spies & Chingos, 2015) whereas others have looked at how these courses can become part of accepted classroom practice (Bogdan, Bicen & Holotescu, 2017), although it is important to note that none of the studies were targeted at an assessment of learning outcomes and aligning online courses to these outcomes (Bralic & Divjak, 2018). Griffiths et al. (2015) highlighted the advantages of making the use of technology in the terms that students are able to review lectures, supplement existing information, and augment this with new material, thereby gaining a deeper expertise and understanding through exposure to other teaching and learning styles/materials via the internet. However, Israel (2015) sounded a note of caution, asserting that a number of challenges present themselves to those who wish to integrate MOOCs into traditionally taught courses, chief of which are practitioner acceptance of the use of said technology and students being computer literate to the extent that they are able to engage with the materials.

Keisling's (2018) recent study found that it was not only teaching approaches that needed to be considered and/or modified to accommodate the use of modern technology as part of learning. His study examined the effectiveness of library services for university students, finding that changing user needs needed to be correlated with resources and technology to deliver a better service for students accessing materials online. In addition, he stated that libraries need to employ robust user assessment programmes in order to scale what they learn about their changing clientele to revise and enhance the services they provide within budget.

Another consideration is that of providing opportunities for reflection in order to encourage learners to engage in transformational learning (Rivers, Richardson, & Price, 2014). Rivers et al. (2014) stated that this is only possible if there is an intentional reflective dialogue between practitioners and students in order for them to think, talk, and learn together, thereby creating a reflective learning environment (Moon, 1999, cited in Rivers et al., 2014). For the purposes of blended learning, it is critical that this be facilitated both in the classroom and in an online learning context (Johnson & Aragon, 2003, cited in Rivers et al., 2014).

Hockly (2018) concluded that a growing body of research exploring the notion of blended learning in languages falls into two distinct categories: comparison and non-comparison studies (Grgurovic, 2011d cited in Hockly, 2018, p. 98). She states that comparison studies look to compare the impact of blended learning courses and traditionally delivered courses, whereas non-comparison studies concentrate exclusively on the blended approach, concerning themselves with issues of course design, the implementation of a blended learning programme, and the attitudes prevalent for teachers and learners towards a blended learning approach. Hockly (2018) observed that the prevalence of non-comparison studies could be rooted in the issues that arise as a result of comparing two different approaches towards the delivery of learning programmes in a meaningful way. She reported that the findings of existing studies are mixed, quoting Aguilar (2012, cited in Hockly, 2018), who stated that some researchers have reported enhanced language learning as a result of exposure to a blended learning model whereas others have concluded that there is no significant improvement compared to conventional teaching methods. Hockly (2018) also highlighted that some cultural considerations must be taken into account with respect to the impact of blended learning; for example, studies by Zhu, Valke, and Schellens (2009, cited in Hockly, 2018) and Liu and Chiu (2016, cited in Hockly, 2018) indicated that students may be reticent to engage in written discussions on the internet due to a genuine fear of making mistakes. The findings of these two studies indicate that the design of blended learning courses must consider a multitude of different factors which can impact language learning (Kessler, 2018).

3.2.3.2 Rationale of Blended Learning

3.2.3.2.1 Autonomy

One rationale for shifting to the blended learning approach is that it allows for creating autonomous or self-directed learners. In this study, self-directed learning and autonomy are used interchangeably. Blended learning permits the learner to become engaged in the construction and the use of the knowledge, rather than acting as passive absorbers. It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by autonomy and self-directed learning. Little (1991) gave his own definition of the former as “the capacity of detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action” (p. 15). Sriarunrasme et al. (2015)

provided another definition as a “procedure where the learner considers and decides on the learning topic based on his/her own interests and abilities” (p. 156).

In settings of blended learning, where the teacher is physically absent for a large part of the time, two essential issues must be considered: First, the design of materials and activities must be clear and purposeful; second, the teacher’s role is crucial in encouraging and supporting learners in their learning decisions and choices (Sriarunrasmee et al., 2015). This view is supported by Terry and Reinders (2008), who claimed that it is challenging for learners to exhibit autonomy without teachers’ intervention and guidance. Furthermore, it has commonly been assumed that learners, who have the ability to accomplish further efforts to develop their learning skills, will only profit from the useful outcomes of self-directed learning. Supporting this view, Bhat, Rajashekar, and Kamath (2007) asserted that, when an institution decides to adopt a self-directed learning (SDL) approach they have to consider heterogeneity and individual skills differences between students. The authors conducted a research project in an undergraduate medical program in India to compare two groups of students in terms of their exams scores by using a *t*-test; the first group was taught by SDL as a part of their learning method whereas the second one was taught using a regular approach. The result indicated that not all students could benefit from SDL; only good students with good learning skills could become effective self-directed learners.

Trinder’s (2017) study of Austrian university students and their use of modern technology in independent settings led her to make the case that there should be a greater degree of attention given to the use of online, informed methods of learning the English language. Her research indicated that online learning resources are of great value to students, not only in terms of the practical benefits to their language learning, but also for improving their digital literacy and in encouraging self-directed learning, which will be essential for their future learning practices (Levy, 2017).

3.2.3.2.2 Flexibility

Much of the current literature on blended learning pays particular attention to the rationale for choosing it by large numbers of learners. Graham and Dziuban (2008) attempted to explain why learners prefer blended learning, stating that it offers more flexibility to learners because

some of the learning takes place at arranged face-to-face times whereas other occurs online at their convenience. Flexibility of time and place, where every student chooses the time and place that suits him or her, is considered a vital feature. This is certainly true in the case of adult learners who have to balance their jobs and families with their studies. Students who live far from the university or have other responsibilities that prohibit them from attending class illustrate this point clearly. Such flexibility and approachability provided by blended learning have enabled more learners to access higher education, regardless of geographical location and culture.

Much can be learnt from previous studies and experiences of utilising online and digital language learning and blended learning. Gordon (2014) looked at how e-learning (or technology-enhanced learning) can support flexible pedagogies and provide enhanced choices for learners in terms of where they learn, the pace at which they learn, and their mode of learning. Each of these things can be supported through appropriate approaches utilising modern computer technology on campus, at the workplace, or in the home. He observed that the use of technology in people's lives is nothing new in the modern age, although technology can enable the use of a diverse range of approaches in the delivery and assessment of courses.

3.2.3.2.3 Engagement

Researchers have recently shown an increased interest in describing the role of blended learning in enhancing student engagement. Furlong and Christenson (2008) defined student engagement as “a concept that requires psychological connections within the academic environment (e.g., positive relationships between adults and students and among peers) in addition to active student behaviour (e.g., attendance, effort, pro-social behaviour)” (p. 365). This definition highlights the role of interaction among learners. This view is supported by Weaver, Spratt, and Nair (2008), who stated that:

tertiary pedagogy is concerned with building meaningful learning relationships between learners and teachers and learners and their peers. It involves encouraging collaboration in learning as well as cooperation in learning for the promotion of innovative and interactive quality e-learning environments. (p. 38)

Using modern technology for learning can also encourage the notion of teamwork and learning with and from others. Cobanoglu, Yucel, Uzunboylar, and Ceylan (2017) examined blended mentoring practice (utilising an online questionnaire methodology) in the learning of English and revealed that preservice ICT teachers thought of their English mentors as colleagues (team-mates) who supported, helped, and guided them in their efforts while also being a resource as experts in their field. Both mentors and mentees welcomed the blended mentoring practice, with all those involved in the study recommending that this type of approach be adopted for teacher education.

3.2.3.2.4 Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes are an important consideration when designing blended learning courses (Mugenyi, Zhu, & Kagambe, 2017), although this must be viewed in terms of aligning factors such as student workload, assessment, and teaching and learning methods (Bralic & Divjak, 2018). The most important of these factors is assessment in the sense that appropriate vehicles for evaluation should be selected to ensure that students have the best possible chance of achieving the set goals (Hamad, 2017).

Thai, De Wever, and Valcke (2017) examined the role of the blended learning approach in student performance. Unlike many researchers in the field who focused on the precise nature of blends (Al-Alwani, 2014; Stein & Graham, 2015), Thai et al. (2017) explored how the flipped classroom design impacted student outcomes. The flipped classroom is a special type of blended learning, where students first attend web-based lectures prior to in-class sessions (Güzer & Caner, 2014). By analysing primary data obtained from 90 undergraduate students, Thai et al. (2017) concluded that, in the flipped classroom environment, the respondents demonstrated a higher level of self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and flexibility. These findings can be explained by the fact that, in such an environment, students are able to spend a large amount of time on reading, watching lectures, and preparing before attending face-to-face lectures (Ricci & Pritscher, 2015). However, the main limitation of Thai's et al. (2017) study is that only two learning instruments (i.e., one synchronous and one asynchronous)

were implemented in the research design. Hence, the produced empirical findings may not be the same with respect to other blended learning tools.

A highly relevant empirical study on the relationship between the blended learning approach and student outcomes was conducted by Alshehri (2017). The researcher investigated the level of satisfaction and commitment of 100 Saudi higher education students with a blended e-learning programme. By employing both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, Alshehri (2017) found that those students who were enrolled in a blended education programme demonstrated better academic results in terms of their grade point average scores as well as higher levels of commitment. Similar outcomes were produced by Zacharis (2015), who also found that the participation in blended learning courses was positively associated with student performance and achievement. However, according to Alshehri's (2017) empirical findings, not all students were satisfied with the online study courses, which negatively affected their willingness to stay in blended learning as well as to comply with its requirements. These outcomes can be partly explained by such factors as the education approach taken by the instructor, the quality of the internet connection, and students' personal attitudes towards and perceptions of blended learning (Vasileva-Stojanovska et al., 2015).

In accordance with the holistic learning theory, the effectiveness of the learning process significantly depends on students' individual characteristics, including emotions, imagination, and intellect (Al-Alwani, 2014). Each of these elements should be activated to ensure that the learning process is effective (Ricci & Pritscher, 201). As noted by Ellis et al. (2016), the significance of blended learning lies in the fact that it involves a wider range of learning methods and channels than traditional learning, more significantly contributes to the development of students' skills, and can evoke positive emotions. From this vantage point, it is relevant to state that blended learning is more effective in activating the previously mentioned elements of students' personality compared to conventional approaches to learning. At the same time, Suda, Sterling, Guirguis, and Mathur (2014) reported no significant difference in examination scores and course evaluations between those students who had completed traditional courses and blended courses. These findings may demonstrate

that, although the blended learning strategy can add to students' ability to attain their course goals, its effectiveness and contribution depend heavily on the context in which it is implemented.

As previously mentioned, the increased availability of new technologies in the modern world creates a myriad of opportunities to practice English in a way that was not possible in previous formal learning environments (Trinder, 2017).

3.2.4 Potential Challenges of Using BL to Support English Language Skills Development

According to Gordon (2014), technology provides both opportunities and challenges for students and for institutions. For students, the opportunity to use technology and a blended learning approach allows them to have an element of control over how, when, and where they learn while enabling them to personalise their learning to the extent that they are able to navigate their own way through learning materials with the support of systems suited to their style of learning. This flexibility of learning is also important to settings which offer this type of approach, particularly with respect to part-time and/or distance learners, although challenges are faced in terms of the delivery of safe collaborative learning environments allowing the maximum use of resources while also controlling and regulating the potential for plagiarism.

Students who are learning English as a second language also face challenges in terms of the use of the internet for supplementary reading. Hamdan, Mohamad, and Shaharuddin (2017) investigated the perceptions of second language learners (TESL undergraduates) towards TESL-related hypermedia reading materials and factors impacting their reading comprehension. Utilising the Think Aloud Protocol, reflective notes, and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods, the authors identified a number of factors affecting students' reading comprehension. Both the design and display of reading materials were found to be important, particularly in terms of long texts; the participants felt that it would help their reading comprehension if illustrations, diagrams, pictures, tables, videos, and audio materials were also made available with the text. They also highlighted the usefulness of

glossaries to their comprehension. The participants noted being distracted by advertisements on websites, poor internet connections, and the easy accessibility of social media websites, which had a detrimental impact on their reading comprehension.

Another challenge identified by Kintu, Zhu, and Kagambe (2017) is that of matching students with appropriate courses to meet their specific characteristics and needs. The researchers looked at the effectiveness of a blended learning environment through an analysis of the relationship between individual student characteristics and background, learning outcomes, and design features. The results indicated that a number of student characteristics and design features were significant predictors with respect to student learning outcomes when utilising a blended approach towards learning.

Equally important to the successful delivery of courses utilising technology is practitioners' willingness to engage with it. Englund, Olofsson, and Price (2017) conducted a 10-year longitudinal study to examine practitioners' conceptions of approaches towards the use of technology as part of their teaching and learning. This involved studying nine teachers engaged in an online Bachelor of Science course utilising a phenomenographic approach. The findings identified clear differences between experienced and novice teachers. Experienced teachers demonstrated almost no change in their conceptions whereas novice teachers, who initially had more teacher focus conceptions, demonstrated more rapid changes in their attitudes. Englund et al. (2017) concluded that it was important to support conceptual change as a part of practitioners' Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities in order to ensure the most effective use of educational technology. Similar observations were made by Rivers et al. (2014), who commented that practitioners' concerns with respect to using asynchronous forums to promote reflection and learning can be addressed by the adoption of protocols for online discussions, with an emphasis on the fact that discussion threads can be a resource for reflection in themselves in that they can track and illustrate student understanding of specific issues and learning.

Singh and Reed (2001) pointed out that one should "approach blended learning as a journey rather than a destination" (p. 7). This highlights the importance of creating an effective plan to

ensure success in the BL implementation journey. Furthermore, Hamad (2017) reviewed the literature about the nature of benefits and challenges when using blended learning in the Saudi educational system. She indicated that the most important factor for ensuring that students have the best possible chance of achieving the set goals was assessment. She also suggested a clear understanding of challenges that may be faced prior to blended learning implementation would be useful as this approach is considered relatively new in the Saudi context.

Several studies investigating the challenges of BL have identified a number of problems faced by institutions, such as a lack of Internet connectivity, technical problems, workload, and difficult instructions in Blackboard (Al Zumor et al., 2013; Banditvilai, 2016; Guangying, 2014; Hamdan et al., 2017; Ja'ashan, 2015; Poon, 2013; Thang et al., 2012) as well as difficulties encountered by students, (Alshathri, 2016; Hamad, 2017; Ja'ashan, 2015; Thang et al., 2012; Vaughan, 2007) and instructors (Alaidarous & Madini, 2016; Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Badawi, 2009; Yang, 2012).

Ja'ashan (2015) examined 130 undergraduate students' perceptions toward challenges in BL in an English module. He noted that an inadequate number of computers, the absence of qualified and skilled instructors in IT proficiencies, and a lack of organizational maintenance were major challenges to blended learning in many developing countries. Similarly, Al Zumor et al. (2013) used a survey to assess 160 male EFL undergraduate students' effectiveness when using Blackboard in a blended learning module. The study found that more than half of the participants were generally dissatisfied with the BL course. The problems stemmed from a lack of Internet connectivity as the most serious limitation, followed by ineffective synchronous and asynchronous activities in Blackboard compared with f2f interactions. Moreover, BL was not considered effective by all students despite being hugely welcomed by the majority of students around the world. For example, students with limited IT skills might lack the enthusiasm to work independently, resulting in disadvantages in the BL environment. The study findings suggested that, to support the implementation of blended learning, technical difficulties should be resolved and effective online activities should be included. Furthermore, Poon (2013) interviewed 9 instructors and surveyed 260 students to investigate their perceptions about the advantages and limitations of using blended

learning in a university in the UK. The study indicated that the role of the institution and the student are major factors in ensuring blended learning's effectiveness. The study warned that a poor Internet connection and unclear instructions in text-based media might cause some frustration, especially among students with computer illiteracy, such as how to use virtual learning tools.

Although BL offered the opportunity for learners who are reluctant to participate with peers to exchange views in English, previous studies found that blended learning has drawbacks. Students reported some negative views, such as isolation, decreased physical time to communicate with their teachers and peers, more time-consuming than f2f classes, and difficult instructions to follow in Blackboard. To better understand the difficulties that students encounter when using BL, in terms of the large quantity of assignments, Thang et al. (2012) interviewed 34 undergraduate students using 9 focus groups to examine their perceptions about course book and online content of an English for academic purposes module used in a university in Malaysia. The study found that undergraduate students suffered from heavy workloads in written and reading tasks in both settings, which required an extra time commitment. Instructors needed initial preparation and training to become aware of the exact nature of mixing the two environments, which should include rethinking the teaching and learning experiences. The researchers argued that two serious challenges might hamper students' progression in a BL environment: a slow Internet connection and a heavy workload. Students often have unrealistic assumptions about the nature of BL and expect less work to decrease class time (Garnham, Kaleta, & Sudzina, 2003; Vaughan, 2007). However, other students reported challenges regarding managing their time in both settings, being active learners, and dealing with technological problems, especially undergraduate students who had recently transferred from high school to the university, where online activities are essential. Therefore, the study concluded that teachers must confront this challenge by enabling students to be autonomous and active in choosing which homework is appropriate for them.

Other studies suggested that training programs should be implemented to develop faculty members as well as students in order to create a successful blended learning environment. For example, Yang (2012) examined problems faced by teachers in BL English writing courses in

a university in Taiwan and found that lecturers' lack of IT skills was a major problem in transitioning to the blended learning approach. In other words, unskilful teachers who have not been trained to use computers and the Internet, for example, might lead to a lack of excitement for their teaching in the BL context. In this regard, Alebaikan (2010) addressed some practical issues raised by faculty members regarding the time they spent developing their course material as online content.

Considering all of the evidence presented thus far, it seems that BL could raise challenges for students, teachers, and institutions. The lack of Internet connectivity, technical problems, a lack of efficiency among some teachers using blended learning, and training deficiencies are additional serious challenges. Although Poon (2013) focused on the delivery of suitable (technical, human) resources and appropriateness of technology infrastructure in universities as the most significant factors for effective BL implementation. Cobanoglu et al. (2017) were more concerned with the creation of clear institutional policy, the careful setting of strategic and operational plans, and the offering of efficient support to teachers and students. They confirmed that learning with recent technology can also encourage the notion of teamwork, engagement and learning with and from others. They indicated that success in BL is highly dependent on a clear institutional policy and robust leadership. In addition, the identification of goals, costs, available human resources, and technical and administrative support all are vital to sustaining the implementation of BL.

In conclusion, the use of modern technology as part of blended learning is not only desirable, but also useful in terms of learning English as well as developing computer literacy. Making use of online resources and the internet is a sensible course of action as it allows students flexibility in their studies and exposes them to practicing English in a variety of contexts, in addition to the time that they spend interacting with their peers in the classroom.

The studies suggest that practitioners must not only understand the reasons behind using modern technology to supplement and enhance teaching and learning, but also embrace this concept to improve their classroom practice and enhance their delivery of the curriculum. Equally important is the balance between face-to-face and online activities and/or time to

ensure that all students are catered to. Some will prefer to work as an individual, alone at their own pace, whereas others will value the interaction that occurs in face-to-face encounters in the classroom.

Clearly, some issues need to be addressed and/or resolved, such as ensuring that the library facilities are capable of delivering this type of approach towards the curriculum, that online materials are suitably supportive of the students required to access them, and that the design of blended learning approaches take into account students; preferred learning methods, the assessment of their courses, and the workload required to be successful.

3.2.5 Theoretical Perspectives Underpinning Blended Learning

As previously mentioned, the nature of blended learning requires the effective integration of both types of learning: “thoughtful integration of classroom f2f learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 96). This means BL is not just simply bringing technology into the classroom. It is redesigning the instructional model, changing the way of working with students, and giving students more control.

This is exemplified in the community of inquiry (COI) framework undertaken by Garrison and Arbaugh (2007). COI is mainly focused on developing critical thinking and collaboration among learners to build active learning in BL setting. This model helps develop the move beyond fostering collaboration and interaction between learners, the teaching material, and the course facilitators to move instead towards a more embedded community of practice. The following discussion provides a brief description of the COI framework (see Figure 3.3), which consists of a set of useful guidelines that could be used by the teacher (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007). It is necessary here to note that:

Community, on one hand, identifies the social nature of education and the role of interaction, collaboration and discourse play in constructing knowledge. *Inquiry*, on the other hand, reflects the process of constructing meaning through personal responsibility and choice. (Arbaugh, 2007, p. 9)

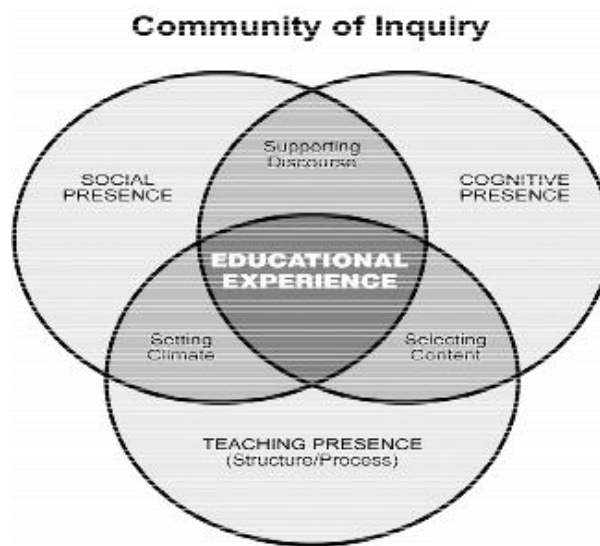


Figure 3.3 Community of inquiry framework

This description indicates that the central aim of COI is to facilitate learners’ engagement and help them be more autonomous. Moreover, knowledge occurs through communication between the learners. In this framework, *community* aims to create a social environment in which the learners communicate, negotiate, and collaborate between each other. Meanwhile, *inquiry* concerns building learners’ awareness to be responsible for their learning. Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) classified COI into three elements: *social presence*, *cognitive presence*, and *teaching presence* (see Figure 3.3). All these elements interrelate and affect one another. Garrison (2009) defined *social presence* as “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of protecting their individual personalities” (p. 352). This definition is useful because it highlights the importance of collaboration among students when they are freely expressing themselves to develop personal relationships. In this setting, teachers have to encourage students to communicate with their peers and express themselves freely. Social presence is generally considered significant because it enables educators to achieve cognitive purposes by prompting and supporting critical thinking in a community of students (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

Cognitive presence refers to “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 11). It allows for the discussion of information, construction of ideas, creation of thoughts, and practical analysis of solutions.

Finally, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) used the term *teaching presence* to refer to “the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (p. 5). Garrison and Anderson (2003) justified the significance of this element as it focuses on interactions and critical thinking to support independent learners who know their learning responsibly. Overall, BL has the ability to support this model and help build social collaborations, engage students, and construct knowledge.

The next sections discuss the relevant learning theories that underpin the use of BL: *social constructivism* and *connectivism*.

3.2.5.1 Social Constructivism

With the increasing attractiveness of online learning and the ongoing technological revolution, many models aligned implicitly to the learning theories, such as social constructivism, in which interactions between people is the primary emphasis. Hadjerrouit (2008) pointed out that learning occurs when students actively engage, such as asking students to solve a particular problem using critical thinking and collaborative discussion. Many of the models discussed herein have focused on interaction issues related to shared experience and to learner autonomy in their course engagements (Hung, 2001; Salmon, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

Salmon (2002) introduced the concept of “e-tivities,” which are described as representing online and interactive learning engagements, moderated electronically by the teaching figure, and being based around a three-element model, including an invitation to engage with a new piece of information, an activity which stimulates engagement, and an interactive aspect, such as an online discussion. She indicated that all of this is wrapped up inside a single message delivered online. Salmon identified this as a low-tech and thus cheap and efficient way to

deliver educational engagements online, with the teaching figure placed in a position analogous to that of the more knowledgeable other in social constructivist thought (Salmon, 2002; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Thus, the priority for online learning is the issue of fostering collaboration and discussion between learners, as well as between individual students and the teaching figure (Salmon, 2002). In such ways, there can be both elements of independent and collaborative learning as well as peer support mechanisms being established and supported, as fellow students find their ways through the material with which they engage (Bates, 2005; Salmon, 2002). In revisiting her 2002 work, Salmon (2013) found that what was then novel is now ubiquitous. The e-tivity model continues to have relevance in a world increasingly typified by digital-first strategies and in the use of massive open online courses (MOOCs) to not only offer education free at the point of use, but also as a promotional tool in increasingly competitive educational markets where physical geography is less of a potential barrier to accessing learning than it has been before (Salmon, 2013). In the updated work, Salmon (2013) again focused on three dimensions of fostering interaction: between learners and content, between learners and other people (both peers and educators), and the issues potentially raised by cross-cultural communication. According to Salmon, although online teaching and learning have their place, there are positives associated with blending the digital with offline and classroom learning; a mix of interactions, engaging with materials via a spectrum of media, is an important aspect of working for learners (Salmon, 2002; Salmon, 2013). The focus on supporting interaction between the different parties involved here highlights the links back to social constructivist theory more clearly (Salmon, 2011).

A great deal of previous research into the relationship between theories and technology has focused on the role of Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). ZPD is based on the idea that the learning process will be more effective if managed by the supervision and advice of a skilful teacher. Likewise, Long, Wood, Littleton, Passenger, and Sheehy (2010) concluded that learners would be more active and productive if supported by competent instructors. For Vygotsky (1978), the teacher in his zone acts as a facilitator who supports and assists the learners to reach a higher level in the zone. The learner's role is central, and the learner works as an active and independent individual. Chew (2009) provided a precise summary of the different roles of teachers and learners in Vygotsky's ZPD and its appropriateness in the e-learning context:

The educators' role is to design and facilitate such social and cultural experiences. For instance, they facilitate learners to play a role in the group discussion, and encourage and recognize the learners when they reach certain achievements. This discourse could be empowered in blended learning. (p. 103)

Overall, it seems that Vygotsky's ZPD provides useful suggestions for tutors to actively engage their students through effective interactions and collaborative work that might be applicable in the blended setting.

Another example of mixing technology with learning theories to successfully implement an active learner approach is Hung's (2001) five tools. The model presented five tools that students might use to help them construct knowledge based on the assumptions of social constructivism (see Figure 3.3). Hung argued that learners could best acquire and understand knowledge if they recognized the purpose of each tool to function in different educational contexts. For example, they could use *individual instructive* tools to enhance basic information that benefited in direct instructions in multiplications and addition. Meanwhile, *individual constructive tools* are helpful for supporting generic information as in Word Excel, and PowerPoint presentations. *Social communicative tools* are used to support socially constrictive activities, such as video conferencing and emailing, and *social constructive tools* use documents for sharing and negotiating knowledge. Again, the idea of a blended learning emerges here as the digital should not supplant the traditional, but should add additional dimensions to the learning experience. Part of the value of the blended learning approach is that relationships and mutual support arrangements that exist in the classroom and in other offline contexts can transfer to the e-learning elements of the engagement and vice versa (Collis & Moonen, 2002).

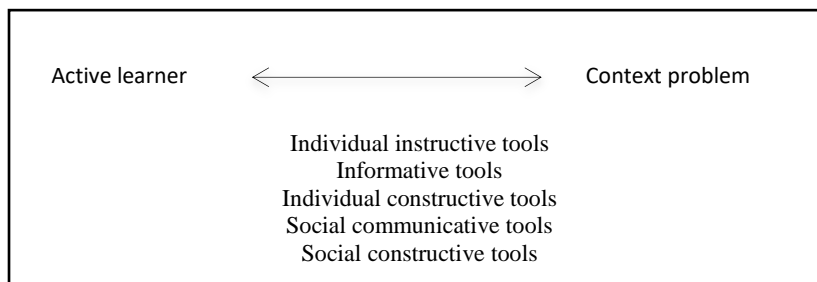


Figure 3-1 Hung's (2001) tools mediate between learners and context

3.2.5.2 Connectivism

The nature of blended learning, which includes a cooperative and unique setting, raises the need for the development of a new learning theory that enhances learning practices and prepares learners for the digital world (Ally, 2008). At the same time, there is a strong argument among educators about the need for a new learning theory that identifies the impact of technology on learning processes because the current learning theories were developed before the revolution of technology (Ally, 2008). Supporting this view, Al-Shehri (2011) believed that designing a new learning theory that enhances and supports learners' skills through attractive digital communication tools is inevitable. Moreover, Bell (2011) and Hirumi and Bermudez (1996, cited in Woo and Reeves, 2007) claimed that relying exclusively on behaviourism theory or constructivism specifically when designing web-based learning environments results in limited learner skills. Behaviourists believe that changed behaviour is the direct result of learning as they describe the mind as a "black box" (Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009). Boghossian (2006) explained that behaviourism is intensely associated with positivism in that it believes in obvious behaviours and totally ignores conceptual processes. For Cardwell (2010), behaviourism refers to "observable events without reference to mental concepts such as mind or emotion" (p. 31). Behaviourists believe that learning occurs only when the learner responds to the external stimulus in the environment without the help of the brain. In other words, behaviourists consider the changing of behaviour to be simply a consequence of a response to outside stimuli (Cardwell, 2010). Meanwhile, constructivism is defined as "an active construction of new knowledge based on a learner's prior experience" (Koohang, Riley, Smith, & Schreurs, 2009, p. 92). In other words, learning is actively constructed in learners' brains. Accordingly, this debate about the strengths and weaknesses of which existing theories to apply plays a vital role in the promotion of connectivism as a new educational theory.

According to Siemens (2014), connectivism is "the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, complexity and self-organization theories" (p. 22). This definition allows

individuals and groups to learn and work in a networked environment. Siemens listed the main principles of connectivism as follows:

learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources and it is the ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts as a core skill, and decision-making is itself a learning process, choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. (p. 24)

There is a continuing debate over connectivism among opponents and proponents. Some opponents of connectivism, such as Kop and Hill (2008) and Clarà and Barberà (2013), have argued that connectivism is not a learning theory, but rather a different pedagogical view where the focus is changing from the teacher to a more student-centred learning approach. Focusing on where to discover knowledge rather than how learners understand knowledge is a good illustration for this point from the opponents' viewpoint. Yet proponents of connectivism, such as Bell (2011), have classified it as a learning theory due to its flexibility on enabling learners to easily engage with a technological environment that supports their active learning. In other words, learning occurs by collaborative working within a network, unlike behaviourism, in which the teacher is the dominant force in the learning context.

Nevertheless, Ally (2008) was more concerned with the potential benefits of this approach compared to other theories. He strongly recommended that educators adopt a combination of existing learning theories with the values of connectivism: "what is needed is not a new stand-alone theory for the digital age, but a model that integrates the different theories to guide the design of online learning materials" (p. 18). Most researchers have agreed that connectivism would be a new valuable direction to be implemented in educational settings while the controversial discussions around it continued.

As connectivism is a relatively new theory, very few studies have examined the role of interaction between learners in relation to connectivism. Interaction is considered vital in the educational setting in general and in connectivism in particular. To illustrate this point clearly, Wang, Chen, and Anderson (2014) addressed the importance of interaction in connectivist learning by comparing social constructivism theory and connectivism. They concluded that the former philosophy describes learning as a practice that happens through social interactions

whereas the latter combines knowledge construction through a massive network: “Connectivists’ learning occurs not just through social interaction, but also through interaction with and between networked nodes (people, media, places), because knowledge is distributed across a network of connections” (Downes, 2007, as cited in Wang et al., 2014, p. 123). Thus, this feature of connectivism could be useful as BL supports learners in active communications with each other or with their tutors through synchronous and asynchronous learning.

As indicated thus far, BL could combine the aforementioned theories (Chen, 2015). Mayes and Fowler (1999) suggested three phases of the learning cycle linked to learning theories that could be applied in BL settings: *conceptualization*, *construction*, and *dialogue*. In the dialogue stage, for example, knowledge is tested through collaborative work and conversation between learners and their peers, such as online chats, online discussions, and video-conferencing, which is related to connectivism theory. For Mayes and Fowler (1999), there is a requirement to consider the development of communities of practice via conceiving e-learning to foster relationships as integral to the success of a course of instruction. Interactions between peers as well as with the course facilitator are vital aspects of that course, which privileges the development of mutuality between the individuals engaging in the learning space (Mayes & Fowler, 1999). With online learning being seen in both collaborative and social terms, it is vital that there be a priority consideration of the fostering of such relationships, or else the teaching and learning engagement will struggle to achieve its aims and learners will receive a partial experience at best (Mayes & Fowler, 1999).

In light of the definition of blended learning as a mixture of traditional learning and online learning (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003), the central aim of this type of learning is to link the best features of both types of learning platforms—namely, e-learning and face-to-face learning. It can be seen that, the features and definition of BL underpin the theories described herein (social constructivism, connectivism, and COI model). As previously mentioned, language development is built throughout social interactions via the Internet as learners can easily engage with limitless online tools that support active learning. Furthermore, to facilitate student engagement in language learning within this new environment, instructors have to adopt the fundamental benefits of each theory to allow the learning setting to be a

combination of the best practices of each theory while engaging students as active and autonomous learners. Part of the task for teachers, then, is to explore ways in which learning might be made meaningful to learners in e-learning contexts and to offer both variety and optional modes of delivery so that students can respond to the course in ways that make sense to them as individuals and ensure that their engagements with others—peers and tutors alike—are both meaningful and effective.

3.3 Definitions of EFL and Other Similar Concepts

This introductory section provides a brief overview of the key terminologies in English language teaching. In the field of English language teaching, many terms exist, such as English as a foreign language (EFL), English as a second language (ESL), and English for academic purposes (EAP). In this study, the abbreviation EFL will be used to refer to settings where English is taught in classrooms in which the main language is other than English. Saudi Arabia is one such a country. Thus, EFL should be emphasized in the classroom as Arabic is the primary language. Tarnopolsky (2016) noted that EFL involves training foreign students to communicate in English. They learn to use basic language skills, such as verbal cues, and to construct sentences as well as reinforce the communicative exchange between one person and another (Brick, 2012). In contrast, ESL refers to “situations in which speakers of other home languages are learning English in a context in which English is dominant language for public life” (Mercer, Swann, & Mayor, 2007, p.13). In such a context, English is used as the main spoken language.

Regarding English for academic purposes, Brick (2012) classified EAP into three main approaches: English for general academic purposes (EGAP), English for specific academic purposes (ESAP), and the study skills approach (EAP), where improving students’ ability in several skills is required for a specific learning level. Brick (2012) pointed out that the study skills approach “aims to develop students’ control of a range of skills deemed to be necessary for successful participation in tertiary study” (p. 170).

EGAP refers to the employment of a pure English language, where higher education students are trained to use the language decorously for the purposes of academic studying (Cummins, 2017; Basturkmen, 2015). The focus in this study was on EGAP as is taught in Saudi

universities, to EFL students during their preparatory year as a general requirement for all subjects to help them gain important academic language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) as well as study skills to boost their careers in the future. Indeed, it is important to help students focus on different skills for the purposes of meeting different academic demands upheld in various subjects (Charles, 2015).

Developing English proficiency for non-English speakers, particularly in the preparatory year, has been growing. In Malaysia, for example, EGAP was implemented in the preparatory year to prepare Malaysian students for academic education and to develop their English language and critical skills (Thang et al., 2012). Similarly, in China's higher education, EGAP is obligatory at all educational levels in order to create independent learners (Liu & Yu, 2012). In Thailand, EGAP has been used to enhance the four English skills (i.e., reading, listening, writing, speaking) to enable students to be more competent (Banditvilai, 2016). Likewise, in Saudi Arabia, EGAP is essential for preparing learners to accomplish the four English skills to enrol in their specialized fields of study. EGAP could be offered pre-sessional (i.e., before the main course) to provide students with essential language and learning skills, thereby enabling them start the academic course. It could also be in-sessional, meaning it is taken at the same time as the main course, to support students in language areas (Brick, 2012).

Meanwhile, ESAP aims to improve learners' ability in specific courses (Brick, 2012). Evans and John (1998) noted that, in such a course, students need to know how to write and interpret technical reports in case they are undertaking a science course. Similarly, a law student needs to be introduced to technical jargon related to legal matters to succeed in the course (Charles, 2015).

3.3.1 Nature of the Four Academic English Skills

This section focuses on different language skills in terms of the nature of each skill and the most effective strategies for language development. Some language teaching theories are also discussed. Initially, the discussion focuses on the receptive skills (reading and listening), followed by productive skills (speaking and writing) because the former serves as input to students, which is produced in the latter for different communication and writing purposes (Sharma & Barret, 2007). To avoid any confusion in this section, it is important to clarify the

differences between skills and strategy. The terms *skills* and *strategy* are often used interchangeably. Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) pointed out that for reading, for example, skills are used by both teachers and students for a long time whereas strategies are used to indicate cognitive process. Therefore, strategies are used as tools to perform skills.

3.3.1.1 Academic Reading Skills

Reading is at the heart of language learning, mainly because it affects the development of other language skills (e.g., writing). This is evident when EFL students face challenges in writing because they do not have meaningful information based on sufficient reading (Burns & Richards, 2012). Recent studies have reported that reading skills could be developed (Behjat, Yamini, & Bagheri, 2012; Szymańska & Kaczmarek, 2011; Tehrani & Tabatabaei, 2012; Yang, 2012). A primary concern identified in these studies is several key aspects, such as the role of the theoretical models of reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, the importance of reading strategies, the role of teachers, and methods of teaching.

Various definitions of academic reading skills exist in the field of EFL/ESL. For Burns and Richards (2012), reading is a combination of several bottom-up and top-down skills to understand the text. For Celce-Murcia (2001), it encompasses a range of writing abilities, such as summarizing, note taking, and vocabularies knowledge. However, academic reading skills at the university level is completely different than reading at the high school level. The former requires students to evaluate, compare and contrast, and analyse the text to understand the author's messages. In this study, academic reading skills will be used to involve different analysis processes, starting from clarifying the purpose, surveying, predicting, and interacting to employing critical thinking to comprehend the meaning of the text. The following sub-sections discuss various aspects of academic reading skills, including the theoretical models of reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, features of good readers, and examples of reading strategies.

3.3.1.1.1 Theoretical Models of Reading Comprehension

The literature uses the phrase *reading comprehension* to refer to working with the text to understand its meaning. Several discussions related to reading comprehension consider the

importance of reading materials, the role of the teachers, and methods of teaching as the most significant factors leading to effective reading comprehension (Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017). As a starting point, it is important to know some theoretical models for understanding the reading comprehension process.

Bottom-up reading is a traditional instruction model of reading comprehension. It basically depends on building up different sounds to letters. Hedge (2003) noted that the term bottom-up has come to be used to describe sounds of letters as well as other language structures. Therefore, in this model, the learner's role is passive as there is no interactions occur between the learners and the text. In the context of Saudi higher education, reading skills are still generally taught in a traditional way, which labels reading as a passive ability. For example, Saudi students are not trained to develop their reading abilities as no communication occurs between the reader and the text; consequently, the learner answers randomly, without looking at the text at all (Al-Jarf, 2002). To develop this model further, *top-down* reading was applied to make learners more active by predicting what will happen in the reading text. This model encourages students to develop some essential reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning, and speed reading (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Meanwhile, *interactive theory* is mainly concerned with the important role of previous knowledge to understand the meaning of the text.

The use of traditional methods of teaching, such as the grammar translation method, is considered one of the main obstacles that negatively affect reading skills in EFL classrooms. The grammar translation method is the oldest approach and dominated in European countries from the 1840s to the 1940s (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This approach focuses on a detailed analysis of grammatical rules to be able to read in the foreign language. One major drawback of this approach is that it does not teach the language used in communication (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Therefore, the constant adoption of conventional teaching approaches has resulted in a deficiency in EFL language skills. It is also useful for the teacher of English language in general and the teacher of EFL in particular to evaluate their traditional teaching methods compared to modern ones. More importantly, they have to learn different technological teaching approaches suited to their students' needs in order to make sensible decisions about which method is appropriate in a particular setting as well as how to integrate the method into

class practice to support foreign language teaching and learning.

3.3.1.1.2 Features of Good Readers

Burich (2004) identified the main features of good readers as the ability to benefit from the *top-down* and *bottom-up* processes to understand the reading text and the ability to read for a purpose. In addition, good readers have a wide range of vocabulary knowledge, which helps them be effective in different contexts, such as communicating when speaking, listening, and writing academic texts. A similar view is offered by Hedge (2003), who mentioned that the fluent reader has the ability to identify the main structure of the text and distinguish the differences between a wide range of vocabularies. Although success during the PYP depends on the ability to master all of the academic language skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing), most first-year university students lack academic reading skills mainly because they are used to reading without a purpose and not attempting to analysing the author's argument (Hermida, 2009). Therefore, it is important for EFL teachers to assist students in developing their English vocabulary by encouraging them to read extensively, teaching them the significance of reading on other language skills, and helping them focus on reading for a purpose.

3.3.1.1.3 Role of Vocabulary Knowledge in Reading Comprehension

Learning vocabulary in an EFL class plays a pivotal role in developing reading skills. As Celce-Murcia (2001) stated, reading and vocabulary have a highly linked correlation. An appropriate level of vocabulary knowledge influences a student's ability to write and communicate with others whereas limited vocabulary could cause further weaknesses in language development. This is certainly true when a learner participates in an open conversation and is not able to memorize the appropriate words to say in a prompt manner (Tosun, 2015).

A considerable amount of literature has indicated that vocabulary building is increased through intensive reading, which requires precise viewing to the academic text rather than pre-teaching vocabularies (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Many scholars, such as Zhang, Song, and Burston (2011), have asserted that learning vocabulary occurs in two ways: *intentional*

learning occurs when the learner deliberately searches for the meaning of specific words whereas *incidental learning* happens while listening to the TV or reading the newspaper. Zhang et al. (2011) strongly recommended that EFL learners practice the former to better enhance their vocabulary knowledge. Another suggestion offered by Hedge (2003) is for non-English speakers to read a wide variety of reading materials to increase their vocabulary knowledge.

3.3.1.1.4 Academic Reading Strategies

Widely practiced strategies exist in many reading modules, including skimming, which aims to obtain general information from the text and skip large chunks of paragraphs, and scanning, which focuses on finding specific knowledge in a text by rapidly searching the text (Hedge, 2003). In addition, an effective reader takes a general look over the text, headings, subheadings, and pre-questions, as it is not important to understand the entire text, but to have an ability to extract particular information from it. Although these strategies are useful, EFL teachers have frequently complained that Saudi students do not engage the text and perceive reading as being of low significance (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). This perception stems from the fact that they have not been well prepared in pre-university programs to help them know how to improve their reading ability (Al-Seghayer, 2014).

Unfortunately, Saudi EFL students are not taught how to manage the reading process effectively and, therefore, most of them lack enthusiasm as they are reading randomly and without purpose (Khan, 2011). For example, at the school level, they are not encouraged to read extensively in English, such as reading short stories, newspapers, or novels. As a result, class hours are the only opportunity where they read and practice EFL. When they enter university, they do not engage in reading in English, as they are not used to doing so from the early stages of schooling (Alhamdi, 2014). The result is a low level of reading proficiency. In this regard, Hedge (2003) concluded that setting the reading purpose in advance would be helpful for developing learners' reading ability. For example, EFL learners have to recognize whether the reading text is for pleasure, to increase knowledge, or to accomplish a specific task. McDonough and Shaw (2003) asserted that the EFL teacher has to focus on the reading purpose initially to develop students' reading ability.

This section has reviewed some of the key aspects of academic reading skills. Again, it is the teacher's responsibility to help students develop their reading comprehension by focusing on reading for a purpose, selecting appropriate reading texts, increasing their vocabulary knowledge, encouraging intensive reading, and setting reading at the highest priority of language learning as well as emphasizing the other language skills.

3.3.1.2 Academic Listening Skills

Although listening comprehension is considered fundamental for language development, previous studies have indicated that listening seems to be a complicated skill to learn (Chang & Read, 2006; Kurita, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2012; Rost, 2016; Ur, 1948). It is mainly because EFL students do not learn how to listen in an effective way or how to handle different listening processes to understand spoken text in real-life situations (Vandergrift, 2007). In the academic contexts, EFL learners need to master some important listening skills (e.g., written notes) in order to understand lectures, seminars, or other informal communication purposes (Evans & John, 1998). Throughout this study, the term *academic listening skills* refers to students' ability to interpret the spoken text in various academic situations, such as lectures, seminars, talks, and presentations.

Several studies' findings have focused on the role of understanding linguistics knowledge, metacognitive factors, and vocabulary knowledge in developing listening comprehension (Altenberg, 2005; Chang, & Read, 2006; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Hasan, 2000; Lee & Lee, 2012; Noro, 2005; Stæhr, 2009). The following section brings together these aspects that influence listening comprehension as well as some listening comprehension problems that need to be addressed.

3.3.1.2.1 Understanding the Listening Process

Understanding the listening process is at the heart of enhancing EFL learners' listening comprehension, which subsequently affects the improvements of other language skills (Vandergrift, 2007). Linguistic knowledge and world knowledge play a pivotal role in helping listeners make sense of spoken speech. In other words, background information about world expectations and linguistics knowledge interacts simultaneously to understand listening

speech. Researchers have been interested in the top-down and bottom-up cognitive processes to understand listening and determine which one of them is applicable during listening comprehension. Yet a much-debated question is whether top-down and bottom-up processes are more effective in listening. Wilson (2012) suggested the use of both strategies concurrently as an interactive model.

For Kurita (2012), top-down processing means employing previous knowledge to comprehend the meaning while bottom-up is generally understood to mean the use of input information as a preparatory action to understand the general idea of the speech. Hedge (2003) added that, in the bottom-up process, the listener tries to divide spoken words into phrases and paragraphs to easily realize their meaning. Vandergrift (2007) asserted that the speed for accomplishing these processes strongly depends on whether the learners are native speakers or second/foreign language learners as well as the linguistic knowledge they possess. For example, native listeners do not need to understand every single word they hear.

A number of previous studies have reported the effects of an inability to use bottom-up processing effectively for listening comprehension. Hasan (2000) studied the effects of listening problems on listening comprehension, including unfamiliar vocabulary, different accents, fast speech, and unclear word structures. He highlighted that these problems negatively affected the development of listening comprehension as the learners stuck to analysing the structures of the words instead of deducing the meaning to understand the speech. In this sense, he recommended that teachers encourage students to utilize the top-down strategy, which is based on the use of previous knowledge to comprehend the meaning.

It is important for the EFL teachers to prepare students thoroughly for pre-, during, and post-listening activities to enhance their comprehension (Lee & Lee, 2012). In this regard, Hedge (2003) clarified the purpose of each stage. For example, the aim of the pre-listening introductory stage is to allow listeners more space to think about the topic and bring together all the previous information about it. During listening, learners need to focus more on the content of the topic to extract the correct answers to the questions. Finally, the post-listening stage should involve bottom-up and top-down skills.

3.3.1.2.2 Role of Linguistics Knowledge in Listening Comprehension

Regarding linguistic knowledge, Buck (2001) used the term *linguistic knowledge* to refer to “phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics, and discourse structure” (p. 2). Meanwhile, Vandergrift (2007) pointed out that the lack of recognizing word segmentation such as stress and intonation of the spoken word affects the listening skills as this process begins earlier in the listening system. A study by Altenberg (2005) revealed that ESL learners found it difficult to identify acoustic-phonetic cues such as the segmentation of spoken words. Therefore, EFL/ESL listeners have to understand the different uses of stress and intonation to help them understand the meaning of utterances. For example, in English, speakers use stress as an indicator of the importance of the message being delivered whereas intonation is used when the listener’s response is needed, such as when answering questions (Kurita, 2012).

3.3.1.2.3 Role of Vocabulary Knowledge in Listening Comprehension

Vocabulary knowledge is another important aspect of listening comprehension. Most authors in the language learning field indicate that vocabulary knowledge in reading is much easier than in listening. For example, readers have a chance to go back to the written text and check the word’s meaning. By contrast, EFL listeners do not have a second chance to analyse the sound of the words for segmentation in order to interpret the meaning (Vandergrift, 2007). Words can be divided into two groups: *content words* related to lexical meaning and *function words* related to grammatical structure. It is widely believed that a listener pays more attention to the content words than function words to build comprehension. *Lexical knowledge* in listening comprehension relates to the amount of vocabulary used to enhance understanding (Kurita, 2012). An empirical study by Stæhr (2009) found a correlation between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension. The study indicated that the breadth of an EFL listener’s vocabulary, or the range of learner’s vocabulary, is fundamental to effective listening comprehension.

Several scholars and linguists have claimed that traditional approaches are inappropriate for basic language teaching methodologies (Nunan, 1999). The *direct method*, for example, is highly dependent on teachers’ proficiencies and uses images and pictures to clarify the meaning of new vocabulary while stressing the correction of students’ pronunciation (Howatt

& Widdowson, 2004). Richards and Rodgers (2001) further mentioned that, although the direct method became popular in Europe, the restricted use of the target language in the classroom is the main issue identified by its opponents. However, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach was developed as a response to building the learner's communication competence in the target language (i.e., the skill to use the linguistic system efficiently and properly). Listening in CLT uses interactions outside the actual classrooms (Wilson, 2012). Unlike traditional methods of teaching EFL, teaching via the online environment is different than via the traditional one, and the role of the teacher is dramatically different. For example, the teacher serves as a facilitator and provides guidance to the learner, who is a totally independent learner. This increases learners' learning opportunities to enhance the language at their pace from anywhere around the world (Banditvilai, 2016).

3.3.1.2.4 Some Listening Comprehension Problems

A number of researchers (Chang & Read, 2006; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Hasan, 2000; Noro, 2005) have reported challenges faced by EFL learners during listening comprehension tasks, such as unfamiliar pronunciations, new words, rapid speech, and unrecognized topics. A qualitative study by Noro (2005) discussed the challenges of listening comprehension for 22 EFL undergraduate students in Japan. The study found that rate of speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and native speakers' different pronunciations caused listening comprehension anxiety, which resulted in reactions such as irritation, aversion, lack of self-confidence, and loss of concentration. Another study by Elkhafaifi (2005) used a survey to examine the impact of foreign language learning anxiety on listening comprehension in an Arabic course of 233 graduate and undergraduate students. The study recommended that instructors eliminate listening stress in classrooms and increase listening practices to engage students more with listening tasks.

However, familiarity with the same language seems to positively affect listening comprehension. Wilcox (1978) concluded that Singaporean students understood English from Singaporean teachers more easily than teachers of other nationalities. Likewise, a recent study by Alghofaili and Elyas (2017) investigated 108 EFL undergraduate students' perceptions about the effect of both native and non-native English speakers on students' language skills

during the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia. The data were collected from different sources: questionnaires and interviews. In terms of listening skills, the study found students prefer non-native speakers to teach listening skills as they are familiar with their same accents and pronunciations. However, regarding the other skills (i.e., speaking, reading, and writing), the most essential factors affecting EFL students' learning was the role of teachers, who have expertise and innovative ways of teaching that engage students effectively regardless of where the teachers come from.

In the Saudi context, EFL learners have often complained about similar listening difficulties, as they did not learn how to listen. In other words, they engaged in listening materials only to answer related questions. In this regard, Kurita (2012) pointed out that learning to listen is different from listening to learn. For the former, listeners develop understanding to make sense of spoken words whereas, for the latter, learners are more involved in the lexis and syntax of the language during the listening process.

Furthermore, previous studies (e.g., Elkhafaifi, 2005; Kurita, 2012; Vandergrift, 2007) have reported the importance of metacognitive knowledge as evidence to enhance listening comprehension and reduce some listening complications such as anxiety. Rost (2016) mentioned that metacognitive skills help learners utilize critical thinking skills, such as predictions and problem solving, to overcome any difficulty encountered during the listening task. In addition, Vandergrift (2010) indicated that the development of metacognitive knowledge could support learners to become more focused to use guessing and other word clues while listening. Although metacognitive knowledge is different between skilled and less skilled listeners, several studies have suggested some effective strategies that can be used in EFL classrooms to support metacognitive knowledge. Chang and Read (2006), for example, suggested providing topical background and repeated input as the most beneficial strategies to support metacognitive knowledge as well as reduce anxiety in listening comprehension.

In addition, the issues of the listening assessment and which testing approach is more appropriate to test listening comprehension have received considerable attention among authors. For Rost (2016), assessment is fundamental in language teaching for several reasons; curriculum development provides the teachers with the background to prepare the lesson and

feedback about learners' ability to assist with what they need to improve during the learning process. Wilson (2012) argued that three main approaches to testing listening exist: the discrete-point and integrative approaches, which are more concerned with the test listener's ability to use the language than to learn the language, and the communicative approach, which aims to test the listener's ability to use the language in real communication.

This section has described the role of understanding linguistics knowledge, metacognitive factors, and vocabulary knowledge in developing listening comprehension as well as some listening comprehension problems that need to be addressed.

3.3.1.3 Academic Speaking Skills

Speaking skills are considered fundamental and complex at the same time, particularly for EFL learners, who generally need to speak for different purposes, such as keeping up with social relationships, travelling, and studying in English courses. One of the most important reasons to hone one's speaking skills is to become a competent speaker able to communicate and negotiate with others in real-time interactions. Supporting this view, Celce-Murcia (2001) mentioned that, although knowing a foreign language simply means speaking it, this ability is totally different from being able to speak it confidently and effortlessly in real-time interactions. However, the complexity lies in how to be fluent speakers. For Hedge (2003), fluency refers to the smooth use of comprehensive and coherent words, intonation, and pronunciation during the conversation. For Nazara (2011), speaking encompasses three components: "mechanical (vocabularies, pronunciation, grammar), functional (interactions through exchange ideas), and sociocultural (turn taking, rate of speech, roles of participants)" (p. 31). Although a variety of definitions of speaking skills have been suggested, this study will use academic speaking that includes satisfactory information about syntax, linguistic, and lexical knowledge and using that knowledge intelligibly in several academic contexts, such as presentations, seminars, oral exams, and group presentations (Charles, 2015).

Previous studies have reported that the lack of communicative competence in real-time conversations has been the main problem for many years (Al-Jarf, 2005b; Alebaikan et al., 2010; Ja'ashan, 2015). The next section will briefly focus on teaching approaches to speaking as well as some speaking problems that need to be addressed.

3.3.1.3.1 Speaking Teaching Approaches

To date, three language speaking teaching approaches have been used in second or foreign language contexts: direct approach, indirect approach, and indirect plus approach (Nazara, 2011). Thornbury (2012, as cited in Burns & Richards, 2012) pointed out that the direct approach is built on the idea of linguistics and functional knowledge of the spoken discourse whereas the indirect approach is more concerned with interaction as a result of speaking developments. Regarding the third approach, Kroeker (2009) indicated that the indirect plus approach is a combination of learner-centred teaching interactions and interactional activities. In this sense, this approach is similar to the communicative approach, which emphasizes more interactive speaking tasks (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1997).

3.3.1.3.2 Communicative Language Teaching Approach

Existing research recognizes the critical role played by the communicative approach to support learners' communicative competence (Hedge, 2003). Unlike the audio-lingual and oral situational approaches, which emphasize correct pronunciation and vocabulary production during lessons with a conversation between the teacher and students (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004), communicative language teaching (CLT) raised the need to refocus on communicative competence as the ultimate purpose for EFL (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This can be done by encouraging students working in groups to share information, motivating them to speak fluently as the primary communication's dimension, engaging them in problem-solving tasks, and helping them learn how to communicate effectively in real daily situations. Students enthusiastically participate in the learning process and are given responsibility for their own learning. For this reason, CLT is labelled as learner-centred. The most significant change in this approach is that the teacher's role has changed from being the central figure to being the facilitator.

Although CLT is widely accepted, it has drawbacks. When students work together in groups or are asked to participate, some are unwilling or hesitate to do so. Nunan (2009) pointed out that the major challenge facing CLT is students' reluctance to communicate or speak. Richards and Renandya (2004) mentioned some of the reasons for students' unwillingness: (a) linguistic aspects (e.g., complications in conveying sounds, rhythms, stress patterns, and

grammar) and (b) psychological aspects (e.g., absence of enthusiasm, anxiety, and shyness). Thus, the teacher has a significant role to play to support EFL students in any way that stimulates them to work and produce language effectively. Some teachers engaging their students in this approach have faced another difficulty: when they ask students to work in groups, the students normally use their first language or L1 rather than English. Moreover, EFL students are often reluctant to participate in real communication speech when invited by the teacher. The evidence presented in this section suggests that the EFL teacher could integrate the components of each approach to meet their students' needs and serve the lesson's purpose. In this regard, a large amount of the literature highlights the teacher's role in motivating students to speak and overcome their unwillingness stemming from their concerns about making errors (Al-Jarf, 2002).

3.3.1.3.3 Some Problems in Speaking

In the context of EFL in Saudi Arabia, speaking is apparently the most difficult skill to acquire, particularly for undergraduate students who have to achieve a satisfactory level in English. Previous studies have reported that the lack of oral ability in real-time conversations has been the main problem for many years (Al-Jarf, 2005b; Alaidarous & Madini 2016; Ja'ashan, 2015). As a result, some problems have arisen, such as anxiety and the lack of confidence to speak in English. Integrated learning in EFL can play an important role in addressing the issue of speaking deficiency among EFL learners, which will be discussed in the BL section. Ja'ashan (2015) noted that participating in online classes is helpful in two ways: to improve critical thinking skills and to encourage students unwilling to communicate. These issues will be discussed later in this chapter.

This section has explained that speaking skills are essential and complicated at the same time, particularly for EFL learners, who generally need to speak for different purposes. The role played by the communicative approach to support communicative competence in speaking, as well as some problems that need to be addressed, has also been presented.

3.3.1.4 Academic Writing Skills

Writing well is one of the main obstacles that EFL learners face. However, success at the university level is highly dependent on academic writing. Charles (2015) pointed out that success in the university is greatly reliant on the ability to write academically—in other words, how to use different writing processes (planning, drafting, proofreading), correct grammatical structures, and referencing to construct a planned, structured essay or assignment. Nunan (1999) confirmed that the creation of a coherent and flowing piece of writing is the most problematic skill and one that even native speakers face limitations with. Part of the problem is the different rules between spoken and written text (Richards, 1990). In this study, academic writing skills refer to the ability to think critically while analysing the question, using reliable and relevant supported evidence, to produce a clear, focused, and structured written work.

For many years, Brown and Lee (2015) raised several questions about “why people don’t learn to write naturally as they learn to speak and why isn’t everyone an excellent writer” (p. 426). Such questions raise a discussion about some issues related to teaching academic writing skills, which are discussed in this section. Some of the recent studies findings presented in this section demonstrate the significant role of writing teaching approaches and feedback to support the writing process. The discussion also explores how plagiarism can affect academic writing, how technology can play an important role in addressing the issue of academic writing development, and how writing can be assessed.

3.3.1.4.1 Writing Teaching Approaches

In recent years, there has been a dramatic change in teaching writing skills to non-native speakers. The predominant traditional approach mainly focused on writing as a final product, regardless of the process (Celce-Murcia, 2001). For Jordan (1997), the product approach “is concerned with the finished product—the text” (p. 164). In the 1980s, the concentration on spelling and grammar in the final production of the written text shifted to writing as a process approach as a result of inadequacies in the product approach (Hedge, 2003). In addition, Nunan (1999) confirmed that the process approach focuses more on activities in the classrooms and interactive group work to enhance writing skills while grammar has received

little focus. Similarly, Yoon (2011) pointed out that the process approach, which consists of outlining, proofreading, and editing, offers a useful method for composing a well-organized written text. However, one major drawback of this approach is inappropriateness for university students, who are more concerned about writing for exams (Nunan, 1999). In the Saudi context, for example, most EFL classes still utilize the product approach to create a piece of writing for assessment purposes (Al-Jarf, 2009).

Technology can play an important role in addressing the issue of academic writing development. An experimental study by Al-Jarf (2009) involved 86 freshmen EFL students (in two groups) to compare their writing after the use of mind map software at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. The control group was taught in a traditional way via textbooks whereas the experiment group was taught a mixture of traditional approaches and lessons using mind maps. A mind map is a visual tool that facilitates the creation of ideas and the interrelationships among them. Students may face some writing difficulties related to idea generation and the development of supporting details about the topic. Al-Jarf found significant differences between both groups, as the group taught with the mind map software had higher achievements in writing skills. This shows that the use of technological tools when teaching writing skills has the potential to develop language skills.

3.3.1.4.2 Role of Feedback to Support the Writing Process

The role of feedback is fundamental for developing writing skills, and it is an essential element in the process of composition (Young & Lee, 2010). More recent attention has focused on peer feedback and group conferencing to enhance the writing process (Ho & Savignon, 2007; So & Lee, 2012; Yoon, 2011; Young & Lee, 2010). These studies have shown that students need to receive significant written or oral feedback about written texts from the teacher, particularly regarding content, organization, and vocabulary. For example, Young and Lee (2010) concluded that providing a group leader with online communication to organize the session and encourage the cooperation among students would be useful for successfully implementing peer feedback.

In peer feedback, teachers encourage students to communicate closely with each other to revise written drafts and provide a general review of the text's coherence (Kim, 2010).

However, some previous studies, such as Tsui and Ng (2000), have reported some difficulties with peer feedback: students' failure to provide valuable feedback and their tendency to comment on superficial errors instead of content. This problem in turn makes other students uncertain about their peers' advice, perceiving it as unreliable. In the context of Saudi Arabia, for instance, EFL students mostly disregard peer feedback and consider it to have less importance; consequently, they rely on the teacher's comments as the only source of knowledge. This is mainly because students were not trained to provide this kind of advice to their colleagues (So & Lee, 2012). Min (2005) conducted a study to examine the effect of proper training on peer review. Eighteen undergraduate EFL students in Taiwan participated in the study, which identified the main training steps to facilitate reviews: recognizing the author's messages, spotting the problems, and offering recommendations.

3.3.1.4.3 Assessing Writing

The issue of writing assessments has received considerable attention in EFL research. As mentioned earlier, writing is regarded as a complicated process for EFL learners; the time pressure during a writing test makes it even more complex. Therefore, it is important to provide learners with enough information about the nature of the writing assessment prior to the test (Burns & Richards, 2012). By way of illustration, Brown and Lee (2015) suggested the use of a six-category checklist for writing evaluations that includes: content, organization, discourse, syntax vocabulary, and mechanics. It helps students consider some weak writing that requires more improvement. Burns and Richards (2012) highlighted that it is important for EFL teachers to decide the assessment that meets different kinds of purposes. For example, a formative assessment is useful during the writing process whereas a summative assessment evaluates the overall performance.

3.3.1.4.4 Plagiarism

Plagiarism refers to using another's words as your own. Sutherland-Smith (2008) pointed out that plagiarism is considered "academic misconduct" (p. 20). In the United Kingdom, for instance, preparatory year educates students about the serious consequences of plagiarism through various tutorials about how to use references, paraphrasing, summarizing, and note taking in order to enhance students' knowledge about this serious issue. Universities have

adopted anti-plagiarism software (e.g., Turnitin) to detect matching texts using a huge online database. Both students and instructors can use such software to check their works before submission. The software provides prompt feedback with a percentage of similarities (<https://www.turnitin.com>).

In contrast, universities in Saudi Arabia do not use such plagiarism check software. The situation is further exacerbated when plagiarism is practiced by lecturers in some Saudi universities. *Arab News* reported that some faculty members have stolen others' ideas and represented them as their own ("Academics sacked for plagiarism," 2015). The lack of information about intentional versus unintentional plagiarism and publishers' copyrights could negatively affect students' academic writing skills, as can the absence of plagiarism-detection software in Arabic and English.

Several recent studies investigating students' or teachers' perceptions about plagiarism in higher education have been carried out across Saudi Arabia. Madkhali (2017) used a survey to explore 245 Saudi students studying in American universities overseas. The research focused on these students' perspective on plagiarism. The study indicated that the lack of awareness about plagiarism and its serious effects are the most important reasons for it. Similarly, Razek (2014) interviewed 13 Saudi students to obtain their thoughts about academic honesty. Most students revealed that plagiarism was a normal and accepted practice; they did not consider stealing others' thoughts to be as unethical practice. Aljarf (2013) concluded that there is a need for some clear and strict guidelines to protect publishers' copyrights and to punish purloiners in Saudi Arabia.

From the above explanation, it seems that academic writing consists of a number of complicated and interconnected processes, such as planning, drafting, and proofreading. An additional process is the ability to think critically while evaluating the question. This section has presented writing teaching approaches, the role of feedback to support the writing process, how plagiarism can affect academic writing, how technology can play an important role in addressing the issue of academic writing development, and how writing can be assessed.

3.3.2 Using BL to Support English Language Skills

The following sub-sections will argue that several universities in Saudi Arabia have taken decisive steps towards substituting traditional educational approaches for new approaches, which are more consistent with today's highly technological world to enhance language teaching and learning. Then, previous studies on the impact of BL on each academic English skill are presented. However, previous studies on the impact of BL on receptive skills (reading, listening) at the university level have included very little compared to other productive language skills (speaking, writing).

3.3.2.1 Review of Related Studies in Saudi Arabia

Several recent empirical studies have investigated the perceptions of teachers or students about the usefulness of blended learning in relation to language learning; such studies have ranged between comparison and no comparison studies. For example, Al Zumor et al. (2013) and Alaidarous and Madini (2016) investigated students' perceptions about the impact of a specific online learning management system in a BL setting, while others such as Ja'ashan (2015) and Alebaikan (2010) examined perceptions about advantages and limitations of BL in English and other subjects. Still other studies, such as Alseweed (2013) and Badawi (2009) compared the effectiveness between two or three learning methods (f2f, BL, or virtual learning). This section describes each of these studies in detail.

Al Zumor et al. (2013) used a survey to assess 160 male students' perceptions about effectiveness when using the Blackboard LMS in a blended learning English module at King Khaled University in Saudi Arabia. BL in this department occurs through the supportive level (mixed f2f and online), in which teachers upload module materials and announcements via Blackboard, send emails, and share files with students as well as meet with students f2f. The study showed that the majority of students valued BL as it developed their English, especially reading and vocabulary. However, this study did not offer an adequate explanation to students in the survey instrument for what each skill means (reading, writing, speaking, listening). Students might not have understood reading as a skill which contains skimming, scanning, etc., and instead simply understood it as browsing via Blackboard. The study concluded that some technical problems, such as poor Internet connection and difficult instructions in

Blackboard, caused several negative perceptions about BL.

Similar to Al Zumor et al. (2013), Ja'ashan (2015) examined 130 (male and female) undergraduate students' views toward BL in the English Department at Bisha University when using the Blackboard LMS. Like King Khaled University, Bisha University also adopted supportive BL. The study used a survey to collect the data. Although the study found that BL offered the opportunity for learners to participate with peers to exchange views in English, negative perceptions such as isolation also emerged.

Alaidarous and Madini (2016) investigated 109 female students' perceptions about the usefulness of the Dorooob LMS in relation to the English module and identified the factors that affected their perceptions about BL at a technical and vocational college. Dorooob is designed especially to support technical and vocational college students to work in the labour market. The data were collected from online questionnaires and interviews. Generally, the study found that most students' perceptions of BL in relation to English learning were positive in terms of their general satisfaction with the module. The factors that positively affected students' views the most related to module content and the kinds of online activities which are understandable and have interactive nature.

In contrast, Alebaikan (2010) conducted a qualitative study to gain a detailed understanding of the benefits and challenges of using blended learning in the Saudi educational system. The study examined the perceptions of seven teachers and 86 undergraduate students involved in BL courses at King Saud University. The study reported that the flexibility of the BL platform enabling students to learn at any convenient time was a feasible feature, especially for women's education. The researcher recommended providing an appropriate long-term plan for the effective implementation of BL in higher education institutions.

In an experimental study, Alseweed (2013) compared 37 undergraduate students' perceptions about the effectiveness of three kinds of learning—namely, BL, f2f, and virtual learning (VL)—in terms of outcomes in the English program at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. This university introduced the Jusur LMS which contains EL and VL as part of the developmental teaching plan. The study found that the majority of students appreciated BL more than f2f and VL as the social environment provided by BL helped them develop their

language learning. Students in this setting had the opportunity to utilize a different range of online audio-visual activities as well as meet with the teacher through Skype and in person.

Similarly, Badawi (2009) set out to compare the effectiveness between two learning delivery approaches, f2f and BL, to develop pedagogical knowledge and performance among 38 EFL teachers in the Education and Arts Department at Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia. Participants were divided into two groups; the first group used traditional learning while the second one used BL. The study reported that BL was more successful than f2f learning to develop teaching performance and teachers' skills in terms of designing and accessibility of any simple BL course on the Internet.

Most of the aforementioned studies reported participants' dissatisfaction with poor Internet connectivity on campuses as a common significant problem. One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether Saudi universities' current infrastructure will be replaced with high-speed Internet. Together, these studies indicate that using blended learning in higher education as a new approach has the potential for students and teachers to interconnect in teaching and learning (Lee & Lee, 2012). The next sections review related literature about BL to develop each of the academic language skills.

3.3.2.2 Academic Reading Skills

Based on the problems mentioned thus far, BL could serve as a practical solution to improve academic reading proficiency among EFL learners by providing learners with additional opportunities to read limitless online materials outside the classroom environment. Therefore, academic reading could be enhanced in a setting supporting independent learning, which is a core element in the preparatory year (Yang, 2012).

Several empirical studies have investigated the significant role BL plays in supporting reading proficiency and vocabulary knowledge among EFL learners compared to traditional f2f learning (Behjat et al., 2012; Saffkova & Tuma, 2012; Szymańska & Kaczmarek, 2011; Tehrani & Tabatabaei, 2012; Tseng & Walsh, 2016; Yang, 2012). These studies confirmed that using online software (e.g., wiki, Moodle) and interactions through online activities (e.g., blogs, LMS) could be more efficient than face-to-face learning in enhancing academic

reading skills and vocabulary knowledge and increasing students' motivation. However, a few studies (e.g., Szymańska & Kaczmarek, 2011; Tosun, 2015) have reported negative results as participants' vocabulary did not improve in the BL setting and they still preferred f2f learning.

Yang (2012) conducted a comparative study to investigate the impact of a BL remedial program on the development of reading skills among 183 EFL college learners with reading difficulties in China. The program includes four interactive features: dialog box, discussion forum, chat room, and annotation tool. During the program, EFL students used four reading strategies while reading text online: predictions, clarifications, summarizing, and questioning. They could ask for assistance from their peers or teachers via chat rooms. If they had any difficulties, they could raise their questions later in the discussion forum. The application of the BL reading program developed students' reading comprehension and maximized interactions with their peers for exchanging opinions and feedback to overcome some of their reading difficulties.

Other studies have also indicated that the role of online activities and interaction has enhanced reading comprehension in BL. Behjat et al. (2012), for example, investigated 107 sophomore students to determine which kind of learning—BL or face-to-face—led to EFL students' reading skills development in Iran. The experimental group participated in online activities such as weblogs and wikis to check and edit their assignments and a wide range of reading materials. The control group used printed reading materials. The study found that the experiential group's reading comprehension was more enhanced by the use of a wiki in the BL setting as participants had limitless access to online resources. This advantageous feature encouraged students to read more text on the same topic by clicking the underlined words and phrases to add or edit in the given reading text. The control group with limited reading materials did not have such a feature.

Likewise, Tehrani and Tabatabaei (2012) conducted a study to examine the effect of BL and face-to-face learning on EFL vocabulary knowledge among 60 undergraduate EFL students in Iran. The experimental group learned vocabulary in a BL setting while the control group was taught in the traditional way. The *t*-test results for the pre- and post-test found significant

differences as the experiment group improved their vocabulary more than the control group. They appreciated reading and communicating online through a wide range of resources, which led to enhanced reading comprehension. They also valued virtual classes to acquire new English vocabularies. The study highlighted the importance of teachers selecting suitable online materials to actively engage students in BL.

Saffkova and Tuma (2012), on the other hand, analysed the data both quantitatively and qualitatively from 105 first-year EFL undergraduate students about their perceptions to employ self-directed learning while working with Moodle software (provides guidelines with additional accessibility for students to use online materials) as a requirement in the BL setting to develop critical reading skills in the Czech Republic. Saffkova and Tuma (2012) identified several results. First, it was challenging for learners to exhibit autonomy without teachers' intervention and guidance. Second, only students with high exam rates were willing to utilize BL materials usefully in reading skills development. Lastly, the use of Moodle software in BL helped increase students' motivation in reading.

Another benefit of BL in relation to EFL is that it increases students' satisfaction. Tseng and Walsh (2016) used a survey in the United States to assess 52 undergraduate students' perceptions about BL and f2f in an English literacy module in terms of motivation and outcomes. To measure students' motivation, a survey based on Keller's (2008) ARCS model was used. Keller (2008) analysed the principles of motivation in detail, which included four elements: attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. This model of classification later added a fifth element: volition. Keller (1983) used the term *attention* to refer to utilizing a different variety of creative teaching methods to attract learners' attention. *Relevance* contains techniques that relate between the educational setting and learners' basic needs. *Confidence* is concerned with helping students be positive thinkers in terms of achieving their learning goals and helping them achieve them. *Satisfaction* involves them liking what they are doing and assuring them that there is no discrimination in the marking system. Finally, *volition* is all about persistence in one's goal to succeed. Tseng and Walsh (2016) found greater statistically significant differences between the two groups of undergraduate students in terms of level of motivation. The participants in the BL course conveyed greater motivation and satisfaction than the other group in the traditional setting, particularly when reading journals or

commenting on the discussion boards through LMS. Moreover, the ability to read and write critically improved more in the BL environment as students received opinions and feedback from their teachers and colleagues. The authors noted that a clear understanding of the key values of motivation might lead to effective teaching and learning. They also recommended that this model be used to help develop teachers' practices, thereby leading to effective motivation, especially in BL settings.

However, integrating online learning with face-to-face instruction does not necessarily mean that no difficulties occur in the classroom context. Unlike previous studies which found BL useful to improve reading skills and vocabulary knowledge, Tosun (2015) carried out an experiment to investigate 40 undergraduate EFL students about the impact of BL in vocabulary knowledge in Turkey. The study demonstrated that students' vocabulary did not develop in the BL setting as they preferred face-to-face learning for vocabulary learning. Although students appreciated BL, they did not prefer to devote much time in learning vocabulary outside the classroom. Tosun concluded that online interactions exchanging opinions and feedback with peers and instructors would be helpful to overcome some students' reading difficulties if there is a continuous development of teachers' and students' training, motivation, and learner's autonomy.

However, a comparative study by Szymańska and Kaczmarek (2011) raised the issue of online versus print reading material. The study set out to determine the effects of different delivery methods on the development of reading skills upon three factors—recall (ability to memorize the text), attitudes (general reading preference), and comprehension (reading test)—among 30 EFL students in their second year at a university in Poland. The experimental group read the text on a computer screen while the control group read a paper-based version. The experiment was divided into three stages: a pre-test to examine students' reading ability, a short survey to examine general reading attitudes, and finally a read, recall, comprehend task applied to each group. Both groups were asked about recall (ability to remember the information in the text), general attitude about reading preference, and reading comprehension tests. The study found that the different methods of delivering reading materials, whether online or printed, did not affect reading development. The study pointed out that no significant differences emerged between groups in terms of attitudes and recall, as

both groups preferred printed materials. However, the experimental group got better results on the reading comprehension test than the control group, who only received printed materials.

Taken together, most of the previous studies' results discussed in this section have demonstrated that BL could develop students' reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge by maximizing opportunities to access unlimited online resources. Moreover, BL enhances students' motivation more than f2f, thereby enriching reading proficiency. However, some results were not very encouraging. Tosun (2015), for example, argued that the BL program studied was not successful for vocabulary learning or reading skills. Szymańska and Kaczmarek (2011) supported this argument when reporting students' preference for printed materials over online reading.

3.3.2.3 Academic Listening Skills

A number of studies have confirmed the effectiveness of BL in developing listening proficiency through online listening communicative activities, collaborations, and active learning among EFL learners (e.g., Banditvilai, 2016; Guangying, 2014; Lee, 2007; Lee & Lee, 2012; Yoon & Lim, 2007). However, studies on how to listen and the role of interaction in enhancing listening (peer, group) through the use of BL have been relatively neglected, and very little is known about the usefulness of BL in developing listening comprehension skills (Vandergrift, 2010). BL allows learners to download unlimited useful listening resources. As a result, learners become more independent, have the ability to measure their weaknesses, and can work to address them (Wilson, 2012).

Lee and Lee's (2012) qualitative study collected data from reflective journals, semi-structured group and one-to-one interviews, online and offline observations, and pre-/post-test surveys to investigate the perceptions of 20 undergraduate students at a Korean university on the impact of blended learning on listening comprehension. The study investigated the impact of a designed BL instructional model. It included online and offline classes, and each setting included pre-listening, while listening, and post-listening activities. The model mainly aimed to enhance interactions in both settings to develop listening skills. Offline sessions started with pre-listening activities focused on vocabulary followed by while and post-listening

activities that required more communication with peers. When the session ended, the teacher provided feedback and introduced the online session. More independent listening activities were included in online sessions via Blackboard followed by while and post-listening activities with group collaboration. The study found that BL was helpful with online synchronous and asynchronous activities; the online group worked effectively by learning and sharing opinions and feedback via autonomous learning, which activated chatting to improve listening skills.

By contrast, Lee's (2007) experimental study sought to determine the impact of the BL approach on listening and reading skill development in an English course for 79 senior students in Taiwan. The American Language Course Placement Test (ALCPT) post-test was used with both groups to investigate the usefulness of BL, and then ANOVA was used to compare the scores of both groups, followed by two online questionnaires at the end. The study found that the experimental group got a higher score on ALCPT than the control group, particularly in the listening section. The reasons for these better performances included the use of different multimedia, supported self-directed learning, and immediate feedback during the listening classes.

Guangying's (2014) experimental study investigated the effectiveness of the blended learning instructional approach in teaching EFL for listening skills among 59 university students in China. This approach was based on the idea of cooperative and autonomous learning. It contained three procedures: before, during, and after classes. This study demonstrated that BL could play an important role in providing more flexible opportunities to EFL learners to develop and practice their academic listening and critical thinking skills. The study also reported that China adopted BL for its educational system in 2003, and it has become one of the most favourable approaches that increasingly affects EFL. BL offers flexible learning to students to extend their listening online at their own pace. Working online via peer and group discussions enhances active learning and encourages students to express their views. The flexibility in time and place, where every student chooses the time and place that suits him or her, is considered a vital feature. In this regard, Little (2004) defined autonomy as “the capacity of detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action” (p. 15). This definition helps distinguish the characteristics of autonomous learners, who accurately

understand the purpose of their learning and assess its usefulness.

A similar study to the current one is Banditvilai's (2016) experimental study, although it was conducted in a different context. Banditvilai set out to examine the efficacy of using BL to support self-directed learning within language skills among 60 undergraduate students in Thailand enrolled in a communicative business English module. In terms of academic listening skills, the results indicated that online supplementary materials provided in BL offered more positive advantages by supporting time flexibility, which allowed students to practice listening at any time convenient to them as well as take the responsibility for their learning, which students strongly appreciated.

These studies have reported a number of promising results proving that BL can be more successful than traditional face-to-face learning in enhancing academic listening skills through online collaborative work, the role of synchronous activities (Lee & Lee, 2012), self-directed learning, peer and instructor feedback, the effective role of teachers to motivate students to keep monitoring their progress and give them more control, and increased achievements (Banditvilai, 2016; Lee, 2007).

3.3.2.4 Academic Speaking Skills

Previous studies have reported the effectiveness of BL to support EFL students' academic speaking skills through the use of different synchronous and asynchronous tools (Chen, 2015; Kırkgöz, 2011; López-Pérez, 2011; Smirnova & Nuzha, 2013). Others, such as Guangying (2014), revealed some problems that cannot be ignored, such as the importance of the teacher's role in providing students with feedback which in turn promotes students' confidence and ability to overcome shyness in speaking.

Chen's (2015) mixed method study investigated the perceptions of 23 EFL undergraduate students in Taiwan about the usefulness of the BL instructional approach to develop speaking courses. The study adapted Mayes and Fowler's (1999) learning cycle to design BL for English teaching. The BL approach combined in-class tasks and after-class web-based learning. In class tasks, teachers initially introduced grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Then, an asynchronous computer-mediated voice forum using a free website (Voxopop) was

practiced to perform speaking tasks outside the classroom twice a week. Finally, teachers provided feedback about learners' audio recording tasks. This study identified some positive results about the usefulness of BL to support speaking skills. The quantitative data results showed that BL helped EFL learners in oral skills, lexical accuracy, and fluency. Asynchronous voice recordings made students more focused on being error free in their speech production as they were not watching each other. Furthermore, integrated learning provided further chances for shy students to talk freely and participate in online classes. On the other hand, qualitative data results revealed that the teacher played an important role in providing students with valuable feedback on voice recordings, which in turn supported their speaking skills and increased their self-confidence.

In the same vein, Kırkgöz's (2011) mixed method study investigated the perceptions of 28 students in Turkey about a BL task-based course combining f2f learning with video recording speaking tasks to develop students' speaking competency in higher education. The data were collected from different sources: pre-/post-speaking course task, speaking video recordings, semi-structured interviews, and surveys at the end of the year. After the pre-course analysis of a speaking task used to investigate students' needs and difficulties, a speaking course was designed based on BL tasks. The course consisted of three elements (pre-task, task cycle, and report). Students met three times a week f2f and participated in a weekly hour-long session recording videos in groups outside the classroom. They also spent an hour evaluating students' performance on speaking according to four criteria: fluency, pronunciation, accuracy, and task accomplishments. The study found significant differences in the pre-/post-test results when assessing students' speaking before and at the end of the study. The majority of participants made considerable development in speech production, the appropriate use of vocabulary, and pronunciation. These findings confirm that BL has the potential to improve speaking skills proficiency and enhance self-esteem in real conversation situations.

Similarly, Smirnova and Nuzha (2013) conducted a case study to examine 20 EFL undergraduate students' perceptions about BL implementation in Russia. The study focused on the delivery of LMS software to develop academic presentation and speaking skills. The data were collected from students through surveys and open-ended questionnaires. Blended learning was implemented through two stages: the LMS-based stage, which consisted of self-

directed learning, instructor's feedback, and self-assessment, and face-to-face learning, which included group discussion and questions about difficulties faced. The study found that the majority of students appreciated the flexibility provided by BL as it allowed more practice to foster speaking and academic presentation skills by using more academic words than traditional face-to-face learning.

Bueno-Alastuey and López Pérez (2013) conducted a detailed survey to examine students' perceptions about the usefulness of BL design in the development of language skills in two courses: 36 EFL students extensively used ICT and 46 Spanish as a second language (SSL) students used ICT less. In the EFL course, students practiced 150 hours—60 f2f hours in two weekly sessions and 90 individual hours working outside the classroom through VLE—to accomplish language assignments. The SSL course had the same hours but used printed materials, such as the course book, in f2f classes. The tasks in each course were divided into three kinds: f2f, online learning, and combined f2f with online learning. In each kind of task, students practiced different language skills, such as speaking activities, grammar exercises, writing and reading tasks, and interactions with the teacher via email. One unanticipated finding of this study was that SSL who used ICT less appreciated ICT more than the second group, who used it more. However, both groups reported positive views about the usefulness of ICT in pronunciation development.

Conversely, Guangying's (2014) experimental study reported some problems in BL settings. The study investigated the effectiveness of a BL instructional model to teach EFL for speaking and listening skills in China. Two groups from two universities were selected: 59 students in the experimental group from science and 59 students in the control group from arts. Both groups attended the same number of classes, but the experimental group was taught EFL using a BL approach emphasizing online (group work, lectures, and multimedia resources) while the control group was exposed to traditional face-to-face (teacher-centred) learning assisted by materials downloaded through the Internet and listening practice in the language labs. Over a period of two years, four standardized listening and speaking English tests were implemented (pre/post) for both skills at the beginning and end of the course. Students' examinations were tracked and analysed statistically using paired and independent sample *t*-tests. Questionnaires and interviews were also implemented with the experiment

group at the end of the semester. Although the study found significant differences between both groups after two years of implementing the BL approach, it also reported some difficulties, such as the lack of teacher assistance and the emergence of some technical problems. Regarding speaking results, the experimental group developed more in terms of oral speaking and learning skills, such as critical thinking and self-directed learning, than the control group.

Taken together, the previous studies have reported positive results related to BL in fostering academic speaking skills. Although autonomy is founded on the idea that students should have the responsibility to learn independently, many researchers believe that teachers still have the responsibility to encourage students. Consequently, it is the responsibility of the teacher to support and motivate learners through interesting and creative speaking activities. One issue affecting student motivation is the student–teacher relationship and how that relationship affects and impinges on the learning process. A good relationship can encourage motivation amongst learners whereas an ineffective relationship will encourage a lack of self-confidence in the classroom (Guangying, 2014).

3.3.2.5 Academic Writing Skills

Although several studies have indicated that BL has emerged as a powerful platform to increase students' opportunities to practice the language to improve academic writing skills through peer/instructor feedback (e.g., Kim, 2010; Klímová & Poullová, 2014; So & Lee, 2012; Yoon, 2011; Young & Lee, 2010), little attention has focused on how to apply it in academic writing classes. Other previous studies have attempted to evaluate the impact of BL on academic writing skills through online group working and interactions between students (e.g., Bahce & Taslaci, 2009; Lee & Chong, 2007; Liu, 2013; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Young & Lee, 2010; Zaini & Mazdayasna, 2015).

Young and Lee (2010) examined the perceptions of 47 undergraduate students about the effectiveness of a blended learning writing model in L2 writing classes in Korea. Data were collected using questionnaires and pre-, midterm, and post-tests. The BL model followed several processes (online and offline) to write and review three drafts in order to produce a well-written work. During these processes, students received feedback from the teacher about

drafts, and modifications were made through different web tools and peer feedback. All three tests were scored using rubrics in four areas of writing: mechanics, content, organization, and structure. The study reported some positive results. First, students' perceptions about the usefulness of BL were generally positive for improving writing skills. Second, the mean score of the midterm and post-tests increased after BL implementation. Regarding the four components of writing, the largest mean was found in content and organization. Third, students appreciated the opportunities available outside the classroom to reflect and produce well-organized essays. The findings identified the top four reasons to apply BL in writing classes: collaborative work, peer/teacher feedback, learning management, and learning to write. Moreover, the role of online/offline peer feedback, interactive activities, and chatting all led to improved writing skills.

However, Yoon (2011) qualitatively examined the effectiveness of Yoon and Lee's (2010) BL writing model based on interactions and reflections in writing classes. Four undergraduate students in a Korean university participated in this study. The qualitative data were collected using reflective journals, feedback on Blackboard, offline observations, and peer feedback as well as a pre-/post- and midterm tests. The study suggested that teacher training was able to use effective online resources and to supervise students through online interactions.

Conversly, So and Lee's (2012) qualitative study attempted to investigate three Korean students' feedback examples to improve academic writing in a blended learning course. Yoon and Lee's (2010) same BL model for writing was applied. However, this study modified the previous model and added new components to support students in becoming aware of their mistakes and making further developments to improve writing skills. Students worked in one group for feedback. The data were collected from four sources: observation recordings, writing assessments, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observations were conducted each week to observe interactions between participants when producing feedback. Participants produced feedback on- and offline that was voice recorded. Further feedback was given on students' draft essays on- and offline. At the end of the course, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain in-depth information about the course. This study demonstrated that generating feedback occurred more in the online than offline sessions. The study suggested that training students on effective techniques for providing peer

feedback in blended learning would be effective for supporting writing skills.

Bahce and Taslaci (2009) examined 55 EFL students' perceptions about BL writing courses based on blog social software for interaction in the first year at a university in Turkey. During the course, students had numerous opportunities to share their writing with others from the outside world who commented on it. Initially, the teachers introduced the features of the course to students, followed by tasks on the blog. At the end, students provided feedback about the course. The study found that BL had a positive impact on the development of students' writing through communication and several online interactive activities that support writing skills, such as paragraph structures and topic sentences.

In the same way, Liu (2013) assessed a BL academic English writing (AEW) course that aimed to improve undergraduate academic writing at a university in China. The course evaluation was based on several aspects: course design, materials, assignments, teacher reflection, and students' feedback about the course. Blended learning was taught as a mixture of f2f sessions and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Throughout the course, students met once a week face-to-face with the instructor for an hour and a half, followed by working online in group discussions to review and develop various essay drafts as well as interact with the teachers. The online-submitted task was assessed based on paragraph structure, grammatical mistakes, and overall coherence and cohesion. By the end of the course, students had produced different academic written tasks, such as a research paper and a presentation in the front of the class. The results from different teacher reflections and students' evaluation questionnaire revealed that the BL course developed academic English writing, enhanced confidence, and decreased interaction anxiety. One of the main conclusions of the study was that the presence of the teacher is crucial for supporting students with feedback, preparing them to communicate in this environment, and selecting appropriate activities; as such, the teacher cannot be replaced by a computer.

Klímová and Poulová (2014) set out to determine the usefulness of a BL course in academic writing among 12 students at a university in Russia. The course mainly sought to improve academic writing structure in planning, drafting, revising, referencing, and production. During the course, students met once every two weeks f2f to discuss the written assignments. An

evaluation form was used to evaluate the integration of both types of learning settings on writing development skills at the end of the course. This study demonstrated that BL flexibility enables students to practice different activities anytime, anywhere, to improve their essays. This study would have been more useful if it had included qualitative data to provide detailed insights about the impact of BL on academic writing courses.

Overall, the studies presented thus far provide evidence that BL can play an important role in supporting EFL students to write in a systematic way through online group work and interactions between students, which in turn developed their academic writing skills.

3.4 Saudi Students' Perceptions

This section describes the nature of perception. The importance of investigating students' perceptions is also discussed. Generally, the term *perception* is understood to mean a way of thinking or point of view. For Cardwell (2010), perception is defined as “a combination of both the psychological process involved within the senses and also the process within the brain, which integrate and interpret the sensory inputs from these systems” (p. 195). In other words, perception is the mental processing of the data we receive from the outside world in order to make sense of it.

Atkinson (2013) pointed out that perception encompasses transferring received information from the outside and understanding it. Constructivist theorists, such as Gregory (1972) and Bruner (1957) asserted that perception is an active and constructive process (as cited in Eysenck, 2001). Based on this understanding, perception is a consequence of individual experiences and communications with others, such as families, friends, and those in the school environment, in which we can formulate different predictions about certain information in order to understand it. In this particular study, the investigation of participants' perceptions allows for understanding how the participants communicate and how their past experiences influence the acceptance of blended learning in Saudi Arabia.

Occasionally, the two terms *perception* and *attitude* are used interchangeably (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Consequently, the interrelationship between perception and attitude in the literature illuminates the importance of reviewing the definition of attitude. In the field of

psychology, various definitions of attitude exist. For Eagly and Chaiken (1993), *attitude* means “a psychological tendency that expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour and disfavour” (p. 1). Similarly, Fredrickson, Loftus, Wagenaar, and Nolen (2009) asserted that attitudes are “likes and dislikes [that are] favourable or unfavourable evaluations of and reactions to objects, people situations, or other aspects of the world, including abstract ideas and social policies” (p. 620). These definitions are essentially identical and share the same component of attitude, which encompasses three main elements: (a) cognitive aspects, which contain perceptions or views about certain objects; (b) affective aspects, which involve our feelings in response to the objects; and (c) behavioural aspects, which contain behaved actions related to an object (Malim & Birch, 2005). Together, they indicate that individuals do not have an attitude until they react in an evaluative manner to an affective, cognitive, or behavioural basis. Therefore, attitudes concerned with how we behave or feel towards certain things are based on our perception, while perception is a mental process to interpret or understand a specific object depending on our previous experiences.

3.5 Current Study

As mentioned earlier, recent developments in the field of technology in education have led to renewed interest in blending traditional methods of teaching with technology which might enhance language teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. This study investigated EFL students’ perceptions concerning the usefulness of blended learning on the development of their academic English language skills, the pros and cons of this particular method, limitations, and recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning. During the preparatory year in Saudi universities, EFL students complete an extensive English language program as a compulsory entry requirement to their colleges. As blended learning is in its initial stages in the Saudi educational system, this study contributes to the existing research as it provides guidance for using blended learning to enhance English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia.

3.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is served as a systematic tool in visual or written form to organize the issues brought forward for further exploration through empirical work (Baden & Major, 2013). The purpose is to explain the key issues to examined during the study.

This study is based on a conceptual framework that identified essential concepts—autonomy, flexibility, and engagement—to obtain a comprehensive understanding of EFL students' perceptions about the use of blended learning as a pedagogical approach to support their language skills. It aims to merge effective tools of both face-to-face and online learning, thereby decreasing the time of traditional learning to foster autonomy while promoting collaboration between students to enhance language skills (see Figure 3.3). The assumption of the current study is that language development is built throughout social interactions via the Internet as learners can easily engage with limitless online tools at their own pace that support autonomous learning. Blended learning in this study focuses on the development of these aspects to help EFL students successfully improve their academic skills in PYP. Thus, in order to understand EFL students' perceptions about the use of blended learning in Saudi Arabia, it is necessary to explore these concepts as well.

As mentioned earlier in Section (3.2.1), blended learning has many definitions which can include reference to personalised learning, digital learning, next-generation classrooms and 21st century learning (Tucker, Wycoff, & Green, 2017). According to a definition provided by Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal (2004), blended learning has been explained as a pedagogical approach that combines traditional face-to-face opportunities of the classroom with the technologically-enhanced learning possibilities of the on-line setting. In this study, the term *blended learning* is used as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool to describe an integration of face-to-face instructions with computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as virtual learning classes, online chats, and discussion boards to help activate learning and facilitate communications, access to knowledge, and ultimately language skills development. It can be seen that, the definition of BL underpins these theories (social constructivism, connectivism, and COI model) which involve social interactions between learners through conversation, online discussion to facilitate accessibility, and learner autonomy to construct knowledge.

Autonomy has been recognized as a significant feature of blended learning (Akgunduz & Akinoglu, 2016). Little (2003) defines autonomy as “the capacity of detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action” (p. 15). This definition helps clarify the characteristics of autonomous learners who accurately understand the purpose of their learning, executing learning and assessing its usefulness. Students in blended learning environment take responsibility for their learning as the teacher serves as a facilitator and provides guidance to the learner (Saffkova & Tuma, 2012). *Flexibility* of time and place, where every student chooses the time and place that suits her to access knowledge and to develop language skills, is considered another vital feature in blended learning setting. The opportunity to use technology in a blended learning setting allows students to have an element of control over how, when and where they learn and allows them to personalise their learning to the extent that they are able to navigate their own way through learning materials with the support of systems which suit their style of learning (Gordon, 2014). This feature is particularly suited several categories of students; adult learners who have to balance their time between jobs and families with their studies, and students who live far from the university or have other responsibilities that prohibit them from attending class in a daily base (Yam & Rossini, 2012). Additionally, *engagement* and collaboration among students is important attribute of this pedagogical approach when they are freely expressing themselves to develop language skills in blended learning setting (Poon, 2013). Furlong & Christenson, (2008) explains student engagement as “a concept that requires psychological connections within the academic environment (e.g., positive relationships between adults and students and among peers) in addition to active student behaviour (e.g., attendance, effort, pro-social behaviour)” (p. 365). All these key concepts and ideas were used in the instrument in language skills sections and explored further in the qualitative phase.

Regarding the language skills, several previous studies’ results have demonstrated that blended learning could develop students’ reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge by maximizing opportunities to access unlimited online resources (Behjat et al., 2012; Saffkova & Tuma, 2012; Szymańska & Kaczmarek, 2011; Tehrani & Tabatabaei, 2012; Tseng & Walsh, 2016; Yang, 2012). While others concluded that blended learning allows learners to download unlimited useful listening resources and (technology-enhanced learning) can support flexible pedagogies and provide enhanced choices for learners in respect of where

they learn, the pace at which they learn and their mode of learning (Gordon, 2014). Other studies reported that blended learning promotes autonomy, students' confidence and ability to overcome shyness in speaking (Chen, 2015; López-Pérez, 2011). Furthermore, other studies provided evidence that blended learning can play an important role in supporting EFL students to write in a systematic way through online group work and interactions between students, which in turn developed their academic writing skills (Klímová & Poulová, 2014; Yoon, 2011).

During the preparatory year in both universities, students have to complete an extensive English language program that includes English for academic purposes as a compulsory entry requirement into their colleges. It is also important to clearly define each academic skill to clearly understand EFL students' perceptions about the use of blended learning. For Burns and Richards (2012), reading is a combination of several bottom-up and top-down skills to understand the text. In this study *academic reading skills*, involve different analysis processes, starting from clarifying the purpose, surveying, predicting, and interacting to employing critical thinking to comprehend the meaning of the text. Several studies' findings have focused on the role of understanding linguistics knowledge, metacognitive factors, and vocabulary knowledge in developing listening comprehension (Lee & Lee, 2012). In this study, academic listening skills refers to students' ability to interpret the spoken text in various academic situations, such as lectures, seminars, talks, and presentations. While, speaking skills encompasses three components: “mechanical (vocabularies, pronunciation, grammar), functional (interactions through exchange ideas), and sociocultural (turn taking, rate of speech, roles of participants)” (Nazara, 2011, p. 31). In this study, academic speaking skills includes satisfactory information about syntax, linguistic, and lexical knowledge and using that knowledge intelligibly in several academic contexts, such as presentations, seminars, oral exams, and group presentations. In respect to writing skill, Charles (2015) pointed out that success in the university is greatly reliant on the ability to write academically—in other words, how to use different writing processes (planning, drafting, proofreading), correct grammatical structures, and referencing to construct a planned, structured essay or assignment. In this study, academic writing concerns with the ability to think critically while analysing the essay's question, to produce a clear, focused, and structured written work.

As previously stated in the introduction chapter, despite the tremendous number of projects that aim to develop EFL curriculum, textbooks, and a variety of professional development programs, the level of English language competence among EFL students remains unsatisfactory in Saudi Arabia (Alrabai, 2014; Fareh, 2010). Previous studies have reported that the deficiency in learning EFL stems mainly from the absence of communication in English inside and outside the classrooms, among other key issues, such as the dominance of passive learning, which remains deeply rooted in the Saudi educational system; the use of traditional methods of teaching; and learners' lack of enthusiasm (Alrabai, 2014; Khan, 2011; Rabab, 2005; Troudi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014).

Mixed methods design was used in this study; it consisted of gathering quantitative survey data first, followed by explaining the quantitative survey results using in-depth qualitative data from a focus group interview. This approach is useful because it supports understanding of the study problem in more depth. Therefore, the adopted conceptual framework will influence the research design, data collection, data analysis, and interpretations. It allows to obtain a comprehensive understanding of EFL students' perceptions about the use of blended learning as a pedagogical approach to support their language skills.

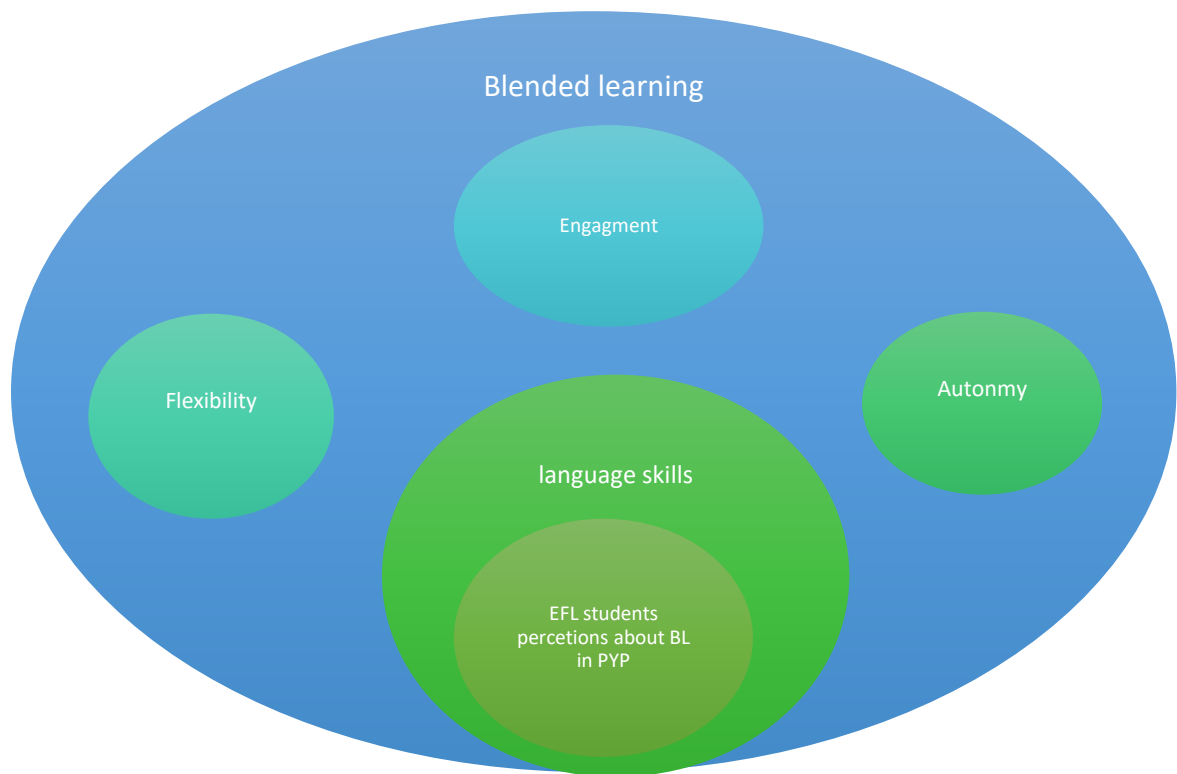


Figure 3.4 Study's conceptual framework

3.7 Research Questions

1. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the benefits of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?
2. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?
3. What are Saudi EFL students' suggestions on how blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool could be useful to develop English language skills in the preparatory year?

3.8 Summary

This chapter has reviewed related literature in relation to blended learning as a technology enhanced pedagogic tool, inclusive of its use in the learning of English as a Foreign Language

(EFL) and how the internet has been used for online and digital language learning. It first examined the meaning of blended learning, with a brief historical background that led to the advent of this particular approach. This chapter next described in greater detail how blended learning could support English language skills development. In addition, theoretical perspectives underpinning blended learning were explained. The review of the literature then described the nature of each language skill and the most effective strategies and practices in each core skill that contribute to learners' language development, and previous studies on the impact of BL on each academic English skill are also presented. Finally, the chapter presented the importance of exploring EFL students' perceptions in the current study and ends with a summary of conceptual framework of the study and reiteration of the research questions.

4 Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and discusses the methods used in this investigation. The first section justifies the chosen research paradigm that underpins the design of the study. Then, the rationale of the data collection and the data analysis will be demonstrated. Finally, reliability and validity as well as ethical issues are considered.

4.2 Research Philosophy: Pragmatic paradigm

There is no consensus about the meaning of the term *paradigm*. Even Thomas Kuhn, who coined the term *paradigm shift*, used the term to mean set of *views*, *generalizations*, beliefs, and *principles* (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Morgan (2007) and Creswell and Clark (2011), showed that there are many alternatives to the term *paradigm*, such as *philosophical assumptions* and *worldviews*. These terms contain basic information that helped build research development. For Guba (1990), a *paradigm* is “a basic set of beliefs that guides action” (p. 17). He also considered the absence of a specific definition of a paradigm as useful for educators, who can develop and reformat their own thoughts as their research progresses.

At the broadest level are *worldview philosophies*, including *ontology* or “a study of being,” and *epistemology*, “which is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Researchers have argued that theoretical perspectives orient the research and could be combined or used separately (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998). *Theoretical perspectives* or worldviews are ways of understanding the world. They encompass *post-positivism*, *constructivism*, and *pragmatism*. Although the terms share some features, researchers have different viewpoints in terms of ontology, epistemology, and methodology. This section presents views of *post-positivism*, *constructivism*, and *pragmatism* from ontological, epistemological, and methodological interpretations.

A considerable amount of the literature has adopted the general view of *post-positivism*, including Comte (1848), who indicated that knowledge of the social world can be obtained objectively. For Slife and Williams, (1995 as cited in Creswell & Clark, 2011), post-positivism

accompanies quantitative research because it concerns cause-and-effect thinking about a phenomenon and the constant testing of a theory. The collected data are based on quantitative data supplied by participants. Thomas (2013) summarized the key characteristics of researchers who employed post-positivist paradigm, including objectivity, in which researchers detach themselves from what is being researched and serve as outsider observers. Moreover, during the research, they explain relationships between variables and test hypotheses. Finally, researchers look at knowledge as an absolute reality and, despite a study's demonstrated hypotheses, they reveal its failure to reject the assumptions of the study. From an ontological stance, post-positivists view reality as singular. This is evident when the findings of the research are helpful in clarifying the theory about a single reality. Meanwhile, epistemological post-positivism collects data about knowledge objectively through an instrument. Therefore, there is a distance between the researcher and the participants. In terms of methodological standpoint, post-positivists work from theory to assumptions when the researchers test theory in deductive studies. *Methodology* are research strategies, followed by *methods*, which are techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

In contrast, constructivism relies on qualitative methods (Creswell, 2013b). From an ontological stance, constructivism observes reality as multiple perspectives gained from participants. Several writers have discussed the major characteristics of this worldview (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998), indicating that researchers who use this approach tend to understand complexity around the investigated research topic. Therefore, participants' background or experiences affect their views about certain objects. Thomas (2013) identified the main features of the role of the researcher through constructivism as being deeply engaged with participants to find answers. This is evident when researchers focus on details by posing open-ended questions to gain more understanding about the phenomena under investigation. Another example is when participants provide their understandings of phenomena through social interactions. In epistemological constructivism, a closeness exists during data collection as the researcher visits participants at their sites to identify causes and find possible solutions to problems in the blended learning environment. In the methodological standpoint, constructivists work from the base level to elicit broader themes from participants (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Before examining the pragmatic ontological stance in this study, it is necessary to explicate what pragmatism means. Dewey and James (the philosophers of pragmatism) provide us with different ways to think about the purpose of knowledge, which helps in the choice of research methods (Biesta & Burbules, 2004). Pragmatism can be defined as “a concern for practical matters; being guided by practical experience rather than theory” (Robson, 2011, p. 27). This definition highlights some features and the central idea of the pragmatism approach as the general orientation of this viewpoint is seeking practicality to utilize several methods to investigate the problem. Similarly, Creswell (2014) noted, pragmatist researchers should apply all approaches that help to understand the research problem. In this sense, pragmatists are concerned about “what works” to understand the research problem and answer the research questions (Robson, 2011). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) explained that pragmatism primarily focuses on problem solving and outcomes. Many authors, including Morgan (2007), Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010), and Creswell (2013b), have considered pragmatism as a mixed methods philosophical paradigm. This stems from the fact that the research problems and questions are primarily considered. Accordingly, the pragmatic ontological stance views reality as both singular and multiple to solve research problems (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Epistemological pragmatism seeks practicality as the researcher collects the data that best answer the research questions. In the methodological standpoint, pragmatism researchers rely on several methods (quantitative and qualitative) to collect and combine the data. In the current study, students’ perceptions are quantitatively and qualitatively investigated to understand the research problem and its consequences. Thus, it is important for the current research to seek participants’ perceptions by using strategies that support understanding of the phenomenon under study and that will answer the research questions. Therefore, pragmatism offers philosophical support for this study by best addressing the research problem and questions.

The research paradigm in this study was based on the answers to ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions, which reveal significant differences among paradigms. The ontological questions were: “What is the form and nature of reality? What can be known about it?” (Punch, 2009, p. 16). Ontological post-positivism in this study views reality by using numbers and measures quantitatively through a questionnaire about participants’ perceptions of the influence of blended learning on their English language development. The

epistemological question was: “What is the relationship between the researcher and the topic being researched?” (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 42). In this study, the data focused on what work to use for research questions. Finally, the methodological question was: “How can the inquirer go about finding out what can be known?” (Punch, 2009, p. 16). Data were collected both deductively from a questionnaire in the quantitative stage and inductively from participants’ views through focus group interviews. Quantitative and qualitative data were then combined to enable the researcher to concentrate on the research problem and use the most valuable strategies.

4.3 Research Design: Mixed methods

Research spanning more than one discipline, such as this one, which draws upon literature from EFL and educational research, is particularly susceptible to what Biesta (2012) called the “paradigm wars” (p. 147), in which one type of research is much more common and respected in a subject area, typically to the unfair detriment of other research approaches (Creswell, 2013a). Such attitudes have been argued to be particularly damaging in educational research in terms of both its impact and its standing within the wider research community (Gorard & Taylor, 2004; Pring, 2000). Mixed methods should therefore be the default choice for any educational researcher in order to redress this imbalance unless there is a strong rationale for alternative mono-method approaches. In practice, educational research should be flexible enough that “the difference between one methodology and another can be difficult to determine” (Newby, 2014, p. 52). The methodological framework proposed by Plowright (2011) builds on this idea by arguing for flexibility in data collection and analysis, thinking more about whether the data itself are numerical or narrative rather than classifying the research as quantitative or qualitative. However, Plowright’s (2011) nomenclature has yet to become widespread.

In this study, choosing an integrated methodology reflects the philosophical position that a complex research problem cannot be directly accessed by any one method, so multiple viewpoints and interpretive lenses give the scope for getting increasingly closer to the truth or essence of the problem. This follows Pring’s (2004) argument that educational research is

ontologically and epistemologically positioned to consider an objective reality which, while unknowable in absolute terms, is increasingly knowable.

In addition to choosing a methodology suitable for the subject, one must also choose a consistent research philosophy (Creswell, 2013a). A clear research philosophy is crucial for explaining how a study sees itself in relation to the research context; such clarity ultimately underpins the rationale of the entire study in which it is found (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). In particular, explicit awareness of the choices one makes when adopting a specific methodology is vital since philosophical assumptions are present in any methodological tradition, whether the researcher is aware of them or not (Pring, 2004). This is especially important for mixed methods research, where one must have the confidence to “know when to bend, ignore or break rules...we are breaking other people’s rules and replacing them with our own:” (Newby, 2014, p. 46).

Several definitions of mixed methods have been put forth. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) stated that considerable revision has occurred since Greene, Caracelli, and Graham’s (1989) early definition, which focused on the use of at least one qualitative and one quantitative method. Ten years later, Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998, as cited in Creswell & Clarke, 2011) offered a composite definition of mixed methods as “combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in the methodology of the study” (p. 3). This definition highlights the mixing of the two methods in all phases. Similarly, Creswell (2015) used the term *mixed methods* to refer to “an approach to research in the social sciences in which the investigator gathers both quantitative and qualitative data, integrates the two and then draws interpretations based on the combined of both sets of data to understand research problem” (p. 2). Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) developed a comprehensive definition based on their understanding of 19 definitions provided by 21 authors published in the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* “mixed methods is the type of research in which researcher or a team of researchers combine elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for the purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (p. 4). This definition takes into account the purpose of mixed methods based on extensiveness and deepness to understand the research as it focuses on thoughtful integration for multiple forms of data for managing mixed methods. Moreover, it highlights that mixed methods is about *methodology*

(strategies) as it gathers both qualitative and quantitative data. For these reasons, this study adopts this definition.

4.3.1 Nature of Mixed Methods

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) stated that, three basic discussions have emerged during *current reflective period*, providing important insights into how to conduct each type of mixed methods research; Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003), Greene (2008), and Creswell (2008). They mapped the current state of the mixed methods field by concentrating on theoretical issues, processes and techniques, and the adoption and use of mixed methods. First, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) described the controversies in the use of mixed methods practices in their book *The Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioural Research*. Then, Greene (2008) published an analysis of the philosophy, procedures, and practice guidelines in mixed methods in the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. Finally, Creswell's (2008) keynote enhanced the understanding in the field by discussing issues such as differences between types of mixed methods in terms of philosophical issues and procedures when conducting a mixed methods study.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) listed the main features of mixed methods, some of which are addressed here. The first issue is *procedural variety*, which means the researcher is free to combine methods appropriate for answering research questions. Creswell (2015) recommended that mixed methods investigators be proficient in both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The second issue is *paradigm multiplicity*, or the belief that a variety of paradigms may serve as the underlying philosophy for the use of mixed methods. The third issue is a *reliance on visual representations* (e.g., figures, diagrams) to simplify the complexities among components. Figures and diagrams are presented in different stages of data collection and analysis. The fourth issue is *focusing on research questions and problem*. Niglas (2010, as cited in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) asserted that, by emphasizing the research questions, researchers become more focused on the methods that best fit their purposes. All these issues were considered in the current study, as will be discussed in later sections.

Due to the growing number of mixed methods designs, choosing the right one is becoming difficult. For this reason, creating a typology is essential. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) justified the need for typology in the mixed methods research as follows: (a) it provides a well-organized structure for the mixed methods approach; (b) it helps create specific and shared language for the mixed methods field; and (c) it provides useful and clear directions for mixed methods researchers. The evidence of mixed methods typology can be clearly seen in the paper about the *three-dimensional typology* of mixed methods by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009), who presented an example for each mixed methods design with its notation system. The design is based on three dimensions:

Level of mixing, time orientation, and emphasis approaches. *Level of mixing* refers to whether mixed methods are partially or fully mixed. *Time orientation* refers to whether quantitative and qualitative data occurred at the same time (concurrent) or after one another (sequential). Finally, emphasis approach refers to whether both quantitative and qualitative methods have equal emphasis in respect to addressing the research question or whether one component has significantly higher priority than the other one. (p. 268)

As Creswell and Clark (2011) stated, Morse (1991) was the first author to specify the notation system typology of mixed methods research (see Table 4.1). Creswell (2013b) mentioned that the plus sign (+), the right arrow (→), and the use of capital and lowercase letters signify that the quantitative and qualitative methods are added or that one follows the other and includes the embedding of one form of data within a larger design. Creswell observed that the notation system simplifies the information associated with diagrams and figures.

Table 4.1

Notation System for Mixed Methods Diagrams

| Notation | What it indicates | Example | Key citations |
|------------------|--------------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Uppercase letter | Prioritized methods | QUAN, QUAL | Morse (1991, 2003) |
| Lowercase letter | Lesser priority | quan, qual | Morse (1991, 2003) |
| + | Convergent methods | QUAN+ QUAL | Morse (1991, 2003) |
| → | Sequential methods | QUAN → qual | Morse (1991, 2003) |

Source: Creswell and Clark (2011, p. 109)

4.3.1.1 An Explanatory Sequential Design: Rationale behind the mixed methods research design

An explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design was used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning in the development of participants' academic English skills (i.e., reading, listening, speaking, writing) as well as their recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in two contexts in Saudi Arabia. The rationale for mixing both types of data was that using only one method would not be sufficient to answer the research questions or address the details and issues around the topic, such as issues around challenges they faced and how students perceived blended learning to help them in the development of each academic skill (see Figure 4.1). Thus, mixing both data provides a comprehensive picture of the research problem.

The initial quantitative phase in this study helped identify benefits and challenges concerning the use of blended learning in relation to each language skill as well as purposefully select participants in the second phase. Then, after the analysis of the quantitative phase and

identification of significant issues that need additional explanation, the focus groups' interviews questions were developed. The second qualitative phase was used to explain how students noticed their changes in learning in this new environment, how challenges they faced could distract progression, and how they can develop their skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in both universities. In this sense, this study is predominately qualitative as the quantitative data were used to provide a general picture of the research problem while the qualitative analysis text data were employed to elaborate the obtained statistical results in more depth.

The design of the current study is considered quan → QUAL (see Table 4.1) because it begins with quantitative data and is followed by a qualitative strand as prioritized over survey data to explain the initial quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The focus was mainly on in-depth explanations of quantitative results, including in-depth information from multiple groups of students. Both types of data gathered were integrated through the discussion. The two phases were connected and related to each other. Another advantage of using this design was that the researcher had enough time to return to participants for a second round of data collection (qualitative phase).

In the quantitative phase of this study, data were collected from students at the two campuses to assess variations in EFL students' perceptions of blended learning in relation to their language development. The second phase was conducted to explain the quantitative results using qualitative focus group interviews. Therefore, this approach is considered useful from different aspects; it is suitable for answering research questions as the qualitative phase supports the understanding of the study problem in more depth.

Cohen et al. (2011) gave two reasons for the efficacy of the explanatory approach: (1) it offers a comprehensive conclusion to the research problem that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques; and (2) it initially seeks quantitative results, which facilitate the investigation of the qualitative data in the second phase. However, one of the limitations of this design is that it is time consuming as both phases require plenty of time to be conducted, particularly the qualitative phase (Creswell & Clark, 2011). In this study, time was organized clearly in each phase in advance to overcome this difficulty. Another difficulty of this method

arises when deciding which sample criteria to use to choose the participants in the second phase and which data in the survey needs further investigation. In the current study, the decision was made to use sample criteria based on students being in blended courses. In addition, after identifying the quantitative results that needed further investigation, the focus group questions were refined for the qualitative strand. In other words, the researcher carefully reviewed the quantitative data several times to choose the significant findings that warrant further explanations.

Several studies on BL in higher education have adopted the mixed methods approach, including Ghaith (2013), whose research is methodologically quite similar to this study. Ghaith investigated students' and tutors' perceptions of BL use in Kuwait using an explanatory sequential design. In Japan, Miyazoe and Anderson (2010) examined university sophomores' perceptions of the usefulness of various online writing activities by using questionnaires and interviews on blended learning courses. Finally, Alaidarous and Madini (2016) investigated female students' perceptions about the usefulness of the Dorooob LMS to identify the factors that affected their perceptions about BL at technical and vocational colleges in Saudi Arabia.

4.3.1.2 Procedures of Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Research Design

The current study followed the following procedures:

- (1) Quantitative stage implementation, including data collection and analysis using a questionnaire.
- (2) After analysing the questionnaire data, specific quantitative data that need further exploration and an explanation results are identified. The data will guide the qualitative stage. For example, a number of predetermined topics based on important factors identified from quantitative results will be asked in the qualitative stage.
- (3) Qualitative stage implementation, including data collection and analysis by using focus group interviews. This stage helps explain how the identified factors helped EFL students develop English language through the use of BL.

- (4) Interpretations of the data aim to answer how qualitative data helped explain the initial quantitative stage and what is generally learned in relation to research questions.

4.3.1.3 How Each Research Question Relates to Various Approaches Adopted

In this study, the research questions emerged from the issues raised in previous literature in the field of BL. The purpose of this study is to explore EFL undergraduate students' perceptions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool, on the development of their academic English in each language skill (reading, listening, speaking, writing) as well as their recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia. The first and second research questions narrowed this purpose and were answered quantitatively as well as being followed up on qualitatively. The third research question was answered using a qualitative approach.

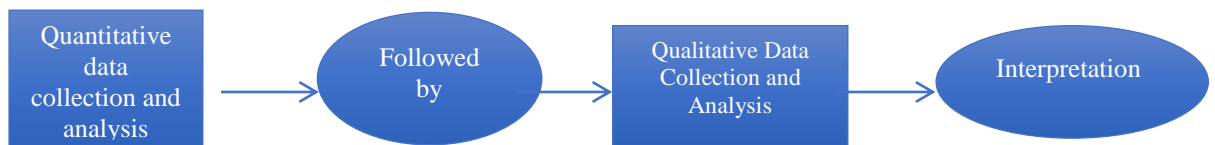


Figure 4.1 Explanatory sequential design source (Creswell & Clark, 2011)

4.3.2 Data Collection

4.3.2.1 Questionnaire

After identifying the study's purpose and research questions as well as reviewing the literature, the researcher decided to modify an existing questionnaire. The researcher searched the database for published articles about a good instrument for exploring students' perceptions about the use of BL as a pedagogical approach that merges f2f and online learning to enhance language learning in terms of benefits, challenges, and recommendations. This study followed some of Creswell and Clark's (2014) criteria to assess and evaluate the

questionnaire, such as whether the researcher had piloted the instrument, the scale of measurement used, and its reliability and validity. Regarding the first criterion, the questionnaire was piloted before the actual distribution, and some modifications were made based on the results of the pilot study. Reliability and validity information was also presented. For example, the inter-rater method was checked, and Cronbach's alpha showed a high level of internal consistency of the scale (0.79). Moreover, the adopted questionnaire was widely cited and frequently used by other researchers. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to offer options for responses to the questions. Responses to each statement were scored as follows: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = undecided; 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. The questionnaire consists of three sections: demographic information, responses to Likert scale statements, and open-ended questions.

4.3.2.1.1 Advantages of Questionnaire

Questionnaires are a practical device for gathering survey data information (Newby, 2010). They are often used in educational research due to their convenience, as the researcher does not have to be present, and their readiness for analysis. Newby (2010) identified two types of questions: closed questions (structured), in which the respondents have no opportunity for personalized input, and open questions (unstructured), in which respondents have the space to answer in their own words. Each type of question is used for specific purposes, and most questionnaires include a mixture of the two. Kumar (2014) mentioned that one of the obvious strengths is that paper questionnaires are one of the quickest ways to ensure a high response rate. Newby (2010) claimed that paper-based questionnaires also tend to have a high rate of completion. Piloting is key to making sure that questions make sense to participants (Bell, 2014; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013), so adapting an existing questionnaire as part of a survey can be helpful since this will already have been extensively piloted prior to publication (Muijs, 2004). This approach helps mitigate against the misunderstanding of questionnaire items or response options, making the data more valid and robust.

4.3.2.1.2 Limitations of Questionnaire

Questionnaires have some challenges and limitations. One major limitation is that, given students' busy schedules, some might not complete the questionnaire, making the

questionnaire inadequate for analysis. To minimize this difficulty in the current study, an agreed deadline was set to encourage participants to finish the questionnaire. Another challenge relates to some questions possibly lacking clarity. This is evident in the case of mailed questionnaires when the participants need some explanations related to the questions. As the questionnaires in this study were hand-delivered to participants, there is an opportunity to avoid any such difficulties in the time for completion. Moreover, in some cases, the attendance of the investigator could cause stress and anxiety for participants when completing the questionnaires. To eliminate this challenge in this study, participation for every participant was voluntary, meaning they could decide to participate or leave the study at any point, without any harms.

A survey tool using Likert-type items (in this case, strongly agree to strongly disagree) also relies on inferences based on being able to combine responses to individual items to create a Likert scale or “summated rating scale” (Kumar, 2011, p. 159). For instance, some methodology textbooks argue that treating this type of response as continuous data is an “illegitimate inference” because the difference between strongly agree and agree cannot be assumed to be the same as the difference between disagree and strongly disagree (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 387).

Numerous studies on blended learning in higher education have used questionnaires for data collection. For example, Al Zumor et al. (2013) used a Likert scale questionnaire in a survey research to assess the effectiveness of using Blackboard in a blended learning module in English. Chen's (2015) mixed-method study investigated the perceptions of 23 EFL undergraduate students about the usefulness of BL to develop a speaking course in Taiwan. The study used a satisfaction questionnaire with open- and closed-ended questions. Young and Lee's (2010) experimental study used a questionnaire to examine the perceptions of 47 undergraduate students about the effectiveness of a BL model in a second language writing class in Korea. Banditvilai's (2016) case study investigated the efficacy of using blended learning for language skills at a university in Thailand. The study used a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to examine 60 students' perceptions of the BL program.

4.3.2.1.3 Questionnaire Sections

As mentioned in the previous section, after identifying the study purpose and research questions as well as reviewing the literature, the decision was made to modify an existing questionnaire. The modification of some questionnaire items in this study was based on the analysis of the relevant literature in the field of blended learning in relation to English skills to obtain a comprehensive understanding of EFL students' perceptions about the use of blended learning in relation to academic language skills in Saudi Arabia (Al Zumor et al., 2013; Banditvilai, 2016; Chen, 2015; Guangying, 2014; Ja'ashan, 2015; Smirnova & Nuzha, 2013). This study explored EFL students' perceptions about the benefits, challenges, and suggestions of the use of BL as a pedagogical approach in each of the academic skills. The focus was on specific areas of development or challenges related to each skill around the three aforementioned concepts (*autonym, engagement, flexibility*) as well as suggestions to improve the BL course in the preparatory year. Table 4.2 shows the relation in questionnaire items and main research questions.

The questionnaire is divided into three sections to identify respondents' perceptions: demographic information, Likert scale statements, and open-ended questions. The first part consists of seven demographic or background questions to assess respondents' personal characteristics: grade point average, computer literacy, computer ownership, enjoyment chatting about BL, belief that BL is a waste of time, Internet access, and BL usage places.

The second part (Likert scale) contained 40 statements ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, concentrating on English language skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing, advantages, and limitations) that students believed that they are developed or enhanced through blended learning course. The last section of the questionnaire consisted of three open ended-questions about advantages, limitations, and suggestions related to the use of BL in the preparatory year (see Appendix IV).

The reading section consists of eight items, followed by the listening skills section (six items), the speaking skills section (seven items), and the writing skills section (four items). The advantages section (nine items) and limitations section (six items) complete the questionnaire. All questionnaire items are based on the adopted definitions of each academic skill as well as different related theories.

Table 4.2

Relation in Questionnaire Items and Main Research Questions

| Main Research questions | Relation in questionnaire items |
|---|--|
| 1) What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the benefits of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year? | A. Language skills Reading (from 1 to 8) Listening (from 9 to 14) Speaking (from 15 to 21) Writing (from 22 to 25) B. General advantages (from 26 to 34) |
| 2) What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year? | Limitations section (from 35 to 40) |
| 3) What are Saudi EFL students' suggestions on how blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool could be useful to develop English language skills in the preparatory year? | Open-ended questions section |

4.3.2.1.3.1 Reading Skills Section

According to the literature, previous studies provided evidence that BL could support EFL learning, particularly vocabulary knowledge, flexibility, and students' engagements within the reading text (Al Zumor et al., 2013; Ja'ashan, 2015; Yang, 2012). In this section, questionnaire items considered the benefits of BL to help EFL students read and comprehend long academic text, vocabulary knowledge, interaction, and the use of different reading strategies (skimming, scanning, speed reading).

According to the literature, academic reading skills at the university level is completely different than reading at the high school level. The former requires students to evaluate, compare and contrast, and analyse the text to understand the author's messages. Therefore, the academic reading skills used in this study focused on the use of different analysis processes, starting from clarifying the purpose, surveying, predicting, and interacting to employing critical thinking to comprehend the meaning of the text (See section 3.3.1.1).

The survey items in the Likert scale related to eight variables in relation to the benefits of BL for example (vocabularies, reading strategies, comprehension, interactions). In Item 1 "I think that using blended learning helps me gain new vocabulary" and Item 2 "I think that using blended learning helps me recognize synonyms and antonyms in the text". Item 3 asked whether students preferred to read online or printed materials: "I prefer to learn reading skills from books rather than from electronic materials". Next, Item 4 related to improving the learner's role to be more active by predicting what would happen in the text: "I think that using blended learning helps me easily understand the text." Top-down reading was the focus of Item 5 "I think that using blended learning helps me improve my skimming reading strategy", and Item 6 "I think that using e-learning helps me improve my scanning reading strategy", and Item 8 "I think that using blended learning helps me improve my reading speed". As previously mentioned in the literature review chapter, top-down reading was applied to make learners more active by predicting what will happen in the reading text. This model encourages students to develop some essential reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning, and speed reading (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Moreover, Interactive theory is mainly concerned with the important role of previous knowledge to understand the meaning of the text, as appears in Item 7 "I think that using blended learning helps me relate my general knowledge to the text topic",

4.3.2.1.3.2 Listening Skills Section

Several studies have confirmed the effectiveness of BL in developing listening proficiency through online listening communicative activities, flexibility, collaborations, and self-directed learning among EFL learners (e.g., Banditvilai, 2016; Guangying, 2014; Lee & Lee, 2012). In this section, questionnaire items considered the benefits of BL to help EFL students interpret

the spoken text in various academic situations, such as lectures, seminars, talks, and presentations.

The survey items in the Likert scale related to six variables in relation to the benefits of BL through the use of different online listening communicative activities, collaborations, and active learning to help EFL students understand spoken words in different academic context. For example, (metacognitive, linguistic knowledge, flexibility, communications, autonomous learner). It considered with the role of on top-down and bottom-up cognitive processes to understand listening and determine which one of them is applicable during listening comprehension (see Section 3.3.1.2.1). For Kurita (2012), top-down processing means “the use of background information in understanding the meaning of a message” while bottom-up means “using the incoming input as the basis for understanding the message” (p. 32). These top-down cognitive processes were considered in Item 9 “Blended learning helps me predict what will happen in the context”, such as the use of critical thinking skills and predictions when listening. While Item 10 concerned with online listening difficulties in the Blackboard system “The listening instructions provided in Blackboard are difficult to follow”. In Item 11, bottom-up cognitive processes were considered: “Blended learning develops my ability to focus on different sounds in speech to match them to relevant questions”. Item 12 asked about BL enabling students with further opportunities to revisit listening online activities at their own pace and provide them with time flexibility: “Blended learning activities enable me to practice listening whenever I wish”. Items 13 and 14, respectively, asked about the advantages of different online activities to develop the role of an active listener able to reflect what others have said and respond accordingly: “My listening communications improved with blended learning” and “Blended learning prepares me for interactive listening in real life”.

4.3.2.1.3.3 Speaking Skills Section

Previous studies have reported positive results related to BL in fostering academic speaking skills, confidence, engagement, and self-directed learning (Chen, 2015; Smirnova & Nuzha, 2013). In this section, questionnaire items considered the benefits of BL to develop EFL students’ confidence, vocabulary, interactions with peers, pronunciation, and presentation skills.

The survey items in the Likert scale related to five variables (vocabulary, confidence, fluency, interactions, and presentation skills). In this section, the role of indirect plus approach—a combination of learner-centred teaching interactions and interactional activities to support learners’ communicative competence, confidence, and pronunciation—was considered in Item 15 “Blended learning enables me to speak confidently and effortlessly in real-time interactions”, Item 16 “Blended learning helps me produce a wide range of spoken words accurately”, Item 17 “Blended learning improves my gradual development ability in real conversations”, Item 18 “Blended learning helps me interact in pairs or small groups”, Item 19 “Problem-solving activity materials used in blended learning help me improve my pronunciation” Item 20 “Blended learning helps me overcome creating errors in real communication”, and Item 21 “Blended learning helps me improve my oral presentation skills”.

4.3.2.1.3.4 Writing Skills Section

Previous studies have attempted to evaluate the usefulness of BL on academic writing skills (Young & Lee, 2010; Zaini & Mazdayasna, 2015). In this section, the survey items in the Likert scale related to six variables considering the benefits of BL to develop EFL students’ academic writing skills in terms of critical thinking while analysing an essay’s questions, the use of summarizing, and paraphrasing to produce an academic piece of work.

The Writing section focused on the use of process approach (i.e., outlining, proofreading, and editing), which offers a useful method to compose a well-written text. Item 22 “Blended learning helps me produce a piece of academic work”, Item 23 “Blended learning enables me to use a systematic framework for the writing process, planning, drafting, and revising”, Item 24 “Blended learning writing activities help me paraphrase text, restate the main ideas, but in more detail”, and Item 25 “Blended learning helps me summarize text (provide fewer details)”.

4.3.2.1.3.5 Advantages

The advantages of using BL were included in another survey section to provide a general picture. This section contains nine questions to elicit participants’ perceptions of the advantages of blended learning as pedagogical approach to enhance EFL in terms of (self-

directed learning, communication, feedback, time management, convenience, flexibility, and usefulness in the preparatory year). Item 26 “Blended learning is more convenient for me than face-to-face learning”, Item 27 “Blended learning improves communication between students and teachers”, Item 28 “Blended learning makes teaching and learning more effective; because it integrates all forms of media, print, audio, video, and animation”, Item 29 “I find blended learning interesting and useful”, Item 30 “I like blended learning because I can work according to my own pace”, Item 31 “Blended learning helps me to develop knowledge of computer and Internet”, Item 32 “I feel more confident when I use English online than when I use it in the class”, Item 33 “Blended learning helps me to use time effectively”, and Item 34 “I benefit from the feedback given by my instructor through Blackboard”.

4.3.2.1.3.6 Limitations

Several studies investigating the challenges of BL have identified a number of problems faced by students, such as a lack of Internet connectivity, technical problems, workload, and difficult instructions in Blackboard (Al Zumor et al., 2013; Banditvilai, 2016; Guangying, 2014; Hamdan et al., 2017; Ja’ashan, 2015; Poon, 2013; Thang et al., 2012).

The limitations section of survey focused on challenges faced during the BL course that prevented students from enhancing their English proficiencies. It contains six questions to understand participants’ perceptions about the limitations of blended learning with respect to (technical problems, infrastructure, isolation, and poor Internet connection in the preparatory year). Item 35 “I feel socially isolated when I use blended learning”, Item 36 “Blended learning is difficult to handle and therefore frustrating to use”, Item 37 “Slow internet connectivity is a major problem I face in using blended learning”, Item 38 “I face technical problems when I use blended learning”, Item 39 “I prefer to learn from the book rather than from the course website”, and Item 40 “Blended learning facilitates cheating and plagiarism”. Table 4.3 shows the purpose for each item in the questionnaire.

4.3.2.1.4 Questionnaire Distribution

The administrators on both campuses responsible for students in the Preparatory Year Program were asked to schedule times to distribute questionnaires. Each university chose a

different time. Eight classes with 350 students were visited to distribute questionnaires, along with approval and consent forms. Each class had 41 to 43 students.

Lecturers allowed 15 to 25 minutes for the distribution and collection of questionnaires. EFL students were grouped together in one class location so that instructions could be easily explained and any problems or misunderstandings that might occur quickly overcome. The questionnaires were handed out to ensure a high response rate. While administering the questionnaire, the researcher circulated among students' rows to ensure that all items were filled out. All questionnaires numbered from 001 to 350.

4.3.2.2 Focus Group Interviews

A *focus group* or *in-depth interview* is “a gathering of a limited number of individuals who, through conversation with each other, provide information about specific topic, issue or subject” (Baden & Major, 2013, p. 375). This study uses focus groups to gain deeper insights into research problems from different points of view as the interviewees focus the discussion on a certain topic. After identifying the quantitative results that needed further investigation, the focus group questions were refined for the qualitative strand.

Focus group interviews depend on interaction and open discussion among all participants. Bill and Waters (2014) identified two types of focus group interviews: *structured*, “where there are pre-prepared questions and checklists, or completely *unstructured*, where the intervention of the researcher is minimal” (p. 182). The use of focus groups in the current study facilitated the interpretation of quantitative results from the first phase and added in-depth understanding to Saudi EFL students' perceptions. A structured exploratory focus group was adopted to gain deeper insights into the research problem through the interactions between interviewees with different experiences by asking a few open-ended questions.

4.3.2.2.1 Advantages of Focus Groups

Focus group interviews offer both advantages and challenges. One advantage of focus groups is the ability to rely on interactions among participants discussing the issue while the researcher works as a moderator organizing the process and encouraging participants to talk. Stewart and Shamdasani (2014) found considerable differences between individual interviews

and focus groups. Focus groups provided fast delivery of data for less expense as they are conducted in a short period of time while producing a great amount of information. This advantage of data richness cannot be covered with individual interviews alone. Furthermore, findings emerging from focus groups are much more easily interpreted than statistical survey results.

Some studies of blended learning in higher education have used focus groups interviews for data collection to gain insights into research problems (e.g., Jokinen & Mikkonen, 2013; Smyth, Houghton, Cooney, & Casey, 2012). For example, in a qualitative study by Smyth et al. (2012), focus groups were used to capture participants' perceptions of a blended learning nursing education program. Jokinen and Mikkonen (2013) conducted three focus groups in a qualitative study to examine teachers' opinions about a BL course for in-depth information and to maximize interactions among participants.

4.3.2.2 Limitations of Focus Groups

There are certain problems with the use of focus groups interviews. One issue is that the results might be influenced by some participants' views, which is a concern if the moderator of the focus group makes gestures or signals that might bias the respondents' answers. To avoid bias in this study, the discussion flow was organized without guiding the responses from participants. Furthermore, in some focus groups, some interviewees might dominate the discussion and not let others express themselves. To prevent this, when moderating, all participants were given an equal opportunity to speak. Another difficulty is that participants can subsequently change their opinions during the discussion. Moreover, some participants might leave the interview because they have another commitment. To make the most use of focus groups in this study, a precise estimation of the time to keep it from being too long was the priority. Furthermore, when transcribing the audiotape, the researcher might not always be able to tell different voices apart. As with any research technique, planning, effort, and resources are necessary.

4.3.2.2.3 Process of Focus Group Interviews in Current Study

After I contacted EFL students via email to be interviewed in the study and obtained permission to access each campus, 28 students agreed to participate in the focus group interviews. It was highlighted that participation was voluntary. I visited eight classes from both institutions to collect the data. Each class had 41 to 43 students. Students were invited to participate in focus groups (two group from each university), each of which contained six to eight students. A structured exploratory focus group was adopted to gain deeper insights into the research problem through the interactions between interviewees with different experiences by asking a few open-ended questions. It was organized with the universities' administrators and the EFL teachers.

The focus groups' interview guide included three themes with questions referring to EFL students' perceptions concerning the benefits of blended learning as a pedagogic tool on the development of their academic English in each language skill (reading, listening, speaking, writing) in addition to a theme about challenges and a theme about their recommendations for improving skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia.

Three stages were implemented to collect the focus group interview data in this study. First, each participant was shown an information sheet (see Appendix II); second, focus group interviews were conducted; finally, a copy of the transcription was sent to the interviewees. The first stage was vital for ensuring that each participant had enough time to read all the information about the study before participating. The information sheet identified the purpose of the study and nature of the data collection as well as declared the confidentiality and anonymity of the data. Then, informed consent was obtained, and it was ensured that participants fully understood the research before proceeding at any stage. Before the meeting, each participant was emailed to arrange a convenient time and place to meet for them. During the meeting with the participants, the aim of the study was explained, and the need to provide truthful opinions to help increase the trustworthiness of the study was highlighted. I introduced myself as a researcher at the University of Reading and indicated that the research findings would be used in the improvement of blended learning in Saudi universities to encourage seriousness in their discussions. At the beginning of all the interviews, I informed

the participants of the expected timeframe of the interviews and obtained their permission to record the interviews on a digital recorder, reconfirming that the recording would be kept securely and would be transcribed by me. The focus group interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours and were led in a convenient, quiet, and informal environment on campus to avoid noises and interruptions. At the end, a copy of the transcriptions was sent to the interviewees to see if they had any further comments or modifications.

4.3.2.2.4 Focus Group Technique

When interviewing participants, this study used notes, an interview protocol, and a professional microphone. An *interview protocol* is “a form designed by the researcher that contains instructions for the process of the interview, the questions to be asked, and space to take notes of responses from the interviewee” Creswell (2014, p. 247). This study adopted the interview protocol designed by Asmussen and Creswell (1995) to ensure that data were accurately transcribed. The components in the interview schedule contained the points summarized in Figure 4.2. During the interviews, a directional microphone picked up sounds in all directions, and a digital recorder recorded the participants’ discussion. The facilitator was asked to help record the responses.

The interview protocol in Figure 4.2 was used to record essential information, including the name of the organization; the date, time, and location of the interview; study purpose; and signature on the consent form. Five brief open-ended questions were then asked to get participants’ thinking about the topic. The initial question was an icebreaker. The core questions addressed the major research questions in the study. Probes were occasionally needed, which involved asking participants to elaborate on and clarify their opinions. A neutral position was taken to ensure that responses were not influenced by the researcher’s stance. All information was considered and equally evaluated. Finally, closing comments were used to thank students and reiterate the confidentiality of their answers.

To start the interview, participants were asked to state their first name. All interviewees were encouraged to take part in the discussion. Keeping the interview focused on the research purpose ensured that the discussion flows smoothly. Depending on participants’ willingness to speak, interviews began with some general questions and moved to more specific matters.

The discussion, which was conducted in Arabic, was fully transcribed and then translated into English for analysis. Native-speaking Saudi experts in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at University B checked the translation of Arabic into English to ensure that the original meaning of the transcript remained consistent. The flow of the conversation was kept smoothly during the focus groups interviews. Notes taken were used to clarify any ambiguities in the transcriptions. To immediately assess the management process after each focus group, the recorder was checked again, and the duration was written down, along with any other comments that could clarify the interview. The interview was ended by expressing gratitude to the participants, guaranteeing the confidentiality of their responses, and offering them a summary of the results of the study if they were interested.

| |
|---|
| Interview schedule Project: Time of interview: Date: Place: Interviewer: Interviewees: Description of the project: Purpose of the study: Questions: Thank the individuals for their cooperation and participation in this interview. Reassure them of the confidentiality of the responses. |
|---|

Figure 4.2 Interview schedule

4.3.2.3 Pilot Study

In the pilot study, the first decision was to distribute the questionnaire electronically via email or Survey Monkey. However, ultimately, paper questionnaires were distributed by hand to ensure a high response rate. The questionnaires were hand-delivered to participants in March 2016 (see Table 4.3). The benefits of the questionnaire were explained in a brief introduction to the students in both the pilot and the actual study before the questionnaires were distributed. The benefits of participation and completing the questionnaire about blended

learning in Saudi Arabia were also explained to students. Figure 4.4 shows the data collection process.

The questionnaire items were in English, which made it difficult for some students in the pilot study. Thus, a key issue identified by the pilot study was the need to translate the questionnaire into Arabic to facilitate understanding and avoid confusion when students filled it out. The final version of the questionnaire contains each questionnaire's items in both Arabic and English (see Appendix IV). Students were asked to read either language they preferred to ensure that all items were meaningful. Some modifications were made to parts of the questionnaire to make it appropriate for the current study. One hundred and five EFL students total completed the instrument in Arabic and then pointed out any problems they encountered in the pilot study. Participants' responses revealed that they understood the questions.

To avoid wording complications, Vaus (2014) suggested a checklist of 17 questions, such as whether the language is simple or the questions negative. This study benefitted from the use of Vaus's (2014) checklist in the pilot study and ensured that each question was clear and understandable. Based on students' feedback, the instrument was revised before distribution to the actual sample (see Appendix IV).

Table 4.3

Chronology of the Data Collection

| Date | Procedure | Description |
|--------------------|---|---|
| January/March 2016 | Pilot study | Obtain permission from the dean of each university to visit and collect the data. Paper-based questionnaires administered and given by hand to participants |
| March/June 2016 | Main study, quantitative data collection (phase 1) | After modification of some of the questions from pilot study, the main questionnaire was distributed to 310 participants. |
| June 2016 | Analysis of quantitative survey | Analyse the survey data using descriptive statistics and facilitate the participants' selection in the second phase Refine focus group questions for the qualitative strand. |
| July 2016 | Identify particular quantitative results that need further investigation. | |
| July–August 2016 | Qualitative data collection (phase 2) focus group interviews | After gaining permission, individuals who contributed in the first quantitative phase were asked to participate in the second phase. When interviewing participants, basic tools such as notes, interview protocol, and a professional microphone were used. |

4.3.2.4 Main Study

After modification of some of the questions from the pilot study, the main questionnaire was distributed. A five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, was constructed. Responses to each statement were scored as follows: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = undecided; 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. The questionnaire is divided into three sections to identify respondents' attitudes and opinions: demographic information, Likert scale statements, and open-ended questions. Information about the study topic and purpose, along with the researcher's name, was provided at the top of the questionnaire, followed by instructions in Arabic on how to complete the questionnaire. To avoid any misunderstanding of the Likert scale scores (1 to 5), each column was given a different colour (see Appendix IV).

The first part consists of seven demographic or background questions to assess respondents' personal characteristics: grade point average, computer literacy, computer ownership, enjoyment chatting about BL, belief that BL is a waste of time, Internet access, and BL usage places (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

Questions and Purposes

| Question | Purpose |
|--|---|
| 1–7 | To collect information about demographic characteristics of the participants' grade point average (GPA), computer literacy, computer ownership, enjoyment chatting about blended learning, belief that blended learning is a waste of time, Internet access, and blended learning usage places. |
| Using Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree | |
| 1–8 | To elicit participants' perceptions concerning reading skills that improved by using blended learning in the preparatory year |
| 9–14 | To elicit participants' perceptions concerning listening skills that developed by using blended learning in the preparatory year |
| 15–21 | To elicit participants' perceptions concerning speaking skills that developed by using blended learning in the preparatory year |
| 22–25 | To elicit participants' perceptions concerning writing skills that developed by using blended learning in the preparatory year |
| 26–34 | To elicit participants' perceptions about the advantages of blended learning regarding to communication, feedback, time management, flexibility, and usefulness in the preparatory year |
| 35–40 | To elicit participants' perceptions about the limitations of blended learning with respect to technical problems, isolation, and poor Internet connection in the preparatory year |

4.3.2.5 Sample Size and Sampling Strategy in Questionnaire

According to Newby (2010), the *target population* is “all instances that meet the requirements of the research issue” (p. 231). Creswell and Clark defined a target population as “a group of individuals with some common defining characteristic that the researcher can identify and

study” (2011, p. 160). In this study, the target population was all female EFL undergraduates in KSA. Within this target population, a sample was selected that consisted of EFL students in their preparatory year at University A and University B (see Figure 4.3).

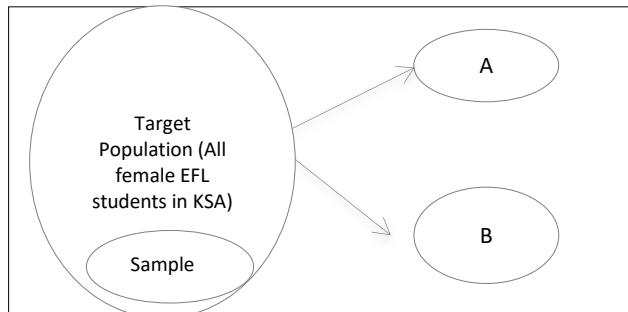


Figure 4.3 Population and sample of the study

4.3.2.5.1 Sample Size

In the literature, Cohen et al. (2011) and Bryman (2012) disagreed on the appropriate sample size. They indicated that the nature and purpose of the research might affect the decision. The current study relied on a mixed method, so two sample sizes were required for the two phases: a larger sample for the quantitative phase, and a smaller sample for the qualitative phase. The former phase of the study targeted the use of the data collected from the self-completed surveys about the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning on the development of EFL students’ academic English skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing) as well as their recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia (thereby requiring a large sample). The latter phase interviewed only a small sample of students to illustrate the initial quantitative results. The size of the sample for each university was based on the total number of students registered in the preparatory year.

Two core elements were considered to determine the sample size: the degree of accuracy and characteristics’ differences in the population (Vaus, 2012). As Kumar (2014) stated, “the larger the sample size, the more accurate your estimate” (p. 211). With regard to the large-scale quantitative phase of this study, an online sample size calculator was used, such as those at www.surveysystem.com or www.macorr.com (Cohen et al., 2011). Follow Fink’s (1995)

recommendation, a statistical formula was used to specify the correct sample size. However, Creswell (2014) pointed out that accurate estimations of the exact number of participants when using a sample size formula are based on different considerations, such as sampling errors and confidence in statistical tests. Similarly, Denscombe (2014) identified several factors that sample size formulas take into consideration, such as accuracy of estimation, variation in the population, and population size. He further stated that researchers need to be confident in the degree of accuracy, as the sample must be representative. The level of confidence is usually 95% or 99% (Cohen et al., 2011). Moreover, *confidence intervals* are also needed. A confidence interval is the accurate and adequate margin of errors (Black, 1999). Confidence intervals of five were chosen in this study. This study has less variation within the population because its sample is bigger. Based on this information from the formula adopted, the required sample size for the quantitative phase for University A was 75 (A subgroup) and for University B it was 235 (B subgroup) EFL students (310 in total). Thus, the sample was considered sufficiently large. However, 350 participants were received and completed the survey in both universities: 95 participants in (University A) and 255 participants in (University B).

Further determination of the sample size relied on the non-response rate. Some participants leave studies for a variety of reasons; they might return incomplete questionnaires (e.g., not responding to all items or marking two choices instead of one). To address the non-response problems in this study, some effective techniques were used, such as considering an appropriate time for participants to participate, as previously discussed in this chapter. Another technique was to have a larger sample than necessary. Many researchers have advised that overestimating (oversampling) rather than underestimating the size of the required sample might minimize the non-response rate (Gorard, 2004).

Additional judgments need to be made about the representativeness of the sample. Black (1999) and Cohen et al. (2011) strongly recommended that the researcher stipulate the characteristics of a wider population: “The researcher will need to be clear what it is that is being represented” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 151). For this study, students’ age, level of education, computer familiarity, and blended learning experiences were established as characteristics that represent the sample. The differences in the backgrounds are due to the

distinctive learning settings. Most students in Saudi Arabia started their undergraduate studies after completing high school. In general, university students take their first computer courses in high school. They are therefore familiar with programs like email and Microsoft Word. Some participating students had already completed one to three blended courses; others were enrolled in a blended learning setting for the first time. The required blended courses are Arabic studies, social studies, English language, law, special education, psychology, and business. Students in blended courses were asked to participate in the study. By employing a larger sample in the quantitative phase and clarifying specific features of the population, a representative population of students in this study was achieved (See table 4.5 and 4.6).

4.3.2.5.2 Sampling Strategy

According to Kumar (2014), *sampling* is “the process of selecting a few (a sample) from a bigger group (the sampling population) as the basis for estimating or predicting the prevalence of unknown piece of information, situation or outcome regarding the bigger group” (p. 230). Thus, it acquires reliable and unbiased conclusions of the population with less time and effort (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996). However, sampling also has disadvantages, like the possibility of an error of the estimation about the population. Nevertheless, Black (1999) pointed out that the sampling technique adopted depends on the design. Thus, each phase of the current mixed methods study needs various kinds of sampling. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) concluded that the mixed methods researcher has flexibility in combining different sampling strategies that serve each strand in their studies.

The sampling selection during the quantitative stage of the current study considered some vital concerns with bias and repressiveness. To avoid bias, randomization is used to ensure that every individual has an equivalent chance for selection. Moreover, individuals were selected to be representative of a population in order to generalize the study results. Consequently, two probability sampling techniques were employed in the quantitative phase of this study: stratified and random. This sampling strategy is particularly useful in facilitating the access to the needed sample that has the required characteristics (Creswell, 2014). Stratified sampling encompasses dividing the population into groups with specific comparable features (Cohen et al., 2011). As the population of this study was relatively large,

first, the population was divided (clustered) into two groups according to the type of university learning: group 1 contained EFL students from University A, representing a BL setting, and group 2 contained EFL students from University B, representing a traditional setting. Cluster sampling is more preferable with a large population. The stratified sample was then selected randomly in each group of both campuses (see Figure 4.3). As there are numerous EFL classes in each university, the stratified sampling is appropriate. However, there are a certain drawbacks associated with the use of the cluster sampling strategy—namely, there might be no differences among chosen clusters (Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore, the clear identification of populations’ characteristics is significant with this type of sampling (Kumar, 2014).

Table 4.5

Information on the Questionnaire Sample in University A

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Age | 18–25 |
| Level | Freshman |
| Majors | Administration and finance, computing and information, health science |
| Computer experience | Beginner to advanced |
| Blended learning experiences | 0–5 courses |

Table 4.6

Information on the Questionnaire Sample in University B

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Age | 18–25 |
| Level | Freshman |
| Majors | Medicine, science, pharmacy, education, arts |
| Computer experience | Beginner to advanced |

4.3.2.6 Sample Size and Sampling Strategies in Focus Group Interviews

Sampling in qualitative research is completely different from sampling in quantitative research. Whereas the former is designed to obtain a rich amount of data from participants about the investigated situation, the latter aims to draw conclusions about the sample. In recent years, a growing body of literature has emphasized the benefits of focus group interviews in enhancing the understanding of the research questions (Morgan, 2007).

4.3.2.6.1 Sample Size

With regard to sample size in qualitative research, Baden and Major (2013) claimed that the number of participants tends to be smaller and depends upon factors such as the topic of the research and length of time available for discussion. Thus, the second phase of this study involved interviewing a small sample of targeted Saudi EFL students to gain in-depth insights into blended learning in relation to English language. The focus group interview data were gathered from 28 participants. The participants were recruited from two Saudi universities with varying emphases on proportions of face-to-face learning and virtual learning (See table 4.7). Many authors (e.g., Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2014) have indicated that there is no definitive answer about what constitutes an adequate number of focus groups. They suggested that the researcher “hold enough groups to ensure the participants can provide adequate information and have a minimum of three focus group interviews. Groups of six are about the right size” (Baden & Major, 2013, p. 388). Therefore, only four focus groups (two groups from each campus) were interviewed; each group contained from six to eight Saudi EFL students from the two universities in Saudi Arabia. Some additional considerations, such as access to the students and recruiting them as well as money and time constraints, could affect the selection of the sample. As this study had easy access to participants and had a sufficient budget, the only concern was whether the analysis was time consuming. Morgan (2007) suggested organizing preparation in advance, as any other research process is essential to overcome any future difficulty.

4.3.2.6.2 Sampling Strategy

The purpose of this explanatory design was to utilize the qualitative phase to gain an in-depth understanding of the quantitative results. Creswell and Clark (2011) indicated that data collection phases are comprehensively correlated. Therefore, individuals who contribute in the first quantitative phase are asked to participate in the second. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) pointed out that the objective of purposive sampling is to obtain further in-depth information about the investigated topic from selected individuals. For Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003, as cited in Teddlie & Yu, 2007), purposive sampling is “based on a specific purpose rather than randomly” (p. 713). However, the main disadvantage of purposive sampling is its reliance on the researcher’s knowledge about participants’ characteristics as he/she has a particular aim in mind. Neuman (2006) stated, “with purposive sampling, researcher never knows whether the cases selected represent the population” (p. 222). In this study, homogeneous purposive sampling was adopted with the sample of EFL students to gain detailed understanding of the research problem from people who have valuable information about the topic as participants. Robson (2011) claimed that purposive sampling is based on the investigator’s rationality and how the sample is used to fulfil the research requirements. To address this issue, the selection of purposive sampling was based on students being in blended courses offered in English during the preparatory year; for example, one focus group included students with positive opinions towards blended learning while another group contained students with negative views. Therefore, the sample was varied. This criterion generated a rich discussion.

Table 4.7

Information on the Focus Group Sample

| Pseudonym of student | Age | Family status | Pseudonym of university | Computer experiences | Region of residence | BL experiences courses |
|----------------------|-----|---------------|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Narjis | 18 | single | Uni B | Beginner | Maddina | 1 |
| Ghada | 19 | married | Uni B | Intermediate | Maddina | 1 |
| Sara | 19 | single | Uni B | Intermediate | Maddina | 2 |
| Mariam | 18 | single | Uni B | Beginner | Village | 0 |
| Nada | 18 | single | Uni B | Advanced | Maddina | 2 |
| Sana | 18 | single | Uni B | Beginner | Maddina | 1 |
| Linah | 18 | single | Uni B | Advance | Maddina | 1 |
| Huda | 18 | single | Uni B | Beginner | Maddina | 1 |
| Randa | 18 | single | Uni B | Beginner | Maddina | 1 |
| Rawa | 18 | single | Uni B | Beginner | Maddina | 1 |
| Amal | 18 | single | Uni B | Intermediate | Maddina | 2 |
| Nora | 18 | single | Uni B | Intermediate | Maddina | 2 |
| Abeer | 20 | married | Uni A | Intermediate | Maddina | 3 |
| Maha | 19 | single | Uni A | Intermediate | Maddina | 2 |
| Ahlam | 18 | single | Uni A | Beginner | Maddina | 2 |
| Bodoor | 18 | single | Uni A | Beginner | Maddina | 1 |
| Haia | 20 | married | Uni A | Beginner | Village | 3 |
| Samar | 18 | single | Uni A | Intermediate | Village | 2 |
| Mona | 19 | single | Uni A | Intermediate | Maddina | 2 |
| Azeeza | 18 | single | Uni A | Beginner | Village | 1 |
| Zahra | 18 | single | Uni A | Intermediate | Maddina | 2 |
| Ohood | 21 | married | Uni A | Beginner | Maddina | 1 |
| Zohoor | 18 | single | Uni A | Beginner | Village | 2 |
| Ameena | 20 | married | Uni A | Beginner | Maddina | 2 |
| Ameera | 18 | single | Uni A | Beginner | Maddina | 2 |
| Rabab | 19 | single | Uni A | Beginner | Village | 3 |
| Zahara'a | 18 | single | Uni A | Advanced | Village | 3 |
| Azhar | 23 | married | Uni A | Advanced | Village | 3 |

4.3.2.6.3 Using the Questionnaire to Draw Out the Focus Group Sample

To draw out the focus groups' sample, during the distribution of questionnaire, EFL students were asked to provide their e-mail address if they were willing to participate in the focus group interviews during the second phase. First, after the quantitative analysis, questionnaires were reviewed to identify which classes of students had typical and low mean scores from statistical information. Then a purposefully selected number of students with typical and low responses were selected for the focus groups. The statistical information was used for the selection of the focus groups' sample based on the mean score of the data. To differentiate the participants, maximal variation sampling was used. This technique is presented in the following section. For example, the results of demographic information (grade point average [GPA], computer literacy, enjoying chatting about blended learning, whether blended learning is waste of time, Internet access, and Internet usage places) was used for the selection.

One focus group included EFL students with typical score perceptions about BL whereas another group had negative views. This technique generated a rich conversation. At the end, EFL learners willing to participate were invited to be interviewed in the second phase. Furthermore, the selection criteria for the purposive sampling was also based on the enrolment in PYP and passing the first semester.

4.3.2.6.4 Maximal Variation Sampling

Maximal variation sampling was used in this study to allow for deeper insights into participants' different viewpoints. Creswell and Clark (2011) indicated that the key idea of this strategy is to offer a comprehensive understanding about the research problem from diverse perspectives. In this study, some factors were considered to maximize the variances between participants; the participants were recruited from two Saudi universities with different requirements for the percentages of face-to-face learning and online learning. This results in variations in the educational setting as University A students are required to attend 25% of the lectures in person and the remaining 75% virtually while students at University B are required to attend only 25% of the lectures virtually and the remaining 75% face-to-face. Second, computer experience across students varied from beginning to advanced level. Third,

some of the participants were residents of Al Madinah city while others lived in small villages nearby. Moreover, participants' ages ranged between 18 and 25 years old. Some participants were married with family, and others were single. Finally, some of the participants had experience with blended learning courses whereas others were participating in them for the first time. Therefore, all of these considerations resulted in rich discussions (See table 4.7).

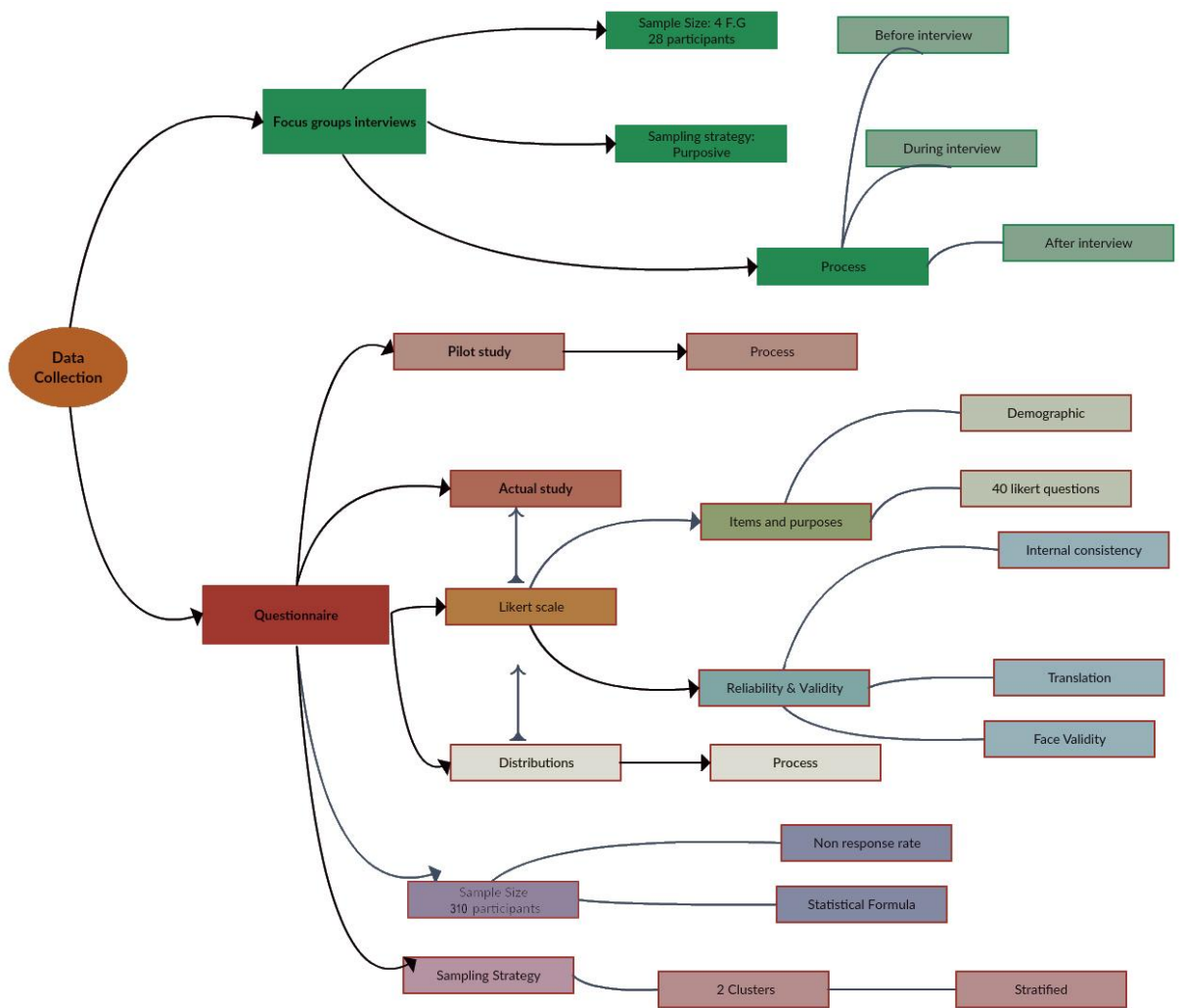


Figure 0.1 Data collection

4.3.2.7 Context of the Study

As this study was conducted in the western province of Saudi Arabia (Al Madinah city), the selected two universities were the only two located in this region which adopted BL as a new technology-enhanced pedagogical approach to improve the quality of teaching and learning and employed PYP as a compulsory for all students to enter their required fields of specialization. However, the extent to which each university applied BL differed. Therefore, these two universities were chosen because they represented variations in educational settings and experienced PYP, thereby allowing for the gathering of in-depth information about the

research problem from different EFL students' perceptions. In addition, the researcher had easy access to both universities, providing another reason for the selection.

The participants were recruited from these two Saudi universities with different requirements for the percentages of face-to-face learning and online learning. In this study, the target population was all female EFL undergraduates in Saudi Arabia. Within this target population, the cohort of students at both sites were consisted of EFL students in their preparatory year at University A and University B (see Figure 4.3). Specifically, University A students are required to attend 25% of the lectures in person and the remaining 75% virtually. Students at University B are required to attend only 25% of the lectures virtually and the remaining 75% face-to-face. The use of blended learning in these universities includes the use of Blackboard as a learning management system (LMS), online chatting with peers, discussing assignments, submitting homework electronically, sending e-mails, and participating in virtual classes.

Recently, the Saudi Arabian government has taken crucial stages towards substituting traditional educational approaches for new approaches, which are more consistent with today's highly technological world. According to Alawairdhi (2016), incorporating blended learning into higher education demonstrates the intention of the Saudi Arabian government to enhance and support the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions.

Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education has introduced a compulsory introductory course known as the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) as an entry requirement in order to enhance Saudi students' English language proficiency, among other goals, such as to help develop students' range of learning skills to understand specific disciplines in which they are registered and to prepare them for studies in higher education establishments (Daif-Allah & Alsamani, 2013). Therefore, it is becoming extremely difficult to ignore the potential of BL as well as PYP in Saudi higher education.

University A offers undergraduate degree programs and lifelong learning. The first group of participants was in their preparatory year; these participants were chosen to explore their experiences with BL on the development of their language from this institution. For this reason, this university was chosen for its appropriateness of the research purpose as its environment based on ICT and blended learning. The university hosts the College of

Administration and Finance Sciences, the College of Computer and Informatics, and the College of Health Sciences. It awards academic degrees in programs and specializations that suit the requirements of the labour market. Students are required to attend 25% of the lectures in person and the remaining 75% virtually. University A has built strategic cooperation with several international universities and companies, such as English First (EF), an international pioneer in teaching EFL in PYP, to help students learn English and communicate with their instructors virtually during the preparatory year. EF's online school includes 16 levels and a course book. Each level contains eight units and an end-of-unit test. Each unit contains the four English skills as well as different activities to help EFL students develop their English language skills.

University B was established in 2003. The second group of participants was in their preparatory year, and they were required to attend just 25% of the lectures virtually and the remaining 75% face-to-face. This university now has 28 colleges in medicine, pharmacy, science, education, arts and humanities, and administration. It awards diplomas, bachelor's degrees, general diplomas, higher diplomas, master's degrees, and doctorates. It also offers distance learning with innovative technology. Similarly, in the preparatory year, EFL students complete an extensive English language program as a compulsory entry requirement to their colleges through the use of the blended learning approach. It contains several online activities with a course book containing several units. Each unit includes the four English skills.

4.3.3 Data Analysis

4.3.3.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The analysis of the questionnaire responses used some basic descriptive statistics in this study. *Descriptive statistics* are “mathematical techniques for organizing and summarizing a set of numerical data” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 132). On one hand, it is helpful to provide a general picture and sense about the entire data (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 451). On the other hand, it serves as preparation that allows for further explanation (Newby, 2010). Information was provided for each of the three main categories of the questionnaire (language areas, limitations, and suggestions) to reveal the participants' thoughts about the most typical

or average value of variables (mean), followed by measures of dispersion (i.e., standard deviation [SD]) that described the distribution of those variables (i.e., how close or far apart observations are from each other). The quantitative data from the current study were analysed using SPSS software. Gall et al. (2007) described SPSS as “a comprehensive, integrated collection of computer programs for managing, analysing, and displaying data” (p. 161). The decision was made to present the data by summarizing the frequencies and reporting results using tabular and colourful graphical representations about each statement in the questionnaire (e.g., histograms, bar charts, and graphs) from the pilot and final surveys.

4.3.3.2 Focus Group Data Analysis

4.3.3.2.1 Thematic Analysis

The purpose of focus groups interviews was to understand and explain initial quantitative data in more depth. After the initial quantitative data analysis, some crucial aspects about development of each of the language skills, challenges, and recommendations remained to be discussed. All interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated. Focus group questions were intended to answer the main research questions. Students were given pUniversity Adonyms. The questions asked during the focus groups interviews are listed below. Table 4.8 displays focus group interview questions while Table 4.9 shows harmonization between focus group interview questions and the main research questions. The decision was made in this study to analyse the qualitaive data by hand in order to ensure true closeness to all the key data without any intrusion from computer software.

Analysing the interview data faced a similar limitation based on the extent to which one feels confident making inferences. There are four main problems to avoid: “overgeneralisation”, “selective observation”, “premature closure”, and the “halo effect” (Neuman, 2013, p. 4). Plowright (2011) related these collectively to the “warranted assertability” of interpretations (p. 185) such that expansive quotations and rich description back up the interpretation and inferences made during analysis. More imaginatively, Kettley (2010) referred to this as a process of “imagination” (p. 79), where analysis involves making inferential leaps and then going back to the various data sources to check if such leaps are valid. Alternatively, in much the same way as inferences in a factor analysis can be discussed to improve their validity,

Wengraf (2001) recommended convening a small panel of people with varied perspectives who can discuss any problematic inferences made during interview coding. This adds a further layer of rigour to thematic analysis, similar to the multiple cycles of coding and theming recommended in the more general methodology guides (Bell, 2014; Cohen et al., 2013).

Table 0.8

Focus Group Interview Questions

| Research Focus | Focus group interview questions | Checked |
|-------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Introduction | Are you familiar with the term “blended learning”? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | What is the main general development you made from blended learning in relation to your English skills? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Did you learn to be a self-directed student? Examples? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Do you think you have enough time to practice language skills in blended learning sitting? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Do you experience group working, interactions in blended learning? In which skill? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Benefits | | |
| Reading Skills | 1. Regarding academic reading skills, having completed this course, do feel you are able to read and understand an academic text in English? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 2. Do you think your academic vocabulary develops in blended learning? How? Examples? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 3. What is the difference between reading online and reading printed books? Do you like online reading activities? Why? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 4. Do you think reading strategies develop? How? Examples? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 5. How did you organize your academic reading skills in blended learning? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Listening Skills | 6. Regarding academic listening skills, having completed this | <input type="checkbox"/> |

| | | |
|------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| | course, do feel you are able to listen and understand conversation easily specially in academic context in English? | |
| | 7. How do you manage online listening activities? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 8. Which aspects do you think developed the most? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Speaking Skills | 9. How do you manage online listening activities? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 10. Regarding academic speaking skills, having completed this course, do feel you are able to speak English fluently? How? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 11. Do you think blended learning created a new learning community for you? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Writing Skills | 12. Regarding academic writing skills, having completed this course, do feel you are able to write a piece of academic work in English? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 13. In your opinion, did blended learning positively affect your academic writing skills? How? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 14. Did you get any feedback from your lecturer concerning your writing? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Limitations | | |
| | 15. Did you face any complications when participating in blended learning? Examples? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 16. Did you face any technical difficulties during virtual classes? Blackboard? Others? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Suggestions | | |
| | 17. Do you have any additional suggestions or comments that you would like to add? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Conclusions | Any comments? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | What will happen to the data? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Thanking participants | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Table 0.9

Connections between Main Research Questions and Focus Group Interview Questions

| Main research questions | Focus group interview questions |
|---|---|
| 1. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the benefits of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year? | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 |
| 2. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year? | 15, 16 |
| 3. What are Saudi EFL students' suggestions on how blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool could be useful to develop English language skills in the preparatory year? | 17 |

Thematic analysis was used in this study to elicit details from the data by creating initial codes, themes, and sub-themes to make sensible connections between them. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined *thematic analysis* as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data” (p. 79). It is a detailed analysis that includes coding, themes, and sub-themes, which can serve different purposes. Bryman (2012) suggested setting a thematic analysis framework that organized main themes and sub-themes. It not only allows researchers to search and retrieve the data in terms of those items that bear the same code, but also identifies similar codes. This study uses a thematic analysis framework that contains major themes, sub-themes, colour coding accompanied with exact participants' quote in the transcription.

Braun and Clarke (2006) offered practical steps to follow before, during, and after thematic analysis throughout six stages: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the

report (see Table 4.6). This study followed these phases to guarantee a continuous back-and-forward process thorough the data. Transcribing the entire text was the first step of thematic data analysis. Listening to the verbal data helped the researcher become familiar with the data. Stewart and Shamdasani (2014) pointed out that “transcription is a permanent written record that can be shared with other interested parties” (p. 103). To make sense of the data in this study, while listening carefully to the audio recordings, the researcher transcribed the interviews and modified some explanations of respondents to fill in any incomplete statements. Writing a list of preliminary important ideas extracted from the transcription ended this phase.

Table 0.10

Phases of Thematic Analysis

| Phase | Activity |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Familiarizing oneself with the data | Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas. |
| Generating initial codes | Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. |
| Searching for themes | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. |
| Reviewing themes | Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis. |
| Defining and naming themes | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. |
| Producing the report | The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to |

the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006)

The next step was to generate initial codes. Johnson and Christensen (2012) defined *coding* as “the process of marking segments of data, usually text data, with symbols, descriptive words, or category names” (p. 520)—in other words, labelling a chunk of text with an idea. In this step, the work must be organized equally with each segment of data regardless of its importance. In the context of the current study, as coding was performed manually, highlighters and notes were used to identify important quotations. The data were then reviewed again, and the number of codes was reduced to five to seven categories to be a more manageable number. Indeed, Tesch (1990) offered eight comprehensive steps to systematize the coding and analysis, and some of them were adopted, such as listing the related or unexpected topics in the margins for members to identify new categories.

The next step was searching for themes. Cohen et al. (2011) identified *themes* as “similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database” (p. 272). This study used tables to name each theme and its related sub-themes (see Appendix III). Based on participants’ extracts, a *mind map* was used in this stage to determine the connection between codes, themes, and sub-themes. Each stage had several themes, and sub-themes were created when ideas about which significant themes to include were still not clear. The themes were reviewed in the next stage and refined to ensure their relationship to the main focus of the research. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) pointed out that this stage often seems to be endless, so the researcher has to stop working on re-coding if the modifications cease to be significant.

The fifth step was defining and naming themes by recognizing what each theme contains, the relationship between themes and sub-themes, and its connection to research questions. The final *mind map* was produced with concise themes and sub-themes. The final step was writing the thematic analysis as a story relevant to the main research questions.

4.3.3.2.2 Content Analysis

Bryman (2012) defined content analysis as a method of analysis used to count the content to identify and summarize the data in a systematic way. In other words, it is a technique used to obtain the numerical data from qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2011). It is usually used with other approach of analysis. Fraenkel and Wallen (2007) identified the main advantages and limitations of content analysis as follows: it is extremely valuable for analysing a rich amount of interview data; it requires a low cost compared to other methods; and it is available for both kinds of quantitative and qualitative research. However, there are certain drawbacks associated with this method, such as it is time consuming. In this study, the researcher has enough time and access to conduct the two phases of the study. Thus, after creating the initial codes, themes, and sub-themes to make sensible connections between them, the content analysis was chosen to allow for counting words that coded initially in the text.

4.3.4 Validity, Reliability, and Quality Criteria

The literature emphasized the significance of validity and reliability in the process of various kinds of research. For example, Denscombe (2014) argued that the judgment of the truthfulness of a study depends on the precision and consistency of its data production. There are important differences between quantitative and qualitative research in relation to the validity and reliability criteria, demonstrating the need to be explicit about what is meant by each term. The term *validity* in quantitative research is associated with the accuracy and appropriateness of the instrument in terms of what it is intended to measure. In qualitative research, validity is related to credibility (Vaus, 2014). In contrast, reliability is understood to mean dependability and consistency over time in quantitative research and is a synonym for credibility in qualitative research.

As this study used more than one method, triangulation was used to look at the different viewpoints. *Triangulation* is understood to mean “ the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspects of human behaviour” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 195). As there are several types of triangulation, this study adopted *methodological triangulation* to allow the use of different methods for the same purpose, thereby increasing credibility.

For Creswell and Clark (2011), *validity* in mixed methods research refers to “employing strategies that address potential issues in data collection, data analysis, and the interpretations that might compromise the merging or connecting of the quantitative and qualitative strands of the study and the conclusions drawn from the combination” (p. 239). Therefore, to address some of these issues, certain validity concerns were considered through the planning procedures. To minimize the validity threats in the course of data collection, a questionnaire was used so a large number of Saudi EFL students from both universities could participate. Moreover, close attention was paid to the quantitative results of the study. For example, findings from the initial phase were reviewed several times to focus on important points that could help interpret the data from the second phase. Choosing a sufficiently large sample size for each phase of the study was another concern. Furthermore, to minimize the invalidity of the findings, the same participants from the quantitative were included phase in the second phase. In this respect, Creswell and Clark (2014) warned that changing samples between phases could lead to invalid findings.

4.3.4.1 Validity and Reliability in Quantitative Research

To maximize the validity of the quantitative phase in this study, several techniques were adopted. To ensure that the instrument is appropriate for measuring what is intended to measure, Bryman (2012) suggested using *face validity* to guarantee effective working in advance, where *face validity* refers to “reflect[ing] the contents of the concept in questions” (p. 171). Experts in a particular field are asked to decide whether questionnaire items reflected the main purpose of the study (Bryman, 2012). Creswell and Clark (2014) also recommended having an external auditor review the entire project and provide some feedback about sampling and the statistical test used. Thus, four bilingual Saudi researchers studying at Reading University were asked to read and comment on the instrument used in the current study. Based on their feedback, some of the questionnaire items were modified. In addition, two Saudi experts who were bilingual in Arabic and English at University B were asked if the questions were valid. The experts reviewed the translation of the questionnaire from Arabic to English and checked the equivalency and quality of the original meaning of the questionnaire items with the translated versions. Next, checking the data was important for ensuring that there were no mistakes in data entry.

To extend reliability in the quantitative phase of the current study, instrument reliability can be verified by measuring internal consistency. Pallant (2016) referred to internal consistency as “the degree to which the items that make up the scale are all measuring the same underlying attribute (e.g., the extent to which the items hang together)” (p. 6). Alpha values vary from 0 to 1, based on the number of items in the instrument; 0.7 is considered an acceptable level and the higher value, the greater reliability indication (Bryman, 2012; Pallant, 2016). Cronbach’s alpha was employed to ensure reliability of the instrument in the sample of 105 EFL students in both universities in Saudi Arabia in the pilot study. Table 4.7 shows the internal consistency of the alphas for each section in the instrument, which was calculated using SPSS. The calculations reveal that reliability measures for the scale were between 0.52 and 0.85, indicating an adequate level of internal consistency. Therefore, Cronbach’s alpha was used in the sample of 105 EFL students at University A and University B in the pilot study to ensure reliability of the instrument as the most frequently used test measurements. In this study, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated, using SPSS, for the six sections on the scale: reading skills (0.81), listening skills (0.69), speaking skills (0.85), writing skills (0.73), advantages (0.81), and limitations (0.52). These alphas indicate an adequate level of internal consistency (see Table 4.7).

Table 0.11

Reliability of the Scale

| Questionnaire Section | Item Number | Alpha |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------|
| Reading skills | 8 | 0.81 |
| Listening skills | 6 | 0.96 |
| Speaking skills | 7 | 0.85 |
| Writing skills | 4 | 0.73 |
| Advantages | 9 | 0.81 |
| Limitations | 6 | 0.52 |

4.3.4.2 Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research

Several techniques were used to maximize validity, which guaranteed quality in the qualitative phase. Authors still disagree on the major elements of quality criteria in qualitative research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). However, a variety of approaches can be used to confirm quality in educational research (Creswell & Clark, 2014; Guba, 1990; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Member checking was used as one of the criteria to guarantee quality in qualitative research.

Guba (1990) noted that it is challenging to demonstrate validity in qualitative research because of its exceptional nature. Cohen et al. (2011) and Denscombe (2014) pointed out that member checking is an effective technique for defining the accuracy and appropriateness of the research. Member checking was used in two ways in the current study: to evaluate the accuracy of transcription and to share results with the respondents. Negotiations with some of the academic staff at the Department of Education at University B focused on the accuracy of the transcriptions and their connection to the research purpose. Two bilingual Saudi PhD researchers at Reading University were asked to check the quality and the clarity of the focus group transcriptions and validate the equivalency of the Arabic version. Member checking means “checking with participants for feedback or verification of interpretation” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 477). Therefore, a further procedure is respondent validation, which can be done after producing the findings and returning them to the participants to share the

study results and data and check the validity of the findings. Furthermore, *transcript checking* was another reliability technique used to ensure that the transcripts did not contain any noticeable errors. In general, in qualitative phase of this study, the researcher tried to be objective so that the findings were not influenced by any personal judgments.

4.3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethics and morals play a fundamental role in educational research. Pring (2015) differentiated morals, which are concerned with right or wrong behaviour, and ethics, which are concerned with whether behaviours conform to basic principles. He defined *ethics* in educational settings as “the rules or principles which should be adhered to in the conduct of a piece of educational research” (p. 173). Understanding ethical issues is the researcher’s responsibility, and ethical behaviour should be implemented in all stages of the study. Bless, Smith, and Kagee (2006) asserted that the investigator has to maintain a careful balance between the right to look for information and participants’ rights to be protected.

As the current study used mixed methods, ethical concerns needed to be addressed for each phase of the study. In the quantitative phase, first the Ethical Approval form was completed and signed. The researcher’s supervisor and chair of the school’s Ethics Committee of Reading University also signed it (see Appendix I). This form certified that participants’ privacy and dignity would be respected. To gain access to University A and University B in Maddina, a letter was submitted to the deans of the preparatory year, requesting authorization and permission to conduct the study. Permission was ultimately given (see Appendix II). Informed consent from the participating students was also needed. The Ethical Guidelines on Research of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) requires participants to be informed about the process of the research, including the purposes of the research and its consequences. Bell and Miller (2012, as cited in Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller 2012) warned that obtaining consent via a form could be impractical if the participant does not recognize the complete process. Thus, informed consent was obtained and ensured that participants fully understood the research before conducting any stage. Each participant was shown an information sheet (see Appendix II) that identified the purpose of the study and nature of the data collection as well as declared the confidentiality and anonymity of the data.

It required them to indicate their voluntary participation, meaning they could decide to participate or leave the study at any point. Finally, they were asked to sign the consent form. To meet these guidelines in the qualitative phase, the same paperwork was filled out. During the first meeting with the participants, the aim of the study was explained, and the need to provide truthful opinions to help increase the trustworthiness of the study was highlighted. I introduced myself as a researcher at the University of Reading and indicated that the research findings would be used in the improvement of blended learning in Saudi universities to encourage seriousness in their discussions. At the beginning of all the interviews, I informed the participants of the expected timeframe of the interviews and obtained their permission to record the interviews on a digital recorder, reconfirming that the recording would be kept securely and would be transcribed by me.

Confidentiality and anonymity are also considered primary ethical aspects of educational research. Anonymity encompasses “that all the information given by participants not reveal their identities” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 91). To protect participants’ anonymity, numbers were assigned to returned questionnaires and aliases were assigned to interviewees. The data were not shared outside of the project, which made it more likely for participants to express their opinions freely. Hence, the information was kept confidential and, as the researcher, I did not discuss anything related to the participants with anyone (Cohen et al., 2011).

4.4 Summary

In this Methodology chapter, the rationale for the research philosophy, methods, and research design was examined to explore EFL Saudi students’ perceptions of the impact of blended learning on the development of their English language skills. An explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design fits the three research questions. The aim of the explanatory design was to use the qualitative phase to gain an in-depth understanding of the quantitative results. The details of the data collection and the data analysis were discussed. Quantitative survey data were gathered first, followed by an explanation of the survey results using in-depth qualitative focus group interview data. Reliability and validity concerns were considered for the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. Ethical issues, confidentiality, and anonymity of the data were also presented.

5 Chapter 5: Findings (Quantitative and qualitative)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter merged both quantitative and qualitative data around research questions related to Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning on the development of their academic English in each language skill (reading, listening, speaking, writing) as well as their recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia.

It first presents the findings from the descriptive statistical analysis of EFL students' perceptions concerning the use of blended learning in the development of English language skills, the strengths and weaknesses of this particular method. Then the chapter moves on to present the qualitative findings based on some important quantitative results that need further explanations.

In this study, blended learning is used as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool to describe the integration of face-to-face instructions with computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as virtual learning classes, online chats, discussion boards to help students use a range of online synchronous activities (occurring at the same time) and asynchronous activities (not occurring at the same time) that can enhance English language skills and autonomous learning as well as facilitate communications and engagement.

The main research questions are as follows:

1. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the benefits of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?
2. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?
3. What are Saudi EFL students' suggestions on how blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool could be useful to develop English language skills in the

preparatory year?

The questionnaire used in this study is divided into three main sections to identify individuals' opinions. The first section consists of demographic or background questions to assess individuals' personal characteristics, followed by data on students' Internet proficiencies, computer knowledge, and blended learning background experiences. The second part contains 40 Likert-type statements considering students' perceptions about the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning on the development of their academic English. The third section presents qualitative data through three open-ended questions about advantages, difficulties, and improvements to the blended learning setting to enhance their English proficiencies in Saudi Arabia's higher-education system. The quantitative analysis for both groups in one table was presented initially, followed by a table about the analysis of each institution.

The initial quantitative results were refined to themes to be asked in the second phase. A thematic analysis was used in this study to elicit details from the data by creating initial codes, themes, and sub-themes to make sensible connections between them. The content analysis was also chosen to allow for counting words that coded initially in the text.

As mentioned earlier in the Methodology chapter, the administrators responsible for students in the preparatory year on both campuses were asked to schedule appropriate times based on students' availability to distribute questionnaires. Following this schedule, the optimum period varied in each university; for example, in the first university, a suitable time was at the beginning of the lecture, whereas, in the second institution, it was at the end of the day. Lecturers offered 15 to 25 minutes of their lecture periods for distributing and gathering the questionnaires. The questionnaire was personally handed to the participants to ensure a high response rate. During the response time, the researcher circulated among students' rows to check that all items were filled out. All questionnaires were assigned numbers as ID, ranging from 001 to 310. Each EFL students' group was together in one class location, so that instructions could be easily explained and any problems or misunderstandings that might occur be quickly overcome.

In the second phase, EFL students were emailed to request interviews for the study. Permission was obtained to access to each campus, and 28 students agreed to participate in the focus groups. It was highlighted that participation was voluntary. A total of eight classes from both institutions were included in the four focus groups (two from each university), each containing six to eight students.

5.2 Demographic Information

The first section of the questionnaire included demographic or background questions divided into seven questions on grade point average (GPA), computer literacy, computer ownership, enjoying chatting about blended learning, whether blended learning is waste of time, Internet access, and Internet usage places. Table 5.1 presents the demographic information by summarizing the frequencies and percentages. The quantitative data from the current study were analysed using SPSS software.

Table 5.1
Students' Demographic Characteristics

| Questions | | Frequency | % |
|---|-------------------------------|-----------|------|
| 1. GPA | Excellent (from 4.50 to 5) | 123 | 39.7 |
| | Very good (from 3.75 to 4.49) | 104 | 33.5 |
| | Good (from 2.75 to 3.74) | 70 | 22.6 |
| | Acceptable (from 2 to 2.74) | 13 | 4.2 |
| 2. How do you rate your computer literacy | Weak | 8 | 2.6 |
| | Good | 145 | 46.8 |
| | Very Good | 106 | 34.2 |
| | Excellent | 51 | 16.5 |
| 3. Do you have a computer at home? | Yes | 310 | 100 |
| | No | | |
| 4. Do you enjoy talking with others about blended learning? | Yes | 242 | 78.1 |
| | No | 68 | 21.9 |
| 5. Do you agree with those who say blended learning is a waste of time? | Yes | 12 | 3.9 |
| | No | 298 | 96.1 |
| 6. Do you have access to the Internet at home? | Yes | 308 | 99.4 |
| | No | 2 | .6 |
| 7. Where do you prefer to use the Internet for blended learning? | All of them | 208 | 67.1 |
| | Other places | 70 | 22.6 |
| | At the university | 25 | 8.1 |
| | At home | 7 | 2.3 |

Table 5.1 shows that the majority of students in both universities (39.7% in the first term) have an excellent GPA: 33.5% had a very good grade, 22.6% had a good grade, and 4.2% had an acceptable grade. This information indicates that, in general, most students across the

groups had high scores in the first term, mainly because they had been accepted in their preferred major in the next year. Generally, students are keen on passing this critical stage as their acceptance heavily depends on it. Table 5.2 shows that over half (50.7%) of students were from University A who got very good grades. Followed by (47.2%) who got an excellent grade from University B. Therefore, the preparatory year is considered a significant stage in students' educational life in Saudi Arabia. Recently, the acceptance rate in Saudi universities has been relatively high, as will be discussed in more detail in the discussion chapter.

When students were asked to rate their computer skill levels in the second item (How do you rate your computer literacy), 81% of students from University A and 80.9% from University B indicated that they had a good to very good level of computer literacy. Whereas similar percentage of (2.6%) of students expressed their weak computer abilities. Generally, the majority reported the highest competencies in basic computer skills, such as Microsoft Office, email, Internet browsers, and Internet searches.

Regarding the third question ("Do you have a computer at home?"), Table 5.1 reveals that all of the students in both universities had either laptops or personal computers in their homes. This result was expected, as it indicates the extensive practical use of technology in Saudi Arabia.

Although the students practiced BL in the preparatory year, which is considered a transitional stage from the secondary level to the university level, the majority of participants (78.1%) enjoy chatting with others about it, as shown in the fourth question ("Do you enjoy talking with others about blended learnings") (see Table 5.1). They found the blended learning environment comfortable and interesting. However, (21.9%) showed no interest in discussing blended learning. The majority of respondents (82.7%) from University A and more than half (76.6%) were from University B reported positive answers to this question (see Table 5.2). This however indicates that they found eLearning environment comfortable and interesting.

Regarding the fifth question ("Do you agree with those who say blended learning is a waste of time?"), the majority of respondents expressed their positive feelings about the efficiency of blended learning (see Table 5.1). Only 12 students reported negative responses about the

statement. (96.2%) from University B and (96.0%) from University A appreciated eLearning and consider it beneficial.

Regarding Internet access at home, the majority of participants (99.4%) had access, indicating the massive utilization of Internet across the kingdom, as there has been continuous development in the IT infrastructure. However, it should be noted that, due to the conservative Saudi culture, the use of technology is controlled under Islamic rules. This will be examined in the discussion chapter. For the last question, which asked if they preferred to use the Internet for blended learning, more than two-thirds (78.7%) of participants preferred using it at home (see Table 5.1). Over two thirds (78.7%) from University A and (63.4%) students from University B were prefer to use the Internet at their homes (see Table 5.2). It was assumed that students who preferred to use the Internet at home would be more engaged in a blended learning platform. Meanwhile, 22.6% preferred using it at universities; only the smallest proportion of students (8.1%) used the Internet in the other places, and 2.3% used the Internet in all of the options mentioned. Thus, the majority of participants were comfortable using the Internet in their own homes (see Table 5.1).

As previously discussed, the participating EFL students were all in the preparatory year. The majority of them earned better GPA marks in the first term in order to be accepted in the desired majors if they passed the preparatory year, which included English as a core module in a blended learning environment. When students were asked to rate their computer skill levels, the majority reported the highest competencies in basic computer skills, such as Microsoft Office, email, Internet browsers, and Internet searches. This finding confirms that participants were confident with their computer skills. It is interesting to note that all participants in this study owned computers, as reported in question four. Furthermore, a similarly high proportion reported that they have access to the Internet at home, which might facilitate practicing with and engagement in BL platforms. The majority of participants appreciated blended learning and found it useful in terms of saving time and effort. Lastly, a comparison of participants' Internet access preference places found that the majority desired using it at home, followed by at the university.

Table 5.2

Demographic Comparison for Each University

| Demographic | | F | | % | |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | | University B | University A | University B | University A |
| 1- GPA | Excellent (4.50 to 5) | 111 | 12 | 47.2 | 16.0 |
| | Very good (3.75 to 4.49) | 66 | 38 | 28.1 | 50.7 |
| | Good (2.75 to 3.74) | 51 | 19 | 21.7 | 25.3 |
| | Acceptable (2 to 2.74) | 7 | 6 | 3.0 | 8.0 |
| 2- How do you rate your computer literacy | Weak | 6 | 2 | 2.6 | 2.7 |
| | Good | 105 | 40 | 44.7 | 53.3 |
| | Very Good | 85 | 21 | 36.2 | 28.0 |
| | Excellent | 39 | 12 | 16.6 | 16.0 |
| 3- Do you have a computer at home | Yes | 235 | 75 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| | No | | | | |
| 4- Do you enjoy talking with others about blended learning | Yes | 180 | 62 | 76.6 | 82.7 |
| | No | 55 | 13 | 23.4 | 17.3 |
| 5- Do you agree with those who say blended learning is a waste of time | Yes | 9 | 3 | 3.8 | 4.0 |
| | No | 226 | 72 | 96.2 | 96.0 |
| 6- Do you have access to the Internet at home | Yes | 233 | 75 | 99.1 | 100.0 |
| | No | 2 | | .9 | |
| 7- where do you prefer to use the Internet for blended learning | At home | 194 | 59 | 63.4 | 78.7 |
| | At the university | 64 | 6 | 27.2 | 8.0 |
| | Other places | 16 | 7 | 7.7 | 9.3 |
| | All of them | 4 | 3 | 1.7 | 4.0 |

The following section moves the analysis forward by examining EFL students' perceptions concerning the key strengths and weaknesses of blended learning on the development of their academic English as well as their recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia.

5.3 Findings Related to Research Question 1 (What are Saudi EFL Students' Perceptions Concerning the Benefits of Developing English language skills using Blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?)

This section first presents quantitative followed by qualitative results relating to the first question. As previously stated, 40 Likert-type statements explored English language skills that students developed or enhanced through blended learning courses. The statements

considered students' perceptions about general and specific English skills that they developed by using blended learning for improving their English language skills in Saudi Arabia's higher education system. Frequencies (F) and percentages were employed for each of the six main sections of the questionnaire (i.e., reading skills, writing skills, listening skills, speaking skills, advantages, and limitations) to describe participants' thoughts from both universities. However, standard deviation (SD) was reported only for the statements with a higher value to indicate the extent of differences between perceptions in this particular question. Responses to each statement were scored as follows: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = undecided; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.

5.3.1 Academic Reading Skills

In the central sections of the questionnaire, the first part about reading skills contains eight questions. This section aims to explore specific reading skills developed and enhanced by the use of blended learning, which contributed to reading comprehension, academic reading proficiency, and consequently academic success. Reading skills statements in this section concentrate on significant issues identified in the literature review, such as vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies, and the role of general knowledge to comprehend the reading text. Table 5.3 shows the mean, standard deviation (SD), frequencies (F), and percentages for each statement in the questionnaire in this section for participants from both universities. At the bottom of the table, the general mean score has been calculated to facilitate the interpretation of the results. A brief concluding section sets out the key findings in both institutions about particular language skills.

As shown in Table 5.3, the highest mean is 4.07 in the first statement (I think that using blended learning helps me gain new vocabulary), followed by the mean of 3.96 in the fifth statement (I think that using blended learning helps me improve my skimming reading strategy), 3.92 in the sixth statement (I think that using e-learning helps me improve my scanning reading strategy), and the lowest mean of 3.28 in the third statement (I prefer to learn reading skills from printed books rather than from electronic materials). Moreover, the general mean score for this section was 3.83, which revealed high agreement among

participants, who believed that the use of blended learning supported academic reading proficiency.

Table 5.3

Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Reading Skills for Both Universities

| Reading skills | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|------|------|-------------------|------------|----------|------------|----------------|------------|-----|------------|-----|------------|--|
| Items | Mean | SD | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | | |
| | | | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Not sure | Agree | Strongly agree | | | | | | |
| | | | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | |
| 1. I think that using blended learning helps me gain new vocabulary. | 4.7 | 1.05 | 12 | 3.9 | 12 | 3.9 | 53 | 17.1 | 99 | 31.9 | 134 | 43.2 | |
| 2. I think that using blended learning helps me recognize synonyms and antonyms in the text. | 3.91 | .99 | 5 | 1.6 | 21 | 6.8 | 74 | 23.9 | 107 | 34.5 | 103 | 33.2 | |
| 3. I prefer to learn reading skills from printed books rather than from electronic materials. | 3.28 | 1.24 | 23 | 7.1 | 67 | 21.6 | 92 | 29.7 | 57 | 18.4 | 71 | 22.9 | |
| 4. I think that using blended learning helps me easily understand the text. | 3.83 | 1.05 | 12 | 3.9 | 21 | 6.5 | 69 | 22.3 | 114 | 36.8 | 94 | 30.3 | |
| 5. I think that using blended learning helps me improve my skimming reading strategy. | 3.96 | .99 | 3 | 1.0 | 26 | 4.8 | 64 | 20.6 | 103 | 33.2 | 114 | 36.8 | |
| 6. I think that using blended learning helps me improve my scanning reading strategy. | 3.92 | .97 | 2 | 0.6 | 28 | 9.0 | 64 | 20.3 | 115 | 37.1 | 100 | 31.9 | |
| 7. I think that using blended learning helps me relate my general knowledge to the text topic. | 3.85 | .97 | 3 | 1.0 | 30 | 9.7 | 65 | 20.6 | 125 | 40.3 | 87 | 28.1 | |
| 8. I think that using blended learning helps me improve my reading speed in general. | 3.87 | 1.09 | 11 | 3.5 | 27 | 8.7 | 60 | 19.4 | 104 | 33.5 | 108 | 34.8 | |
| Result | 3.83 | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 5.4

Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Each University

| Reading skills | 1 strongly disagree | | 2 Disagree | | 3 Not sure | | 4 Agree | | 5 Strongly agree | | Items |
|----------------|------------------------|-----|---------------|------|---------------|------|------------|------|---------------------|------|---|
| | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | |
| University B | 8 | 3.4 | 6 | 2.6 | 40 | 17.0 | 70 | 29.8 | 111 | 47.2 | 1- I think that using blended learning helps me gain new vocabulary |
| University A | 4 | 5.3 | 6 | 8.0 | 13 | 17.3 | 29 | 38.7 | 23 | 30.7 | |
| University B | 3 | 1.3 | 15 | 6.4 | 54 | 23.0 | 75 | 31.9 | 88 | 37.4 | 2- I think that using blended learning helps me recognize synonyms and antonyms in the text |
| University A | 2 | 2.7 | 6 | 8.0 | 20 | 26.7 | 32 | 42.7 | 15 | 20.0 | |
| University B | 16 | 6.8 | 53 | 22.6 | 83 | 35.3 | 35 | 14.9 | 48 | 20.4 | 3- I prefer to learn reading skills from book rather than from blended learning course |
| University A | 7 | 9.3 | 14 | 18.7 | 9 | 12.0 | 22 | 29.3 | 23 | 30.7 | |
| University B | 6 | 2.6 | 17 | 7.2 | 52 | 22.1 | 84 | 35.7 | 76 | 32.3 | 4- I think that using blended learning helps me easily understand the text |
| University A | 6 | 8.0 | 4 | 5.3 | 17 | 22.7 | 30 | 40.0 | 18 | 24.0 | |
| University B | 3 | 1.3 | 18 | 7.7 | 50 | 21.3 | 71 | 30.2 | 93 | 93.6 | 5- I think that using blended learning helps me improve my skimming reading strategy |
| University A | 0.0 | 0.0 | 8 | 10.7 | 14 | 18.7 | 32 | 42.7 | 21 | 28.0 | |
| University B | 2 | .9 | 22 | 9.4 | 47 | 20.0 | 85 | 36.2 | 79 | 33.6 | 6- I think that using e learning helps me improve my scanning reading strategy |
| University A | 0.0 | 0.0 | 6 | 8.0 | 17 | 22.7 | 31 | 41.3 | 21 | 28.0 | |
| University B | 3 | 1.3 | 20 | 8.5 | 50 | 21.3 | 96 | 40.9 | 66 | 28.1 | 7- I think that using blended learning helps me relate my general knowledge to the text topic |
| University A | 0.0 | 0.0 | 10 | 13.3 | 15 | 20.0 | 29 | 38.7 | 21 | 28.0 | |
| University B | 9 | 3.8 | 16 | 6.8 | 4.6 | 19.6 | 73 | 31.1 | 91 | 38.7 | 8- I think that using blended learning helps me improve my reading speed in general |
| University A | 2 | 2.7 | 11 | 14.7 | 14 | 18.7 | 31 | 41.3 | 17 | 22.7 | |

EFL students in both groups expressed the highest positive responses regarding the development of new vocabulary through the use of Internet for supplementary reading within blended learning in statement 1 (I think that using blended learning helps me gain new vocabulary; 75.1%), followed by statement 5 (I think that using blended learning helps in skimming reading strategy; 70%), and statement 6 (I think that using blended learning helps me improve my scanning reading strategy; 69.0%). However, statements 4, 7, and 8, which concerned the development of general understanding while reading, relating information with the reading text, and developing the general speed reading skill, resulted in slightly similar responses. Finally, in statement 3 (I prefer to learn from printed books rather than electronic materials), both groups expressed little motivation (i.e., 41.3%; see Table 5.3).

When students were asked about the usefulness of blended learning to increase new English words (i.e., I think that using blended learning helps me gain new vocabulary), the participants agreed with the statement: (43.2%) strongly agreed and (31.9%) agreed. Less than (8.0%) reported negative opinions in both universities. The participants from University B (77%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. Similarly, at University A a larger proportion (69.4 %) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement (see Table 5.4). This indicates that students believed that the use of blended learning enhanced the acquisition of English vocabulary. This statement had the highest mean score of 4.07 and standard deviation of 1.05, as shown in Table 5.3. Although this positive rating is high, (17.1%) of the students in both universities were not sure about the statement.

In regard to blended learning helping students distinguish synonyms and antonyms in the text (i.e., I think that using blended learning helps me recognize synonyms and antonyms in the text), in general, the majority of participants (67.7%) in both groups positively rated the item. Thus, they believed that the use of blended learning supported their English reading skills in terms of differentiating between antonyms and synonyms in reading text, which helped them read more fluently. Over half of the respondents (69.4%) from University B strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. A similar proportion from University A (62.7%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement (see Table 5.4). What is surprising is that the larger percentage (26.7%) of students uncertain about this item were from University A, compared to 23.0% from University B (see Table 5.4).

With regard to the third question (I prefer to learn reading skills from printed books rather than from electronic materials), one unanticipated finding was that some of the participants favoured printed books rather than electronic materials when reading English text. Table 5.3 reveals that less than half of the participants (41.3%) in both universities generally agreed to learn from regular books than electronic books. Table 5.3 shows the lowest mean at 3.28. The SD for this statement was the highest (1.24), indicating that participants' perceptions spread wider from the mean. In other words, there were differences between students' perceptions when this question was answered. one unanticipated finding was that most of participants from University A prefer books than course book website. More than one third (35.3%) of the students from University B and more than half (60%) from University A strongly agreed or agreed with the statement (see Table 5.4). This result further support that although blended learning is considered as convenient from students' thoughts, they do desire reading from printed textbooks or hard copies to enhance their reading comprehension. As participants were undergraduate students, they were required to read a variety of reading materials online. It is somewhat surprising that more than 80 students from the total sample 235 of the participants from University B were unsure about this item.

With respect to the fourth statement (I think that using blended learning helps me easily understand the text), more than two-thirds of EFL students (67%) from both institutions thought that blended learning benefitted them in understanding and getting more involved in the text while reading (see Table 5.3). More than two thirds of EFL students (68%) from University B agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning helps them become more familiar with text while reading (Table 5.4). Likewise, students at University A (64%) strongly agreed that BL promoted interactions being built between students and the text. This indicates that participants believed using blended learning in the EFL classroom supports and facilitates English reading comprehension.

Regarding the fifth and sixth statements (I think that using blended learning helps me improve my skimming reading strategy and I think that using blended learning helps me improve my scanning reading strategy, respectively), an even higher similar proportion of participants, 70.0% and 69.3%, respectively, agreed or strongly agreed. However, these statements were

the second and third most highly ranked statements in the questionnaire, with a mean of 3.96 for both universities. A higher proportion of participants from University A (70.7%) than University B (69.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning positively affected their skimming reading technique. These findings reveal that students believed the use of blended learning promotes reading for a specific purpose and improved strategies. Turning now to the sixth statement as the previous one, most of the participants from both universities were positively rated BL learning when they practiced scanning reading strategy: 69.8% from University B and 28% from University A agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

In response to the seventh statement (I think that using blended learning helps me relate my general knowledge to the text topic) and last item (I think that using blended learning helps me improve my reading speed in general), more half of the students agreed or strongly agreed (68.4% and 68.3%, respectively). Over half of the students from University B (69%) and a similar proportion (66.7%) from University A agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning supported their understanding of English text when they could relate their previous information to the reading text. However, 21.3% in both universities were unconfident about the answer (see Table 5.4). There was a strong agreement between respondents in both universities (64% from University A and 69.8% from University B) with statement eight (see Table 5.4). These results indicate EFL students perceived blended learning as supporting comprehension of the text when they could relate their previous information to the reading text and improve their general reading speed ability.

This section has presented participants' views concerning the reading skills developed in the blended learning environment during the preparatory year. In general, students' perceptions across both institutions were quite similar. Both groups of students believed that the integration of face-to-face instructions with computer-mediated communication (CMC) in a blended learning environment was useful for improving reading comprehension. However, the lowest responses indicated that they still valued reading from books rather than electronic materials, particularly at University A. Furthermore, participants reported similarly positive opinions in the second group of statements, which concerned different strategies improved by using blended learning, such as skimming, relating existing information with the reading text, and making general speed-reading progress. Students at University A conveyed slightly less

positive responses than students in University B to two items concerning different strategies improved by using blended learning by scanning.

Reading skills are possibly more complicated than any other skill as they provide the basis for success at university. As the participating students had recently graduated from high school, all these skills were new to them. The majority of students from both universities believed blended learning to be useful for supporting reading comprehension and expanding their knowledge about unfamiliar vocabularies. This feature seems to be crucial to EFL students because vocabulary is the most challenging aspect for EFL students in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, they continue reading to understand sentences and paragraph better by employing different reading strategies. Indeed, they believed that they could read texts strategically, combined with their own background knowledge, to build comprehension. The next section presents qualitative findings related to the reading skills.

Table 5.5 shows the frequency and percentage of students' perceived reading skills developed in several areas. The majority of the students (N=20, 71.4%) thought that BL improved their reading comprehension and critical thinking and maximized their reading opportunities. More than two-thirds of students (N=19, 67.9%) appreciated that BL helped them increase their academic vocabulary. In addition, most participants (N=18, 64.3%) believed that blended learning (on-/offline) reading has influenced some reading strategies (e.g., speed-reading, skimming, and scanning). More than half of participants (N=15, 53.6%) indicated that electronic library websites assisted them in developing academic reading skills and research projects. Half of the participants (N=14, 50%) viewed blended learning courses as having helped them increase their GPA on the reading section test, and they were satisfied with their performance. Five sub-themes emerged from this skill, as outlined in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5

Five Sub-themes Related to Academic Reading Skills Theme

| Theme | Sub-themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|---|-----------|------------|
| Academic reading skills | 1- BL enhances reading comprehension | 20 | 71.4% |
| | 2- BL develops English vocabulary building | 19 | 67.9% |
| | 3- BL supports reading strategies | 18 | 64.3% |
| | 4- BL enhances research skills through electronic library | 15 | 53.6% |
| | 5- BL increases EFL students' reading satisfaction and outcomes | 14 | 50% |

5.3.1.1 BL Enhances Reading Comprehension

The majority of EFL students (N=20, 71.4%) reported that blended reading is a major influence for increasing their understanding and knowledge about significant topics. They believed that BL supported their reading comprehension and critical thinking and maximized their reading opportunities to extend and discover their knowledge as the internet has a richness of reading resources. Ghada (FG1) revealed:

I feel reading in English is becoming easier on-/offline [...] I can save any viewpoints and underline any difficult words, grammar to facilitate understanding the reading text very quickly. It helps me improve and practice my critical thinking ability. I can also talk to my friend about any reading difficulties or improvement. Furthermore, the online reading test has different useful tips that helped with time management.

Maha (FG3) thought that mixture between online reading classes and f2f classes facilitated her understanding by providing more opportunities to practice reading, especially of controversial and complicated topics.

I couldn't imagine that I could understand complex topics such as global threats and sustainable developments until I participated in online learning. For example, we used

different multimedia tools such as short videos or educational TV episodes are helpful because they provided me with more chances to practice reading to extend the world knowledge. Then, in f2f classes, I related my previous information to the reading topic to make it more understandable.

Sara (in FG1) illustrated the same point:

When I have f2f reading classes, I try to guess what will happen in the reading text first from the printed books. It takes a long time. When I get confused, I try to use Google search after classes to translate, practice or to read similar topics to expand my knowledge. So, my understanding ability has gradually improved while I experience both (on-/offline) topics [...] I can understand online chats more easily than before.

In addition, three students agreed that the instructor assisted them in becoming more engaged in online reading and linking face-to-face and online learning. Narjis (in FG1) explained:

In blended learning, I enjoy reading in English because I have enough time to read on/off line. So, I understand what I am reading. So, for example, our tutor creates a very good strategy to connect both settings [face-to-face and online learning] to teach us the reading passage. She gives us a reading text twice: one [face-to-face] in the lecture for discussion and one [online] to read again to answer the related questions. I like peer discussion in online classes as I can learn from them. This is very helpful to support my reading comprehension.

Furthermore, 10 of the 28 students revealed reading in the university's online system through the *Touchstone* books series and its online platform. Huda (in FG2) explained that:

I found reading boring at the beginning. I thought it might cause me to fail the course. But later on, when we used some interesting online reading activities at www.touchstone/online-platform, I found it useful and I became more engaged in reading tasks in f2f classes as well—and understood more. Recently, I used my mobile phone to read my friend's text messages in English which helped me memorize some words. I changed the mobile language from Arabic to English.

However, some students liked to read from printed textbooks in order to understand the reading text whereas others preferred electronic reading. Mariam (FG1) preferred reading printed textbooks: “Honestly, I prefer printed textbooks than online reading. It makes me concentrate more.” Meanwhile, two students agreed that they prefer reading in English in the online setting and in Arabic in written books. Mona stated that “reading in English is becoming easier online. But I like to read the same text from written books in Arabic either to understand the general idea about the text”.

5.3.1.2 BL Develops English Vocabulary Building

More than two-thirds of students (N=19, 67.9%) perceived BL to support their academic vocabulary by encouraging them to download an electronic dictionary for academic English. Azeeza (in FG4) stated that:

After I have a reading task in f2f class, I normally go and search online. It is becoming a habit for me. Different diagrams, pictures, tables are very useful. In addition, I downloaded an electronic dictionary to my mobile phone, which facilitated my understanding of difficult academic words. Interactive chatting helped me expand my academic vocabulary, which is very useful for understanding the text and doing my assignments and different essays.

Ahlam (in FG3) affirmed:

I think my reading skills have improved through extensive tasks we have done through <http://www.University A.englishtown.com/partner/Corp/default.aspx> online system. In class, we have read about different topics, which enriched my knowledge. I have more chances to read and write to communicate with my friends in English most of the time. So, at the end of the day, I find myself memorizing a lot of new words, which enables me to practice some vocabulary learned in class. In addition, social media applications such as Snapchat and WhatsApp are very helpful to combine with f2f classes.

Amal (FG2) also believed that “I have read a variety of topics online and then discussed them in f2f class. This helped me build up my own academic vocabulary and use it on different occasions”.

Ghada (in FG1) indicated that:

I think I have gained many more academic and non-academic words than before. For example, in virtual classes, I read online instructions and rules, which contained a great number of new words. Then I generated a list of new words in Microsoft Word for each unit and tried to use them in class to memorize them. I updated them frequently.

The analysis of open-ended questions showed that 118 participants believed the mixing between on-/offline reading, increased the English vocabulary as they could use in conversation or writing. Others added that vocabulary development helped them carry on a conversation and instantly remember the appropriate word to use during it.

5.3.1.3 BL Supports Reading Strategies

Likewise, more than half of participants (N=18, 64.3%) noticed that blended (on-/offline) reading influenced some reading strategies (e.g., speed-reading, skimming, and scanning) as they involved in online reading to evaluate the knowledge. Nada (in FG1) stated that:

Blended (on-/offline) reading is very motivating for me to read massive resources. It develops my speed-reading strategy more than reading from textbooks only. It also saves my time; when I am searching online, I try to limit my search to specific information so I get what I want very quickly.

Similarly, other students perceived that blended (on-/offline) reading improved their reading skills, including skimming, scanning, and organizing reading wisely—in other words, reading for a purpose. Ameera and Ameena (in FG4) as well as Sana (in FG1) described their development while practicing reading online. For example, Ameera stated that:

Generally, I think the blended (on-/offline) reading helped me organize my reading, I mean reading for a purpose. For example, when I do research, I use online websites.

Then, in f2f class, I learned how to organize my time to analyse the text quickly and understand general ideas. I have a richer background about different academic topics.

Sana stated that “blended (on-/offline) reading facilitated looking for specific information [scanning] instead of wasting time understanding each single word, and having a general look at headings, sub-headings to understand the text”. This quote shows that students were becoming aware of being more focused while reading English text. Likewise, Ameena (in FG4) said:

The tutor gave us the topic and made the discussion in the face-to-face lecture. Then she asked us to search online for a specific topic and asked us to understand the writer’s main points by skimming. This helped me read quickly and purposefully.

When responding to the open-ended questions, students frequently commented (223 times) that they developed several reading techniques, such as speed-reading, to answer related reading questions.

5.3.1.4 BL Enhances Research Skills via the Electronic Library

More than half of the students (N=15, 53.6%) perceived blended (on-/offline) reading to support their research skills through the use of electronic library websites as additional online resources. They revealed that the main purpose for using an online library was for research projects. They also believed that the online library helped them save time when looking for information for their assignments.

Haia (in FG3) shared her opinion with others in the same group:

We take the topic of the project in f2f class, then we are asked to go and search for it online. The online platform has a massive range of reading sources. I can read and increase academic words at the same time. Later, I can use these words, which I have gained in several situations. The electronic library is very beneficial, especially for research. For example, it contains valuable [books] with easy language, which encouraged me to buy some of them to read.

Mona (in FG3) perceived that the electronic library helped her seek the required information

while doing research very fast. “As a part of our English class, we were asked to visit an electronic library. In the online library, I read lots of academic materials, such as journal articles and academic topics. It was very useful.”

Thirteen of the 28 students thought that Internet searches were easier than going to the library to read or borrow books or other references. Zohoor (in FG4) mentioned that:

In the past, I used to go to the library to read several books there, and I wasted time searching about a similar topic to understand the one I was reading. Searching through an electronic library is very stress-free and comfortable for me. It contains a large number of reading texts that I can explore with a single click.

This indicates that flexibility in accessing information via online reading materials at any time was an additional key advantage of blended learning. The students believed that such advantages are eliminated when visiting the library to search for knowledge, wasting a lot of time when the same information is available online. Flexibility is a crucial feature, particularly for part-time students or those who returned to their studies after a long absence (e.g., non-traditional students).

However, others believed that the electronic library enhanced their reading skills to support academic writing at the same time. In the same group, Zahra (in FG4) said that “I think the more I read, the better I will be. The electronic library helped me read more and more and saves time. I also believe that, when my reading improves, my writing will also improve”.

In contrast, three students disagreed that the electronic library saved time and effort when using it for research. Ghada (in FG1) expressed her negative response:

I think it is better to read directly from books in class; it saves more time to go to the library to find out exactly what I want. After I spent hours in online searching, I didn't get what I want [...]. It took extra time. For me it is easier to research from books in the library. Also, I found the online library website to be very difficult. I think it is only suited for academic or professional users.

This quote shows that some students need assistance to guide them in using the electronic

library effectively.

Surprisingly, three of the 28 students stated that they did not know about the electronic library at all. They stated that they heard about university information from their classmates, suggesting that there is a lack of required information about university facilities and educational services for these first-year students. This obstacle will be further discussed in the challenges section. Bodoor (in FG3) reported that:

By chance, I knew that there is an electronic library available from my colleagues. They helped me register to create user name and password to start using library. I was totally impressed while using great sources while doing my research project. I enjoyed searching and reading there. It saves me time and efforts.

Only three students complained about language difficulty while using the online library. Mariam (in FG1) revealed that “the language on the electronic library website is very difficult for me to understand”.

More than 200 of the 310 EFL participants frequently responded to the open-ended questions that they believed the use of blended learning supported them in improving their research skills as they were required to submit several assignments that relied heavily on research during the preparatory year. They also thought the computer literacy skills they developed through the frequent usage of online resources. Still, others continued to suffer from needing to further develop some technological skills.

Generally, these findings suggest that students enjoy reading from the electronic library to develop their reading skills while managing the required research for their course. Very few of them displayed negative perceptions about language complexity when practicing online reading from the digital library. EFL students perceived online searches through BL to be enabling them to access information from any part of the world. The limitless use of online audio and video materials, e-books, and external references from related websites contribute to delivering the information more quickly than traditional approaches to learning. In other words, students believed that blended learning encourages students to use online resources that support English learning to develop understanding. The respondents in this study

believed that BL enabled them to explore and investigate a certain number of topics, which further supported learning and understanding.

5.3.1.5 BL Increases EFL Students' Reading Satisfaction and Outcomes

Half of students' comments (N=14, 50%) perceived blended learning to be enhancing their motivation and outcomes. They kept learning without losing enthusiasm. The online university system contains different activities and collaborative learning tools that help students develop their language skills and allow them to interact virtually with their English language instructors. Sana (in FG1) showed gradual improvement since the beginning of the course. She expressed her interest in reading even during vacation by logging in to the system to develop her English reading skills. According to Sana:

At the beginning, I spent a long time studying, making too much effort—unfortunately without any benefits later on. I think my whole language has been enhanced well. The combined f2f and virtual learning is very useful. I found [http://www.University A.englishtown.com/partner/Corp/default.aspx](http://www.UniversityA.englishtown.com/partner/Corp/default.aspx) is useful for developing English skills. It is a virtual platform communication website that we can register on and read different topics. I really enjoyed and want to learn more—even on vacation.

Likewise, other students indicated that they becoming more engaged and would suggest the course to friends. Amal (in FG2) mentioned that “I enjoyed the (on-/offline) reading exercises and short stories, and I have a desire to do more and more of them. I will convince my friend to enrol in a university that employs blended courses. It is interesting”.

Relatedly, Nora (in FG1) commented that “I like what I do. I have a better attitude towards mixing both kinds of (on-/offline) reading”. These quotes show that, within the blended learning platform, students became more excited and enthusiastic about enhancing their language learning.

Students believed that the blended course helped them increase their GPA on the reading section test in the first semester, and they were satisfied with their performance. For example, Mona (in FG3) said during the interview that “I am pleased with my progress. The (on-/offline) reading is very helpful for gaining additional credits in the test”. Others reported that

the online quiz was a good opportunity to increase their credits. For example, Maha (in FG3) reported that “I got a higher mark on the online quiz during the last term”. Zohoor (in FG4) revealed that both online and f2f interactions with instructors and peers supported her scores:

I enjoyed all the (on-/offline) reading activities [...]. In my opinion, communication with a tutor and classmates—all these really helped me get good results. I am satisfied with my progress as my score developed quite a bit, especially on the reading section.

Similarly, Zahra (in FG4) stated that online interactions through online lectures helped her increase her score level.

I think mixing (on-/offline) interactions facilitates language learning. I think there is no excuse if anyone cannot earn a higher GPA [...]. I got higher score on the reading practice test than last semester. There is a massive amount of online learning activities and lectures that each student can benefit from, so it is their fault if they are not able to increase their score.

Altogether, these results indicated that EFL students perceived blended learning and its limitless resources to be providing a great opportunity to practice what they learn and ultimately develop their learning outcomes. Considering all of this evidence, it seems that most participants believed that mixing online learning with traditional learning supports their comprehension, accessibility, reading strategies, and research skills while reading in English.

5.3.2 Academic Listening skills

The second section of the questionnaire focused on listening skills that EFL students developed by using blended learning in the preparatory year. It contained six questions (from 9 to 14). This section investigated students’ perceptions about specific listening skills developed and improved through the use of blended learning that contributed to listening understanding, academic listening proficiency, and consequently academic success. Statements in this section focused on significant listening skills, such as developing the listener’s ability to predict, practicing autonomous listening, and preparing listeners to interact in real-life listening situations. Table 5.6 shows the means, standard deviations (SD), frequencies (F), and percentages for each statement in the questionnaire in this section for

both universities. At the bottom of the table, the general mean score has been calculated to facilitate interpretation of the results. A brief concluding section reviews the key findings about particular language skills for both institutions.

Table 5.6

Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Listening Skills for Both Universities

| Listening skills | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------|------|-------------------|------------|----------|------------|----------------|------------|-----|------------|-----|------------|
| Items | Mean | SD | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | |
| | | | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Not sure | Agree | Strongly agree | | | | | |
| | | | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage |
| 1. Blended learning helps me predict what will happen in the context while listening | 3.82 | 1.02 | 6 | 1.9 | 30 | 9.7 | 68 | 21.9 | 116 | 37.4 | 90 | 28.7 |
| 2. The listening activities provided in Blackboard are difficult to follow. | 2.90 | 1.10 | 39 | 12.6 | 66 | 21.3 | 116 | 37.4 | 66 | 21.3 | 23 | 7.4 |
| 3. Blended learning develops my ability to focus on different sounds in speech to match them to relevant listening questions. | 3.99 | .98 | 6 | 1.9 | 20 | 6.5 | 56 | 18.1 | 117 | 37.7 | 111 | 35.8 |
| 4. Blended learning listening activities enable me to practice listening whenever I wish. | 4.09 | .95 | 5 | 1.6 | 14 | 4.5 | 55 | 17.7 | 111 | 35.8 | 125 | 40.0 |
| 5. My listening communications improved with blended learning. | 4.26 | .87 | 3 | 1.0 | 14 | 4.5 | 29 | 9.4 | 116 | 37.4 | 148 | 47.4 |
| 6. Blended learning prepares me for interactive listening in real life. | 4.02 | .96 | 3 | 1.0 | 17 | 5.5 | 73 | 23.5 | 96 | 30.3 | 121 | 39.0 |
| Result 3.84 | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 5.7

| Listening skills | 1 strongly disagree | | 2 Disagree | | 3 Not sure | | 4 Agree | | 5 Strongly agree | | Items |
|------------------|------------------------|------|---------------|------|---------------|------|------------|------|---------------------|------|--|
| | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | |
| University B | 5 | 2.1 | 20 | 8.5 | 50 | 21.3 | 88 | 37.4 | 72 | 30.6 | 1- Blended learning helps me predict what will happen in the context |
| University A | 1 | 1.3 | 10 | 13.3 | 18 | 24.0 | 28 | 37.3 | 18 | 24.0 | |
| University B | 32 | 13.6 | 49 | 20.9 | 96 | 40.9 | 45 | 19.1 | 13 | 5.5 | 2- The listening activities provided in blackboard are difficult to follow |
| University A | 7 | 9.3 | 17 | 22.7 | 20 | 26.7 | 21 | 28.0 | 10 | 13.3 | |
| University B | 4 | 1.7 | 15 | 6.4 | 42 | 17.9 | 82 | 34.9 | 92 | 39.1 | 3- Blended learning develops my ability to focus on different sounds in speech to match them to relevant listening questions |
| University A | 2 | 2.7 | 5 | 6.7 | 14 | 18.7 | 35 | 46.7 | 19 | 25.3 | |
| University B | 4 | 1.7 | 11 | 4.7 | 4.2 | 17.9 | 81 | 34.5 | 97 | 41.3 | 4- Blended learning listening activities enable me to practice listening whenever I wish |
| University A | 1 | 1.3 | 3 | 4.0 | 13 | 17.3 | 30 | 40.0 | 28 | 37.3 | |
| University B | 2 | .9 | 13 | 5.5 | 21 | 8.9 | 86 | 36.6 | 113 | 48.1 | 5- My listening communications improved with blended learning |
| University A | 1 | 1.3 | 1 | 1.3 | 8 | 10.7 | 30 | 40.0 | 35 | 46.7 | |
| University B | 1 | .4 | 14 | 6.0 | 52 | 22.1 | 75 | 31.9 | 93 | 39.6 | 6- Blended learning prepares me for interactive listening in real life |
| University A | 2 | 2.7 | 3 | 4.0 | 21 | 28.0 | 21 | 28.0 | 28 | 37.3 | |

Frequencies and Percentages for Listening Skills in Each University

Table 5.6 reveals the mean and standard deviation for each item in this questionnaire section. The highest mean was 4.26 in the fifth statement (my listening communications improved with blended learning), followed by 4.09 in the fourth statement (Blended learning activities enable me to practice listening whenever I wish), 4.02 in the sixth statement (Blended learning prepares me for interactive listening in real life), 3.99 in the third statement (Blended learning develops my ability to focus on different sounds in speech to match them to relevant

questions), 3.82 in the first statement (Blended learning helps me predict what will happen in the context), and finally 2.90 (the lowest mean) in the second statement (The listening instructions provided in Blackboard are difficult to follow).

In general, statement five (My listening communications improved with blended learning) ranked first, as most EFL students in both groups (84.8%) believed that their communication skills in listening situations were improved when using blended learning. The limitless video and audio listening activities have a considerable effect on listening communication development. Next was statement four (Blended learning listening activities enable me to practice listening whenever I wish), with (75.8%) agreement, and statement three (Blended learning develops my ability to focus on different sounds in speech to match them to relevant listening questions), with (73.5%) agreement. These slightly similar positive responses indicate that students believed an independent listener has the ability to develop skills by practicing anytime he or she wishes. The last statement (Blended learning prepares me for interactive listening in real life) ranked fourth (69.3%), which indicates that they thought technology appropriately prepares listeners to interact in real listening situations. However, in the second statement (The listening activities provided in Blackboard are difficult to follow), participants reported slightly lower responses, with (33.9%) strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the statement. This suggests that blended learning listening activities in the Blackboard system are clear and easy to follow only to a limited extent.

In regard to the first item (Blended learning helps me predict what will happen in the context), more than half of the respondents (66.1%) in both universities strongly agreed or agreed that blended learning helps students expect what will occur in the situation to which they are listening. This indicates that students thought online setting gives students opportunities to interact with the listening context and anticipate what is going on. Over half of students from both University A and B (61.3% and 67.6%, respectively) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. Approximately 50 (of 235) students from University B and 18 (of 75) from University A were uncertain about the answers (see Table 5.7).

With respect to the second statement (The listening activities provided in Blackboard are difficult to follow), (33.9%) of the respondents from both universities strongly disagreed or

disagreed that they faced some difficulties in the Blackboard system, while (28.7%) of the students strongly agreed or agreed with this item (see Table 5.6). This indicates that there is a slight lack of clear instructions to facilitate the Blackboard system for the students, which was new to them. However, some participants (37.4%) were still not sure about the statement. The SD in this statement was highest (1.10), which indicated that participants' perceptions spread wider from the mean. This shows that students' perceptions about this question were slightly different between each other. Students' responses are relatively higher in University A than University B; 41.3% of the respondents from University A strongly agreed or agreed that they had some struggles with the Blackboard online system compared to 34.5% of students from University B (see Table 5.7).

Regarding the third item (Blended learning develops my ability to focus on different sounds in speech to match them to relevant questions), a high proportion of participants from both University A and B (72% and 74%, respectively) strongly agreed or agreed that the online setting has developed their listening skills to differentiate between a variety of sounds and helped them answer different questions (see Tables 5.6 and 5.7).

The next statement related to blended learning activities enabling students to practice listening whenever they desired; strong agreement was found amongst the participants as long as they have Internet access. Indeed, (75.8%) of all the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with this item (see Table 5.6), indicating that students believed blended learning provides flexibility in terms of when they could practice the language without time pressure, which is one of the major attractions for learners. There was a strong agreement amongst the participants as they thought that blended learning environment gave them opportunity to practice listening at any time appropriate for them as long as they have Internet access. (75.8%) of the respondents were from University B and (77.3%) were from University A strongly agreed or agreed with this item (see Table 5.7). This indicates that students perceived blended learning to be providing them with flexibility in time so they could practice the language without time pressure—a major attraction for learners.

The next statement (i.e., listening communications improved while listening by using blended learning) received the highest positive responses (84.8%) and highest mean (4.26) in both

universities (see Table 5.6). Whereas, a similarly high proportion of students from University B (84.7%) and University A (85.3%) agreed or strongly agreed with this item (see Table 5.7). This indicates that students believed the blended learning setting positively affected learners' communications skills outside the classroom.

The last item concerned blended learning preparing students for interactive listening in real life; more than half (69.3%) of the participants in both institutions (see Table 5.6) revealed that they were comfortable in a blended learning setting, as they believed that they were becoming well prepared to interact in real-life listening situations. More than two thirds (71.5%) of the participants from University B and 65.3% from University A believed that their ability to interact in actual conditions had improved (see Table 5.7).

In general, students' perceptions across both institutions were relatively similar. Both groups believed that online activities gave students additional opportunities to develop their listening skills and make sense of spoken words. The majority of students in both universities thought online supplementary materials in blended learning courses could enhance listening communication skills and develop autonomous listening practice. The advantage of autonomous practice assists EFL learners in focusing on spoken words at their own pace. Likewise, another large group of students believed that blended learning provides them with extra opportunities to practice and revisit listening materials at any time, supports thinking and expectations while listening, and promotes concentrations between different sounds. However, the lower responses from University A compared to University B suggests some difficulties in terms of listening activities provided in the Blackboard system. The next section presents qualitative findings related to the listening skills.

Table 5.8 shows the frequency and percentage of students who perceived BL to support their listening skills in several areas. The majority of the students (N=22, 78.6%) expressed that numerous difficulties prevented them from developing listening skills in the blended learning environment, such as tutors' different accents, speed rates, and pronunciations as well as unfamiliar words. However, most participants (N=21, 75%) appreciated BL, and particularly believed that the online activities and collaborative learning tools, helping them practice at any time they wish. Moreover, more than half of students (N=19, 67.9%) mentioned live

chatting's (synchronous and asynchronous) essential role between students and their peers and between students and tutors in enhancing their listening skill development. Another large group of students (N=18, 64.3%) perceived blended learning as supporting them in working autonomously to progress their listening skills. Four sub-themes are outlined in Table 5.8.

Table 5.8

Four Sub-themes Related to Academic Listening Skills Theme

| Theme | Sub-themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------|---|-----------|------------|
| Academic listening skills | 1- Different accents, speed rates, and unfamiliar words negatively affected listening comprehension in BL | 22 | 78.6 % |
| | 2- BL flexibility enabled EFL students to practice listening at their own pace | 21 | 75% |
| | 3- Synchronous and asynchronous support listening skills | 19 | 67.9 % |
| | 4- BL enhances student-centred learning to develop listening skills | 18 | 64.3 % |

5.3.2.1 Different Accents, Speed Rates, and Unfamiliar Words Negatively Affect Listening Comprehension in BL

The majority of students (N=22, 78.6%) expressed a negative response to listening skills development in the preparatory year. Numerous difficulties prevented them from developing listening skills in the blended learning environment, such as tutors' different accents, speed rates, and pronunciations as well as unfamiliar words. Ameena (in FG4) stated that:

I found different accents in the face-to-face classroom and online class to be a real problem because I can't concentrate on the different sounds. So, the results are misunderstanding and wrong answers to the questions [...] For example, in the class we have different nationalities with different accents, American, English [Indian-US], so I found listening complicated.

Similarly, Samar (in FG3) said that "we have an Indian instructor [who] teaches us. Her

accent is very hard to understand. I have to learn Urdu to understand her”.

Some students had problems with the bottom-up and top-down processes while listening. Randa (in FG2) clarified this point:

Online listening is good but I found some difficulties in predictions skill, which was not practiced in schools at all [...]. So, when I listened to the conversation, I tried to predict (when/who/where) a strategy to help me understand to answer questions correctly. But I couldn't.

Likewise, the analysis of responses to the open-ended questions reflected similar difficulties as 124 of students commented that listening difficulties occurred when native speakers spoke rapidly and with different unfamiliar accents.

Surprisingly, another student believed that her listening developed better when the teacher is Saudi. Narjis (in FG1) stated that:

My understanding is quite developed when I listened to my teacher. Her accent is so clear to me. She is Saudi [...] but when I watch a movie and/or listen to the teacher in online classes, I can't understand the language. I feel my level of English is the same as at the secondary school level. I become irritated because I can't understand and then I lose my concentration.

5.3.2.2 BL Flexibility Enables EFL Students to Practice Listening at Their Own Pace

Most participants (N=21, 75%) perceived BL online activities as being provided by the university online system, to support their listening skill development by enabling them to practice on their own time, interact with peers, and improve study skills. For example, Nada (in FG1) believed that www.touchstone/online-platform (adopted by University B) was useful for developing her listening skills:

I feel that the online website provides us with very useful listening materials on different topics, such as academic talks, so I can find all of this in one place with flexibility to practice any time I wish. This really saves my time.

Likewise, Mona (in FG 3) and Azeeza and Azhar (in FG4) valued how the online listening activities' flexibility helped their listening skills. As mentioned earlier, University A employed English First (EF); students can log in to the system to develop their English language skills through different activities and collaborative learning tools that help students practice at any time. It allows them to interact virtually with their English language instructors or peers. Mona exemplified this point as follows:

In virtual classes, when the teacher provided listening materials which required an answer, we worked together as a group to answer the questions. This was very interesting. For me I enjoyed online listening practices in [EF] because it was more effective and flexible in time [...]. Interestingly, when I practiced online listening, I also noticed some grammatical rules (how to construct sentences, how to pronounce singular and plural).

Similarly, Azeeza explained that "EF contains several topics in both listening and speaking. However, I enjoyed online listening practices with no time limits. They helped me be more realistic about the exam practice. In addition, working with others makes listening interesting and not boring".

Seven students' comments demonstrated how blended learning gave them the flexibility to control their learning with their different family and work responsibilities. For example, Bodoor (in FG3) said that:

I like BL. I can access the system and practice listening online at any time convenient for me. When my family was asleep, I did more work and listened to the recorded lectures. This made me relaxed. I am a mother; I have enrolled in the university to complete my studies with more time flexibility provided.

Likewise, Mariam (in FG1) stated that:

I like online lectures. They suit my hectic routine. As a mother of four children, I preferred BL. It gave me time flexibility, especially when I did listening tasks. So I can study and take care of my children simultaneously.

5.3.2.3 Synchronous and Asynchronous Activities Support Listening Skills

More than half of students (N=19, 67.9%) believed synchronous and asynchronous activities' essential role between students and their peers and between students and tutors, enhancing their listening skill development. For example, Samar (in FG3) said that "I think communicating online with different tutors and colleagues is effective for me. I have listened to many people, compared our answers, and tried to understand them".

Similarly, Mariam (in FG1) reported that she was able to correct her errors while doing assignments:

I personally believe that communication with my tutor is important. During online chat, she gives me very useful suggestions about the course. Later on, I just focus on the general idea of the listening speech to understand the meaning unlike the past. So, I learned to correct my mistakes myself and plan my studies to achieve my goal.

5.3.2.4 BL Enhances Student-Centred Learning to Develop Listening Skills

Another large group of students (N=18, 64.3%) perceived blended learning to promote their autonomous learning. Apparently, students thought that the listening activities they practiced in the blended course contributed to supporting self-directed learning. For example, they could set a study plan to organize their learning and work autonomously to progress their listening skills. Moreover, they realised they were able to manage their time to be skilful learners.

Mona (in FG3) commented how blended learning permits her to handle her own learning in a systematic way:

In online listening, I made a lot of effort [and] worked to be concentrate more. I am responsible for my learning. For example, I listened to lots of materials such as movies [and] TED talks on YouTube. Every week I set a study plan for myself, but I still needed to meet the teachers more.

Abeer (in FG3) believed that BL enabled her to organize her time, especially during the online listening test. "I learned how to manage my time carefully during the online test; it is

really helpful”.

In addition, 12 of the 28 students confirmed that the teacher was a facilitator as learners came to be more in control and active; accordingly, they were able to decide which learning topics suited their concerns. For example, Ameera (in FG4) mentioned that “I have become more independent. For example, I never wait for my tutor to explain something. When I didn’t understand some listening vocabulary, I immediately searched for it online. But I need to interact with the teachers occasionally”. Similarly, Ghada (in FG1) stated that:

I am becoming a more active and responsible learner, so I try to understand what I have listened to with some listening audios online without waiting to ask my tutor. I am working independently to develop my language. For example, I use my mobile phone apps or bring my iPad to listen to some materials to help me understand the listening task.

Amal (in FG2) also indicated that she developed her skills in terms of preparing, participating, and communicating with her peers in either face-to-face or online classes. She added that she only asked her instructor when she needed some assistance. She stated that “online listening depends on us, and we just ask the instructor to provide a little guidance”.

Students believed that they were able to develop some study skill techniques, such as note taking, paraphrasing, and knowing how to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words. Maha (in FG3) explained that:

I think my listening developed through both [book and online materials] as each completes the other. When I practiced listening online, I found a lot of new words to me, so I tried to keep vocabulary notes with me to record any new words and revisit them several times. I probably found beginning with listening to new vocabulary useful before working with any kind of exercise.

The overall impression of all focus groups was that EFL students in both universities were satisfied that they were becoming self-regulating and active learners. They believed that blended learning offered them the flexibility to practice and develop listening skills from home. However, various problems prevented them from developing listening skills in the

blended learning environment, such as tutors' different accents, speed rates, and pronunciations as well as unfamiliar words.

5.3.3 Academic Speaking Skills

The third section of the questionnaire was about speaking skills that EFL students developed by using blended learning in the preparatory year; it contained seven questions (from 15 to 21). This section aimed to explore specific speaking skills developed and enhanced by the use of blended learning, which contributed to speaking fluently. Speaking skills statements in this section concentrated on some significant abilities, such as producing a wide range of spoken words in communication or in presentations in front of class, speaking with confidence, interacting with peers, and self-correcting when speaking. Table 5.9 shows the means, standard deviations (SD), frequencies (F), and percentages for each statement in this section of the questionnaire for both universities. At the bottom of the table, the general mean score has been calculated to facilitate the interpretation of results. A brief concluding section sets out the key findings from both institutions about particular language skills.

The highest mean, at 4.14, was for the second statement (Blended learning helps me produce a wide range of spoken words accurately), followed by 3.98 in the third statement (Blended learning improves my gradual development ability in real conversations), 3.83 in the fourth statement (Blended learning helps me interact in pairs or small groups), 3.79 in the first statement (Blended learning enables me to speak confidently and effortlessly in real-time interaction), 3.78 in the fifth statement (Problem-solving activity materials used in blended learning help me improve my pronunciation), and finally 3.68 in the sixth statement (Blended learning helps me overcome creating errors in real communication). Standard deviations ranged between .980 and 1.09.

Table 5.9

Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Speaking Skills for Both Universities

| Speaking skills Items | Mean | SD | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | |
|--|------|------|-------------------|------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|-------|------------|----------------|------------|
| | | | Strongly disagree | | Disagree | | Not sure | | Agree | | Strongly agree | |
| | | | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage |
| 1. Blended learning enables me to speak confidently and effortlessly in real-time interactions. | 3.79 | 1.11 | 12 | 3.9 | 31 | 10.0 | 65 | 21.0 | 104 | 33.5 | 98 | 31.6 |
| 2. Blended learning helps me produce a wide range of spoken words accurately. | 4.14 | .90 | 3 | 1.0 | 23 | 7.4 | 43 | 13.9 | 100 | 31.9 | 141 | 45.4 |
| 3. Blended learning improves my gradual development ability in real conversations. | 3.98 | 1.00 | 8 | 2.6 | 20 | 6.5 | 52 | 16.1 | 120 | 38.4 | 110 | 35.2 |
| 4. Blended learning helps me interact in pairs or small groups. | 3.83 | 1.11 | 13 | 4.2 | 27 | 8.7 | 63 | 20.3 | 104 | 33.5 | 103 | 32.9 |
| 5. Problem-solving activity materials used in blended learning help me improve my pronunciation. | 3.78 | 1.05 | 9 | 2.6 | 26 | 8.4 | 79 | 25.2 | 105 | 33.9 | 91 | 29.4 |
| 6. Blended learning helps me overcome errors created in real communication. | 3.68 | 1.09 | 14 | 4.5 | 31 | 9.7 | 74 | 23.9 | 113 | 36.1 | 78 | 25.2 |
| 7. Blended learning helps me improve my oral presentation skills. | 3.71 | 1.12 | 10 | 3.2 | 38 | 12.3 | 80 | 25.8 | 85 | 27.1 | 97 | 31.3 |
| Result 3.84 | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 5.10

Frequencies and Percentages for Speaking Skills in Each University

| Speaking skills | 1 strongly disagree | | 2 Disagree | | 3 Not sure | | 4 Agree | | 5 Strongly agree | | Items |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----|---------------|------|---------------|------|------------|------|---------------------|------|---|
| | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | |
| | University B | 9 | 3.8 | 21 | 8.9 | 56 | 23.8 | 71 | 30.2 | 78 | |
| University A | 3 | 4.0 | 10 | 13.3 | 9 | 12.0 | 33 | 44.0 | 20 | 26.7 | |
| University B | 2 | .9 | 15 | 6.4 | 30 | 12.8 | 72 | 30.6 | 116 | 49.4 | 2- Blended learning helps me produce a wide range of spoken words accurately |
| University A | 1 | 1.3 | 8 | 10.7 | 13 | 17.3 | 28 | 37.3 | 25 | 33.3 | |
| University B | 5 | 2.1 | 13 | 5.5 | 37 | 15.7 | 92 | 39.1 | 84 | 35.7 | 3- Blended learning improves my gradual development ability in real conversations |
| University A | 3 | 4.0 | 7 | 9.3 | 13 | 17.3 | 27 | 36.0 | 25 | 33.3 | |
| University B | 10 | 4.3 | 21 | 8.9 | 48 | 20.4 | 75 | 31.9 | 80 | 34.0 | 4- Blended learning helps me interact in pairs or small groups |
| University A | 3 | 4.0 | 6 | 8.0 | 15 | 20.0 | 29 | 38.7 | 22 | 29.3 | |
| University B | 3 | 1.3 | 16 | 6.8 | 59 | 25.1 | 78 | 33.2 | 78 | 33.2 | 5- Problem-solving activity materials used in blended learning help me improve my pronunciation |
| University A | 5 | 6.7 | 10 | 13.3 | 20 | 26.7 | 27 | 36.0 | 13 | 17.3 | |
| University B | 8 | 3.4 | 21 | 8.9 | 58 | 24.7 | 88 | 37.4 | 60 | 25.5 | 6- Blended learning helps me overcome creating errors in real communication |
| University A | 6 | 8.0 | 10 | 13.3 | 16 | 21.3 | 25 | 33.3 | 18 | 24.0 | |
| University B | 6 | 2.6 | 28 | 11.9 | 63 | 26.8 | 65 | 27.7 | 73 | 31.1 | 7- Blended learning helps me improve my oral presentation skills |
| University A | 4 | 5.3 | 10 | 13.3 | 17 | 22.7 | 20 | 26.7 | 24 | 32.0 | |

Generally, most students believed that blended learning supported their English language speaking during communicative tasks in the face-to-face class or online class as well as in many other aspects, such as delivering presentations in front of the class and increasing self-esteem. As revealed in Table 5.9, the highest positive responses (77.3%) were given to the

second statement (Blended learning helps me produce a wide range of spoken words accurately), followed by the third statement (Blended learning improves my gradual development ability in real conversations) with 73.6%. This is a significant indication that students thought blended learning helped them develop gradual fluency in speaking. Furthermore, statements 1, 4, 5, and 6, which concerned self-esteem, working with colleagues, and self-correction while speaking, also garnered similar positive replies. However, the last statement was the lowest positive response, which indicates that EFL students need more support and training to develop speaking in presentation tasks (see Table 5.9).

Regarding to the first item (Blended learning enables me to speak confidently and effortlessly in real-time interactions), almost two-thirds of the participants (65.1%) in both universities agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning facilitated fluency in actual time. Moreover, the mean of this statement (3.79) was considered relatively high. More than two thirds of participants (63.4% from University B and 70.7% from University A) agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning assisted them with speaking in real time. Thus, they believed the online environment enhanced EFL students' willingness to speak without shyness or hesitation. Students also perceived blended learning as enabling them to expose themselves to the language outside the classroom (see Table 5.9).

In the case of the second item (Blended learning helps me produce a wide range of spoken words accurately), an even higher proportion—more than two-thirds (77.3%)—agreed or strongly agreed that a supplementary online learning program allowed them to generate an extensive range of spoken words and expand their vocabulary. A high proportion of students from both universities (80% from University B and 70.6% from University A) agreed or strongly agreed that the online learning program enabled them to produce a wide range of words. In this way, students can build a list of many words useful in any speaking context. It is important to mention that this statement had the highest positive mean ranking (4.5) among all items in this section (see Table 5.9).

In regard to the third item (Blended learning improves my gradual development ability in real conversations), the majority of the participants (73.6%) from both universities agreed or

strongly agreed that blended learning develops their gradual progress to expand their words in actual chats. A high percentage of participants from both universities (74.8% from University B and 69.3% from University A) agreed or strongly agreed with the item. In other words, students thought that they could control their learning to increase and enhance what they have achieved slowly and practice the language in real dialogues. Moreover, this statement reported the second-highest positive mean ranking (3.98) among all items in this section.

The next item related to blended learning helping students interact in pairs or small groups. A similar proportion (66.4%) of students in both institutions strongly agreed or agreed that the use of blended learning supported them in becoming more involved with their colleagues (see Table 5.9). A quite similar proportion of students from University B (65.9%) and University A (68%) strongly agreed or agreed that the use of blended learning supported them to engage with their peers (see Table 5.10).

Regarding problem-solving activity materials used in blended learning to help students improve their pronunciation, more than half of the respondents (63.3%) in both universities, over half of the respondents from University A (53.3%) and two thirds from University B (66.4%) strongly agreed or agreed that supplementary online materials as problem-solving activities reinforced their thinking and accordingly developed their speaking skills (see Table 5.10).

As shown in Table 5.9, two-thirds (61.3%) of students in both universities believed that blended learning helped them overcome errors created in real communication. Over half (57.3%) from University A and 62.8% from University B reported positive responses about the statement. This indicates that they becoming independent learners who reliant on their selves in improving the language and accept that the teacher role is only a facilitator.

In the last item, which concerned blended learning helping students improve their oral presentation skills, more than half (58.4%) of students in both universities—a similar proportion from University A (58.7%) and University B (58.8%)—agreed or strongly agreed that the blended learning program motivated them to become more engaged when making a PowerPoint presentation in front of the class (see Table 5.9). About 80 of the 310 students were unsure about the answer to this item. The SD in this statement was the highest (1.12),

indicating that participants' perceptions spread wider from the mean. This shows that there are differences between students' perceptions in this question.

Generally, students' perceptions across both institutions were relatively similar. Both groups of students believed that the integration of face-to-face instructions with computer-mediated communication in a blended learning environment was beneficial for improving speaking comprehension. As previously mentioned, Saudi EFL students are often hesitant to take part in open conversations. Most of them experienced a lack of vocabulary and confidence while speaking. As the findings revealed, the majority of students in both universities thought that blended learning supported speaking English language during communicative tasks in the face-to-face class or online class as well as in many other aspects, such as delivering presentations in front of the class and increasing their self-esteem, becoming independent learners, and engaging more to improve English proficiency for real-time interactions. However, the lower responses came from University A compared to University B students regarding their ability to overcome errors in real communication practices. The next section presents qualitative findings related to the speaking skills.

Table 5.11 shows the frequency and percentage of students who perceived BL to be developing their speaking skills in several areas. Most students (N=19, 67.9%) perceived that synchronous and asynchronous learning, the virtual learning environment, and learning management systems through BL provided further opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom and help students develop presentations in class. Furthermore, more than half of the students (N=17, 60.7%) believed BL enhanced their self-reliance through online discussions. Most students (N=16, 57.1%) considered that online communication through virtual classes helped them with an appropriate platform to build up their relationships with different colleagues to exchange ideas. Three sub-themes are outlined in Table 5.11.

Table 5.11

Three Sub-Themes Related to Academic Speaking Skills Theme

| Theme | Sub-themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------|---|-----------|------------|
| Academic speaking skills | 1- BL supports speaking skills through synchronous and asynchronous communication | 19 | 67.9% |
| | 2- BL supports students' confidence while speaking | 17 | 60.7% |
| | 3- BL as rich intercultural platform to enhance EFL students' speaking skills | 16 | 57.1% |

5.3.3.1 BL Supported Speaking Skills through Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication

Most students (N=19, 67.9%) believed that synchronous and asynchronous learning, the virtual learning environment, and learning management systems through BL provided further opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom and develop presentations to the class. With the possibility of Blackboard, the teacher downloads helpful links for students in relation to their studies and offers feedback as a direct response. Approximately four students from each group believed that the role of online discussion as a fundamental part of developing speaking skills in the blended learning environment. For example, Abeer (in FG3) indicated that “I am so interested in participating in chatting through online sessions. My speaking has improved so fast. Some tutors recommend recording online sessions to be able to hear the strengths and weaknesses to improve them”.

Mona (in FG3) group thought that BL sessions helped her listen to the recorded lecture, which enhanced her speaking.

I am so interested in participating in online sessions through EF online platform. Each time has different teachers and different colleagues. My speaking has improved so fast. Some tutors recommend that we record online sessions to be able to hear the strengths and weaknesses to improve our language.

Other students believed that the synchronous online communication (text-based discussions),

particularly with native English speakers, encouraged them to practice the language without fear or hesitation of making errors. Ohood (in FG4) stated that “I preferred communicating with English native speakers through [EF]. It is very beneficial to learn language from its origin. I am not afraid of saying something wrong, like before”.

A high proportion of responses (190) to the open-ended questions believed that developing speaking skills by connecting in class with online class participation enabled students to practice the language. Unlike traditional face-to-face learning, the online platform provided an opportunity for EFL students to communicate with native English speakers—whether students or instructors—and speak with them in virtual classes. They believed that it encouraged them to speak and use the language even if they made mistakes. Maha (in FG3) stated that:

I feel more confident when I practice speaking through online class. It is good preparation for the standardized test for English proficiency (STEP). Each time I practice what I have learned before the speaking test. At the end of the term, we had a presentation about certain topics. I was so excited to do the presentation.

Most students thought that the synchronous and asynchronous learning offered many advantages that reinforced their learning and provided them with more freedom to express their views. Sara (in FG1) reported that:

In the online discussion, we learned to be brave and express our opinions freely no matter how many errors we make. So we speak with each other, listen to different accents, correct others’ mistakes, and learn new academic vocabulary. We learn how to speak academically in order to prepare for the test.

Some students reported teachers’ important role, especially in virtual classes, to support speaking competence. Ameera (in FG4) affirmed that “I think my tutor’s role in virtual classes helped me improve my speaking. For example, she always encouraged and motivated me to speak, regardless of mistakes made. Sometimes I said [unclear pronunciation] but she didn’t laugh at me”.

Some students preferred receiving immediate and detailed feedback from the tutor to help

them develop speaking skills and avoid errors through Blackboard. Linah (in FG2) said:

Most of the time our tutor gives us general feedback during class or through Blackboard about our presentations. This is very general and I don't know where are the exact mistakes I made. I wish to have detailed and quick feedback for all of us; it could be very helpful. Voice feedback might be quicker and less time consuming than written, if she agrees.

However, some students offered examples of learning activities that the teacher used to connect both (on-/offline) classes and to support speaking. Based on students' comments, it seems that teachers at University B were more creative and active in teaching techniques than University A; this likely related to the distinctive university setting as University B provides more space for face-to-face lectures. Nada (in FG1) indicated that:

I feel my speaking has improved rapidly this term. This is mainly because of the strategy that my tutor recently added. She created a [Twitter] account to follow and communicate with her. We also communicated with each other online and discussed many topics. So, my writing and speaking developed at the same time. For example, my grammar was more improved—unlike in the past, when I became confused when I met someone who didn't speak Arabic and I couldn't communicate with him/her even if I understood what he/she said, but I was never able to reply.

Other students described another teaching technique that helped their speaking. For example, Narjis (in FG1) stated:

In my opinion, the most effective way that enhanced my speaking was the strategy used by my tutor. She strictly prohibited speaking Arabic in online class and imposed a punishment if anyone did so. For example, an extra additional task in writing would be used as a punishment. This encouraged us to practice the language.

5.3.3.2 BL Supports Students' Confidence While Speaking

More than half the students (N=17, 60.7%) reported positive responses towards online discussion as an efficient tool to enhance self-reliance. For example, Narjis (in FG1) stated

that “I overcome my fear when speaking online so it is helpful”. Meanwhile, Nora (in FG2) reported that “we communicate online for useful purposes as language learning; it makes us talk without hesitation about creating errors, so it builds my confidence”. Ahlam (in FG3) also conveyed her satisfaction: “I am becoming more confident and fluent in speaking, which is not the case in communicating in class face-to-face only”. Nada (in FG1) expressed her positive experience as well, saying that, “in the online classes, I am free to speak. No one can joke about anything I have posted. It was very stress-free. So, I can improve my language easily”.

Four students believed that blended learning allowed them to be exposed to language outside class, which helped them overcome shyness and enhanced their confidence. In this regard Azeeza (in FG4) said that:

Besides, online discussion is very useful as well [...] it makes me overcome my shyness. I tried to speak English with my family at home; they are happy to listen to me. So, online conversation is really helpful because I can practice language elsewhere. I was so excited.

Moreover, seven of the 28 students perceived online discussions as helping them prepare for class presentations more confidently. For example, Zohoor (in FG4) said that “I think my presentation skills have developed this term. Online class discussions helped me participate effectively. For example, each time I created a list of ‘useful phrases’ used in online discussions to be used in my presentation”.

Ghada (in FG1) was motivated to speak the language with her family:

I tried to mimic my tutor’s technique with my family. It is so funny. So, for example, I chatted with them online using microphones and web cams to discuss certain topics. In fact, they were so excited to speak English. Thus, blended learning opens the doors for us to practice and love what we learn.

More than half of participants’ responses to the open-ended questions mentioned that BL is helpful for increasing their self-confidence, as they were not scared or embarrassed of making errors when speaking with others. In addition, they believed BL to be beneficial in assisting

them while making presentations to the class.

5.3.3.3 BL as a Rich Intercultural Platform to Enhance EFL Students' Speaking Skills

Most students (N=16, 57.1%) in each group believed that f2f and online communication through virtual classes helped them with an appropriate platform to build up their relationships with different colleagues to exchange ideas. Nora (in FG2) said that:

In the online system, I enjoyed talking with others about my culture and my country. For example, someone asked me about a certain topic in my country, and he totally misunderstood. So, I tried to clarify it for him. Online classes improved my speaking ability; I learned some interesting phrases and can use them in any situation. When we meet f2f with the teacher, we were asked to discuss what we already taken in online session for further speaking.

Both Mona and Haia (in FG3) agreed that online communication is considered a rich intercultural platform for improving language. Mona mentioned:

Staffs in the virtual class are very friendly [...]. They corrected me, and we could evaluate them after the session through feedback. I had some background information about different social traditions in China. Online speaking gave me the opportunity to present my own culture and, to some extent, correct any misconceptions about our culture. In addition, we are required to prepare a presentation in f2f class of what we discussed in virtual class.

Haia (in FG3) thought that:

My background information about different cultures has developed. For example, in online discussions, we normally have conversations on many topics, and this was the first time my classmates knew that [pork] is prohibited for us as Muslims. It is very interesting to have all this knowledge within a short time. But I still preferred for the instructor to use Arabic with English in the class because sometimes I felt confused.

Azeeza (in FG4) also illustrated this point clearly:

I had an online conversation with someone who asked me, “How do you come to university?” I said by car. Then he asked, “Do you drive?” I said in my country women are not allowed to drive. So, online chatting allowed us to talk about our societies to others and share ideas. I used some words from the online conversation in the f2f class.

Moreover, some students indicated during the interviews that participating in the online platform enriched their language as well as social relationships. Abeer in (3) stated that:

I was worried at the beginning, to be honest, about being judged for my religion or culture. But later, I found it interesting to know others and communicate with them. I have many male friends and regularly contact with them online. We helped each other with different tasks, such as presentations and projects, which was very effective for my language learning.

5.3.4 Academic Writing Skills

This section is concerned about the fourth and final part of the questionnaire, which focused on the writing skills that EFL students developed by using blended learning in the preparatory year. It contained four questions (from 22 to 25). This section explores specific writing skills developed and enhanced through the use of blended learning, which contributed to academic writing. Writing skills statements in this section concentrated on some significant issues, such as asking students about their ability to produce longer academic assignments, write in a systematic way, and academic writing strategies such as paraphrasing and summarizing. Table 5.12 shows the means, standard deviations (SD), frequencies (F), and percentages for each statement in this questionnaire section for both universities. At the bottom of the table, a general mean score has been calculated to facilitate the interpretation of the results. A brief concluding section highlights the key findings in both institutions about this particular language skill.

The highest mean (3.81) was for the third statement (Blended learning writing activities help me paraphrase text [restate the main ideas, but in more detail]), followed by 3.77 in the fourth statement (Blended learning helps me summarize text [provide fewer details]), and the lowest

mean of 3.35 in the first statement (Blended learning helps me produce a piece of academic work).

Table 5.12

Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Writing Skills for Both Universities

| Writing skills Items | Mean | SD | 1 Strongly disagree | | 2 Disagree | | 3 Not sure | | 4 Agree | | 5 Strongly agree | |
|--|------|------|------------------------|------------|---------------|------------|---------------|------------|------------|------------|---------------------|------------|
| | | | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage |
| 1. Blended learning helps me produce a piece of academic work. | 3.35 | 1.10 | 17 | 5.5 | 48 | 15.5 | 108 | 34.8 | 82 | 26.5 | 55 | 17.7 |
| 2. Blended learning enables me to use a systematic framework for the writing process (planning, drafting, and revising). | 3.54 | 1.05 | 6 | 1.9 | 47 | 15.2 | 101 | 32.6 | 87 | 27.7 | 69 | 22.3 |
| 3. Blended learning writing activities help me paraphrase text (restate the main ideas but in more detail). | 3.81 | 1.02 | 10 | 3.2 | 22 | 7.1 | 72 | 23.2 | 119 | 38.4 | 87 | 28.1 |
| 4. Blended learning helps me summarize text. | 3.77 | 1.06 | 12 | 3.9 | 25 | 8.1 | 72 | 23.2 | 115 | 37.1 | 86 | 27.4 |
| Result 3.6 | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 5.13

Frequencies and Percentages for Writing Skills in Each University

| Writing skills | 1 strongly disagree | | 2 Disagree | | 3 Not sure | | 4 Agree | | 5 Strongly agree | | Items |
|----------------|------------------------|-----|---------------|------|---------------|------|------------|------|---------------------|------|---|
| | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | |
| | University B | 10 | 3.4 | 36 | 15.3 | 87 | 37.0 | 62 | 26.4 | 40 | |
| University A | 7 | 9.3 | 12 | 16.0 | 21 | 28.0 | 20 | 26.7 | 15 | 20.0 | |
| University B | 5 | 2.1 | 33 | 14.0 | 79 | 33.6 | 65 | 27.7 | 53 | 22.6 | 2- Blended learning enables me to use a systematic framework for the writing process (planning, drafting, and revising) |
| University A | 1 | 1.3 | 14 | 18.7 | 22 | 29.3 | 22 | 29.3 | 16 | 21.3 | |
| University B | 6 | 2.6 | 14 | 6.0 | 57 | 24.3 | 92 | 39.1 | 66 | 28.1 | 3- Blended learning writing activities help me paraphrase text (restate the main ideas, but in more detail) |
| University A | 4 | 5.3 | 8 | 10.7 | 15 | 20.0 | 27 | 36.0 | 21 | 28.0 | |
| University B | 7 | 3.0 | 17 | 7.2 | 58 | 24.7 | 84 | 35.7 | 69 | 29.4 | 4- Blended learning helps me summarize text |
| University A | 5 | 6.7 | 8 | 10.7 | 14 | 18.7 | 31 | 41.3 | 17 | 22.7 | |

Generally, most students (44.2%) were slightly uncertain about academic writing as reported in the first statement (Blended learning helps me produce a piece of academic work), indicating that EFL students need assistance and support to develop their academic writing and be able to produce longer pieces of writing. Furthermore, 66.5% of students reported similar positive answers for statement three (Blended learning writing activities help me paraphrase text), and 46.5% responded in a similar way to statement four (Blended learning helps me summarize text), whereas 50% similarly responded to statement two (Blended learning enables me to use a systematic framework for the writing process).

In regard to the first item (Blended learning helps me produce a piece of academic work), less than half (44.2%) of the participants in both universities, agreed or strongly agreed that the use of blended learning supports their academic writing (see Table 5.13). However, 108 of the

310 students (34.8%) were unsure about the answer. The SD in this statement was the highest (1.10), indicating that participants' perceptions spread wider from the mean. This suggests that there are differences between students' opinions in this particular question.

In the item concerned with blended learning enabling students to use a systematic framework for the writing process, Table 5.12 shows that approximately half of participants from both universities—50.3% from University B and 50.6% from University A—agreed or strongly agreed that the use of blended learning assisted them in organizing academic writing skills. Yet more than a third of the participants (32.6%) in both institutions were uncertain about their response.

Regarding the third item (Blended learning writing activities help me paraphrase text), more than two thirds of all the participants (66.5%) in both universities; more than two thirds of the participants from University B (67.2%) and University A (64%) agreed or strongly agreed that the blended learning program enhanced their ability to write academically in a systematic way (see Table 5.13).

There was also strong agreement amongst the students in both universities with the last item (Blended learning helps me summarize text). Indeed, more than two thirds of all the participants (64.5%); 65.1% from University B and a slightly lower percentage (46%) from University A believed that blended learning allowed them to summarize the main ideas of the text when they searched for a particular topic. This was considered rewarding, especially on written exams.

In general, students in both groups were somewhat uncertain about the development of academic writing skills through the use of BL, particularly students from University A. However, almost half of them believed that BL supported them in systematising their academic writing skills. As mentioned in Chapter 3 writing well is one of the main difficulties that EFL learners face in Saudi Arabia. However, success at the university level is highly dependent on academic writing. The next section presents qualitative findings related to the writing skills.

Table 5.14 shows the frequency and percentage of students who perceived BL to be

supporting their writing skills in several areas. The majority of students (N=19, 76.9%) perceived BL to be supporting academic writing through well-informed feedback and asynchronous communication which offered them more opportunities to write in English. Furthermore, more than half of participants (N=18, 64.3%) believed that online group work to produce a written text was a great opportunity to improve their academic writing and teach them how to avoid plagiarism. Two sub-themes are outlined in Table 6.5.

Table 5.14

Two Sub-themes Related to Academic Writing Skills Theme

| Theme | Sub-themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|--|-----------|------------|
| Academic writing skills | 1- BL supported students' academic writing skills through instructor and peer feedback | 19 | 76.9% |
| | 2- BL supported students' academic writing skills through online group work | 18 | 64.3% |

5.3.4.1 BL Supported Students' Academic Writing Skills through Instructor and Peer Feedback

Regarding writing skills, the majority of students (N=19, 76.9%) perceived BL to be supporting academic writing through well-informed feedback and asynchronous communication which offered them more opportunities to write in English. Many students in each group believed that feedback provided by their classmates or teachers helped them develop their writing. For example, Mariam (in FG1) said that:

I think getting well-informed feedback about writing is so valuable and also an advantage. For example, the teacher emailed me [model answers] about the topic; these showed a variety of writing approaches. For example, I received a comment about how to use punctuation effectively, how to write a topic sentence, and how to present arguments. I prefer teacher feedback; it is very helpful.

Similarly, Nada (in FG1) noted that “comments I have received in f2f and online class, from my tutors showed me my exact weak points and where to begin to modify them”.

However, Ameera (in FG4) described how her writing was helped by peer review feedback during the online class:

I think peer evaluation is a good process to develop writing. I benefited from this to correct my mistakes. For example, I heard something like “it would be better if” or “I would recommend that”, etc. I enjoyed providing or receiving feedback more in the online class. It is productive.

Moreover, Ameena (in FG4) stated that:

My tutor compared all my assignments at the end of the term to provide me with general feedback for improving my writing. For me, I like to send my comments by email to my friend for peer feedback because it gives me more time to read the essay draft and comment on it, unlike in the face-to-face class.

Haia (in FG3) mentioned that she only liked tutor feedback as she studied the comments carefully to be able to write precisely. However, in some cases, peer reviews seemed to be discouraged:

When I received feedback about my writing, I studied essay reports very carefully in order to avoid any mistakes on the next writing task. I am becoming more concerned about grammatical structure that is important for writing. I like to receive feedback, not give it, as some of my classmates’ feedback makes me upset.

5.3.4.2 BL Supports Students’ Academic Writing Skills through Online Group Work

More than half of participants (N=18, 64.3%) believed that online group work to produce a written text was a great opportunity to improve their academic writing and teach them how to avoid plagiarism. Narjis (in FG1) stated that:

Online group work is very beneficial. So, we were working, for example, to generate an essay in a systematic academic way [e.g., dividing ideas, main themes, supporting details, and conclusion]. I learned the difference between synonyms and antonyms by using Google search as well. In the end, we were able to produce a good written work.

Mariam (in FG1) shared her belief that online group work facilitated high scores on quizzes as her writing was enhanced:

Creating [a mind map] in online group work helps me organize my work and ideas effectively. In this way, I can write and produce an academic work with a variety of academic vocabulary, which helped me gain high scores on the test. Each student participates with different ideas.

Other students indicated that the teacher in online classes encouraged them to use mind maps to organize their writing. Linah (in FG2) said “our teacher encouraged us to use different online website on how to create a mind map. I found it difficult when I started using it, but it is becoming easier now”. Zahra (in FG4) elaborated on this point as follows:

I have enjoyed the online writing classes. [Brainstorming] in online classes was very helpful. It made me think quickly to get many good ideas for my essay. My tutor used the [process approach] in writing and presented it as a slide show on PowerPoint slides. It is very effective in organizing ideas and drafts during writing production.

Two students believed that sharing ideas in online group work was a major factor in their writing development. Ohood (in FG4) said “I have experienced different academic writing styles. It is very helpful. It helps with sharing and discussing writing steps with others”.

By contrast, responses to the open-ended questions mentioned some dissatisfaction with online group work as it made them lose their concentration. As student number 133 indicated, “group work disrupts me a lot and makes me unfocused, especially in writing class”.

Although the plagiarism check was a new experience for most of the EFL students, they frequently mentioned it during the interviews. They gained their plagiarism knowledge from classmates in the VLE classes. As there is no plagiarism software in the universities, they just received some information and warning about it. What is surprising is that a large number of students who commented on this issue were from University B, which has a traditional setting, compared to only three students from University A, which has an electronic setting. This result will be examined further in the next chapter.

Mona (in FG3) mentioned that:

Online writing and submission at the same time are considered rewarding; they strengthen my self-esteem. But to be honest, I normally copy and paste when I write my essays as my teacher did not care about plagiarism.

Surprisingly, Linah and others in the second focus group interview raised an interesting point. Linah mentioned that they were not familiar with plagiarism as a term in English. They searched for it until they recognized its meaning and consequences. Linah stated that, “regarding plagiarism, to be honest I hadn’t heard about it at all. I heard about from an online discussion session. But when I was becoming more involved in the course, I realized how important it is”.

As mentioned earlier, only three students from University A expressed opinions about plagiarism. Haia (in FG3) said that:

Personally, I benefited from making notes [quoting, summarizing] before writing and acknowledging sources. It is totally a new practice for us. But I still don’t know why copying and pasting are not good, and I think everyone does these practices. We did not have extra time to write. I want to just pass this year. The teacher says “don’t copy” but we don’t know how.

Sana (in FG1) indicated that “I learned not to copy [steal] written ideas. Using different sources and providing references are useful techniques to avoid plagiarism. I think it is a new form of exercise for me”.

Overall, these quotes show that students perceived that blended learning enabled them to learn from each other through written feedback, which to some extent enhanced their writing skills. They also believed that the advantage of blended learning to assist their writing skills. They thought that group work, whether with peers or groups, had reinforced their academic writing to some extent.

5.3.5 Quantitative Findings about Students' Perceptions Related to the Advantages of Blended Learning

This section reviews the advantages section, which contained nine items (from 26 to 34) in the instrument. Generally, EFL students believed the blended learning program, as it is beneficial for enhanced motivation and self-directed learning and provides students with time flexibility to practice the language at any convenient time. This section explores the general benefits of using blended learning, which contributed to developing general learning skills such as flexibility, time management, and computer literacy. Table 5.15 shows the means, standard deviations (SD), frequencies (F), and percentages for each questionnaire statement in this section for both universities. At the bottom of the table, the general mean score has been calculated to facilitate the interpretation of the results.

As shown in Table 5.15, the mean values ranged from 3.58 to 4.26, with a total mean of 3.96; participants from both universities agreed to a large extent that blended learning was useful in developing general learning skills. The highest mean (4.26) was for the third statement, followed by 4.21 for the fourth and fifth statements, 4.18 for the sixth statement, 3.92 for the second statement, 3.87 for the first statement, 3.77 for the seventh statement, 3.87 for the first statement, 3.65 for the eighth statement, and the lowest mean of 3.58 for the last statement. The general mean score for this section was 3.83, which revealed high agreement among participants that the use of blended learning supported academic reading proficiency. Standard deviations ranged between .972 and 1.05

Table 5.15

Frequencies, Means, and Standard Deviations for Advantages for Both Universities

| Advantages Items | Mean | SD | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | |
|--|------|------|-------------------|------------|----------|------------|----------------|------------|----|------------|-----|------------|
| | | | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Not sure | Agree | Strongly agree | | | | | |
| | | | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage |
| 1. Blended learning is more convenient for developing my English language than face-to-face learning. | 3.87 | 1.24 | 22 | 7.1 | 25 | 8.1 | 56 | 18.1 | 74 | 23.9 | 133 | 42.9 |
| 2. Blended learning improves communication between students and teachers. | 3.92 | 1.20 | 19 | 6.1 | 26 | 8.1 | 44 | 14.2 | 93 | 30.1 | 128 | 41.0 |
| 3. Blended learning makes teaching and learning more effective because it integrates all forms of media, print, audio, video, and animation. | 4.26 | 1.01 | 8 | 2.6 | 17 | 5.5 | 31 | 10.0 | 84 | 27.1 | 170 | 54.8 |
| 4. I find blended learning interesting and useful. | 4.21 | 1.02 | 9 | 2.9 | 14 | 4.2 | 41 | 13.3 | 84 | 26.8 | 162 | 51.9 |
| 5. I like blended learning because I can work according to my own pace. | 4.21 | 1.00 | 9 | 2.9 | 13 | 4.2 | 38 | 12.3 | 93 | 30.0 | 157 | 50.6 |
| 6. Blended learning helps me to develop knowledge of computers and the Internet. | 4.18 | 1.02 | 10 | 3.2 | 13 | 4.2 | 41 | 13.2 | 93 | 30.0 | 153 | 49.4 |
| 7. I feel more confident when I use English online than when I use it in the class. | 3.77 | 1.26 | 21 | 6.8 | 40 | 12.9 | 46 | 14.8 | 86 | 27.7 | 117 | 37.1 |
| 8. Blended learning helps me to use time effectively. | 3.65 | 1.09 | 9 | 2.9 | 40 | 12.9 | 86 | 27.9 | 91 | 29.0 | 84 | 27.1 |
| 9. I benefit from the feedback given by my instructor through Blackboard. | 3.58 | 1.24 | 18 | 5.8 | 33 | 10.6 | 89 | 28.7 | 92 | 29.7 | 78 | 25.2 |
| Result 3.96 | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 5.16

Frequencies and Percentages for Advantages in Each University

| Advantages | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | | Items |
|--------------|-------------------|------|----------|------|----------|------|-------|------|----------------|------|--|
| | strongly disagree | | Disagree | | Not sure | | Agree | | Strongly agree | | |
| | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | |
| University B | 15 | 6.4 | 15 | 6.4 | 45 | 19.1 | 55 | 23.4 | 105 | 44.7 | 1- Blended Learning is more convenient for me than face-to-face learning |
| University A | 7 | 9.3 | 10 | 13.3 | 11 | 14.7 | 19 | 25.3 | 28 | 37.3 | |
| University B | 10 | 4.3 | 20 | 8.5 | 37 | 15.7 | 65 | 27.7 | 103 | 43.8 | 2- Blended Learning improves communication between students and teachers |
| University A | 9 | 12.0 | 6 | 8.0 | 7 | 9.3 | 28 | 37.3 | 25 | 33.3 | |
| University B | 4 | 1.7 | 11 | 4.7 | 20 | 8.5 | 57 | 24.3 | 143 | 60.9 | 3- Blended Learning makes teaching and learning more effective; because it integrates all forms of media, print, audio, video, and animation |
| University A | 4 | 5.3 | 6 | 8.0 | 11 | 14.7 | 27 | 36.0 | 27 | 36.0 | |
| University B | 4 | 1.7 | 10 | 4.3 | 29 | 12.3 | 59 | 25.1 | 133 | 56.6 | 4- I find blended learning interesting and useful |
| University A | 5 | 6.7 | 4 | 5.3 | 12 | 16.0 | 25 | 33.3 | 29 | 38.7 | |
| University B | 6 | 2.6 | 8 | 3.4 | 33 | 14.0 | 65 | 27.7 | 123 | 52.3 | 5- I like blended learning because I can work according to my own pace |
| University A | 3 | 4.0 | 5 | 6.7 | 5 | 6.7 | 28 | 37.3 | 34 | 45.3 | |
| University B | 8 | 3.4 | 9 | 3.8 | 31 | 13.2 | 73 | 31.1 | 114 | 48.5 | 6- Blended learning helps me to develop knowledge of computer and Internet |
| University A | 2 | 2.7 | 4 | 5.3 | 10 | 13.3 | 20 | 26.7 | 39 | 52.0 | |
| University B | 15 | 6.4 | 32 | 13.6 | 38 | 16.2 | 59 | 25.1 | 91 | 38.7 | 7- I feel more confident when I use English online than when I use it in the class |
| University A | 6 | 8.0 | 8 | 10.7 | 8 | 10.7 | 27 | 36.0 | 26 | 34.7 | |
| University B | 5 | 2.1 | 28 | 11.9 | 69 | 29.4 | 74 | 31.5 | 59 | 25.1 | 8- Blended learning helps me to use time effectively |
| University A | 4 | 5.3 | 12 | 16.0 | 17 | 22.7 | 17 | 22.7 | 25 | 33.3 | |
| University B | 11 | 4.7 | 26 | 11.1 | 72 | 30.6 | 69 | 29.4 | 56 | 23.8 | 9- I benefit from the feedback given by my instructor through Blackboard |
| University A | 7 | 9.3 | 7 | 9.3 | 17 | 22.7 | 23 | 30.7 | 21 | 28.0 | |

Regarding the first item (Blended learning is more convenient for developing my English language than face-to-face learning), Table 5.16 shows that about (66.8%); 68.1% of students from University B compared to 62.6% from University A agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning is a more appropriate context for enhancing English as a foreign language than face-to-face learning. On the other hand, only (15.2%) of the respondents from both universities negatively responded to the statement.

Regarding to the second item, more than (70%) of participants from both universities agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning improves communication between students and teachers. 70.6% of students from University A and 71.1% from University B agreed or strongly agreed with the item. This indicates that the online format gave them the opportunity to express themselves and build a strong relationship between students and teachers.

In the third item (Blended learning makes teaching and learning more effective; because it integrates all forms of media, audio, video, and animation), an even higher proportion (81.9%) of students in both universities expressed their belief that ICT permitted more learning engagement as referred to in Table 5.6. Moreover, this statement had the highest mean score (5.15). The results indicate that 58.2% of students from University B and 72% from University A agreed or strongly agreed with the item.

As displayed in Table 5.6, in the fourth statement (I find blended learning interesting and useful), more than two-thirds of respondents in both universities (78.7%)—81.7% from University B and 72% from University A—reported a high rating toward the liking and enjoyment of blended learning, as they agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning helped them accomplish their learning objectives.

Regarding the fifth item (I like blended learning because I can work according to my own pace), an overwhelming number of the participants (80.6%) from both universities expressed some positive perceptions toward the item (see Table 5.15). They believed that blended learning provided them with greater flexibility in time, which allowed them to practice learning outside the classroom to complete their tasks. A similar proportion of the respondents from University B (79.6%) and University A (78.7%) agreed or strongly agreed.

A similar proportion (79.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning helps them to develop knowledge of computers and the Internet; this item also had a higher mean score (5.15). A high percentage of respondents from University B (79.6%) and University A (87.7%) believed the blended learning setting positively affected their computer and internet knowledge. Thus, blended learning gave them opportunity to enhance their IT knowledge skills.

With respect to statement seven (I feel more confident when I use English online than when I use it in the class), more than half (64.8%) of all participants agreed or strongly agreed that they could practice the language online more confidently than in a traditional classroom (see Table 5.15). The SD in this statement was the highest (1.26), showing that participants' opinions spread wider from the mean. This indicates that there are differences between students' opinions in this question. Across the group, University A students more often expressed a slightly negative feeling (21.3% versus 14% from University B). The results can be seen in Table 5.16.

Regarding blended learning helping participants use their time effectively, more than half (56.1%) of all respondents had a positive response whereas (27.9%) of participants were not sure. Similar percentages of respondents from University B (56.2%) and University A (56%) agreed or strongly agreed with the item. The results in Table 5.15 show that, on the last item (I benefit from the feedback given by my instructor through Blackboard), more than half of respondents from both groups (54.9%)—and with the lowest mean of (3.58)—expressed positive perceptions toward the usefulness of the instructor's feedback through Blackboard in the blended learning setting. More than half of participants from University B (53.2%) and University A (58.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning positively influences students' performance and provides them with beneficial support and encouragement.

After analysing the advantages section, EFL students were asked to relate each advantage to specific language skills in the second phase. These advantages were merged in the qualitative findings with the related language skill.

5.4 Findings for Research Question 2 (What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?)

This section focuses on the last part of the questionnaire about limitations faced when using blended learning in the preparatory year, based on EFL students' perceptions. It includes six items (from 35 to 40). Table 5.17 shows the means, standard deviations (SD), frequencies (F), and percentages for each questionnaire statement in this section for both universities. At the bottom of the table, the general mean score has been calculated to facilitate the interpretation of the results. A brief concluding section highlights the key findings for both institutions about this particular section.

As shown in Table 5.17, the mean variable ranged from 2.08 to 3.85, with a total mean of 2.96, indicating that participants in both groups encountered some difficulties associated with blended learning. The highest mean (3.85) was for the third statement, followed by 3.24 for the fifth statement, 3.15 for the fourth statement, 2.83 for the sixth statement, 3.87 for the eighth statement, 2.64 for the first statement, and 2.08 (the lowest mean) for the second statement. Standard deviation ranged between 1.13 and 1.31.

Table 5.13

Frequencies, Percentages, Means, and Standard Deviations for Limitations for Both Universities

| Limitations Items | Mean | SD | 1 Strongly disagree | | 2 Disagree | | 3 Not sure | | 4 Agree | | 5 Strongly agree | |
|--|------|------|------------------------|------------|---------------|------------|---------------|------------|------------|------------|---------------------|------------|
| | | | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage | F | Percentage |
| 1. I think I am socially isolated when I use blended learning. | 2.64 | 1.29 | 69 | 22.3 | 93 | 30.1 | 65 | 21.0 | 48 | 15.5 | 35 | 11.3 |
| 2. Blended learning is difficult to handle and therefore frustrating to use. | 2.08 | 1.13 | 115 | 37.1 | 109 | 34.8 | 47 | 15.2 | 23 | 7.4 | 16 | 5.2 |
| 3. Slow Internet connectivity is a major problem I face when using blended learning. | 3.85 | 1.31 | 27 | 8.7 | 32 | 10.3 | 38 | 12.3 | 78 | 25.2 | 135 | 43.2 |
| 4. I face technical problems when I use blended learning. | 3.15 | 1.26 | 42 | 13.5 | 53 | 16.8 | 81 | 26.1 | 85 | 27.4 | 49 | 15.8 |
| 5. I prefer to learn from the book rather than from the course website. | 3.24 | 1.37 | 41 | 13.2 | 59 | 19.0 | 77 | 24.8 | 50 | 15.8 | 83 | 26.8 |
| 6. Blended learning facilitates cheating and plagiarism. | 2.82 | 1.40 | 74 | 32.9 | 63 | 20.4 | 66 | 21.0 | 55 | 17.8 | 51 | 16.5 |
| Result 2.96 | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 5.18

Frequencies and Percentages for Limitations in Each University

| Limitations | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | | Items |
|--------------|-------------------|------|----------|------|----------|------|-------|------|----------------|------|--|
| | strongly disagree | | Disagree | | Not sure | | Agree | | Strongly agree | | |
| | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | |
| University B | 53 | 22.6 | 77 | 32.8 | 53 | 22.6 | 33 | 14.0 | 19 | 8.1 | 1-I think socially isolated when I use blended learning |
| University A | 16 | 21.3 | 16 | 21.3 | 12 | 16.0 | 15 | 20.0 | 16 | 21.3 | |
| University B | 90 | 38.3 | 88 | 37.4 | 37 | 15.7 | 13 | 5.5 | 7 | 3.0 | 2-Blended Learning is difficult to handle and therefore frustrating to use |
| University A | 25 | 33.3 | 21 | 28.0 | 10 | 13.3 | 10 | 13.3 | 9 | 12.0 | |
| University B | 23 | 9.8 | 25 | 10.6 | 33 | 14.0 | 65 | 27.7 | 89 | 37.9 | 3-Slow Internet connectivity is a major problem I face in using blended learning |
| University A | 4 | 5.3 | 7 | 9.3 | 5 | 6.7 | 13 | 17.3 | 46 | 61.3 | |
| University B | 34 | 14.5 | 44 | 18.7 | 72 | 30.6 | 59 | 25.1 | 26 | 11.1 | 4-I face technical problems when I use blended learning |
| University A | 8 | 10.7 | 9 | 12.0 | 9 | 12.0 | 26 | 34.7 | 23 | 30.7 | |
| University B | 31 | 13.2 | 47 | 20.0 | 62 | 26.4 | 39 | 16.6 | 56 | 23.8 | 5-I prefer to learn from the book rather than from the course website |
| University A | 10 | 13.3 | 12 | 16.0 | 15 | 20.0 | 11 | 14.7 | 27 | 36.0 | |
| University B | 49 | 20.9 | 53 | 22.6 | 51 | 21.7 | 41 | 17.4 | 41 | 17.4 | 6-Blended Learning facilitates cheating and plagiarism |
| University A | 25 | 33.3 | 11 | 14.7 | 15 | 20.0 | 14 | 18.7 | 10 | 13.3 | |

Regarding the first item (I feel socially isolated when I use blended learning), Table 5.18 shows that more than half (52.4%)—55.4% from University B and 42.6% from University A—of all respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This indicates that the largest proportion of the whole sample did not feel loneliness in the blended learning platform. As undergraduate students are still young, they spend more time learning online than within the classroom.

In the second item (Blended learning is difficult to handle and therefore frustrating to use), a higher percentage from University B (75.5%) than University A (61.3%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. This indicates that they believed that they can easily use the internet for online learning.

With respect to the next item, a higher proportion (68.4%) of students agreed or strongly agreed that slow Internet connectivity is a major problem when using blended learning (see Table 5.17). Yet a great majority of their students struggled or were not satisfied with the Internet connection. This statement reported the highest mean among all other statements (3.85). A high proportion of students—65.6% from University B and 78.6% from University A—agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (see Table 5.18). This finding was unexpected as University A is fully employed eLearning platform, a great majority of their students struggled or not satisfied with Internet connection.

Furthermore, regarding the fourth item (I face technical problems when using blended learning), almost half (43.2%) of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with this item (mean = 3.15). This indicates that technical difficulties are considered a crucial problem in both institutions. More than two thirds of respondents from University A (65.4%), compared to less than half from University B (36.2%), strongly agreed or agreed with this item. Thus, University B students faced more technical problems than University A students.

On item five (I prefer to learn from the book rather than from the course website), Table 5.7 shows that (32.2%) of EFL students desired to learn from electronic materials through blended learning whereas (42.6%)—50.7% from University A and 40% from University B—still favoured traditional learning from printed books. Therefore, the greatest percentage expressed some positive perceptions about learning directly from the book rather than from electronic content. Surprisingly, the greatest percentage expressed their positive attitudes to learn directly from the book rather than electronic content were from University A.

The last item (Blended learning facilitates cheating and plagiarism) showed that more than half of all respondents (53.3%) strongly disagreed or disagreed; this item also had the lowest mean (2.82). Yet 34.3% of students strongly agreed or agreed with this item (see Table 5.17). Thus, the majority of all students assumed that technology could contribute to preventing plagiarism. The SD in this statement was the highest (1.40), indicating that participants' perceptions spread wider from the mean. This indicates that there are differences between students' opinions in this particular question. At the same time, 32% of respondents from University A and 34.8% from University B strongly agreed or agreed with this item.

In general, although EFL students conveyed the advantages about the usefulness of blended learning program to support English as a foreign language, the findings also highlighted some

drawbacks in terms of poor Internet connectivity on campuses. Students across the two institutions were dissatisfied with their experiences, particularly in terms of the low internet speed. The next section presents qualitative findings related to the challenges section.

Table 5.19 shows the frequency and percentage of students' perceptions about challenges faced when using blended learning in the preparatory year. The majority of students (N=22, 78.6%) reported poor Internet connections that caused either cancellations or delays in lectures. Moreover, a higher proportion of participants (N=20, 71.4%) complained about some technical difficulties, such as unclear audio in online classes while practicing or slow downloads from Blackboard in the blended learning setting. More than half of the participants (N=18, 64.3%) indicated a lack of necessary information about how to use or deal with universities' online systems and Blackboard. Nearly half (N=13, 46.4%) frequently mentioned long face-to-face class hours in both universities. In addition, more than a third of participants (N=11, 39.3%) felt pressured by the huge number of assignments and workloads which affected their progression in language development. With respect to insufficient PCs, nine students (32.1%) stated that there were limited numbers of PCs with poor conditions. From the analysis, six themes emerged in relation to the second research question as outlined in Table 5.19.

Table 5.19

Themes about Challenge in Relation to the Second Research Question

| Themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| 1- Poor Internet connection and technical problems | 22 | 78.6% |
| 2- Lack of technical support | 20 | 71.4% |
| 3- Lack of required information to use the university's online system | 18 | 64.3% |
| 4- Long face-to-face class hours | 13 | 46.4% |
| 5- A great amount of written work | 11 | 39.3% |
| 6- Insufficient computers in labs | 9 | 32.1% |

5.4.1 Poor Internet Connection and Technical Problems

The majority of students (N=22, 78.6%) at both institutions reported poor Internet connections that caused either cancellations or delays in lectures. Nada (in FG1) reported that students and instructors would bring their own Wi-Fi to connect during the lecture: "For me

the biggest obstacle I have is poor Internet connections on campus. So, our tutor requested that we use our mobile Wi-Fi phones. Sometimes the tutor used her own Wi-Fi to connect. This is a shame.”

Likewise, Amal (in FG2) revealed that:

The main difficulty I faced was the poor Internet connection on campus. I normally did my assignment at the university because most of the time I did not have access at my home as it also has poor Internet connection. So, this made tutors carry their private Wi-Fi to connect to the Internet.

Mona (in FG3) stated that “I have faced big problems with my connection when the server went down”. Likewise, Ohood (in FG4) suggested having a better Internet connection even if it costs them: “We normally used our own Wi-Fi. It might be better if we have good connection, with an extra charge”.

Moreover, Zohoor (in FG4) complained that when she had to download an assignment from Blackboard for asynchronous communication, she faced problems as the system did not respond, which caused submission delays: “I had a problem appear several times when downloading my assignment through Blackboard. I sent an email to the teacher to inform her about the problem, then she communicated with technicians to solve it.”

From the analysis of responses to the open-ended questions, a large proportion (285) of participants noted poor Internet connection when practicing online activities on campus. The findings included students’ frustration stemming from the surprise they encountered when the Internet was disconnected. This is mainly because bandwidth at both universities had a limited capacity that affected loading speed.

5.4.2 Lack of Technical Support

A high proportion of the participants (N=20, 71.4%) complained about some technical difficulties, such as unclear audio in online classes while practicing or slow downloads from Blackboard in the blended learning setting. For example, Abeer (in FG3) said that “lectures downloaded very slowly on the Blackboard system”.

One unanticipated finding was that the larger technical problems mentioned occurred at University A, which is entirely electronic. Aameera (in FG4) said that:

Although it is supposed to be an [electronic university], we faced many technical problems. I didn't know how to log on to virtual classes... Each time I tried to register there was a message about [problem errors]. My classmates helped me because we had a discussion group in WhatsApp...

Similarly, 156 responses to the open-ended questions also identified technical problems with the website, such as difficulties connecting to virtual classes or sound cutting off. All these limitations identified by most of the respondents are associated with the absence of technical support. Accordingly, a large number of students added that such technical problems discouraged their learning development as they felt stressed and frustrated.

More than five students revealed that they experienced poor sound. Bodoor (in FG3) mentioned that, "in online classes, we typically have technical complications like unclear sounds or repeated cut-offs". Similarly, Zohoor (in FG4) said that "the sound was unclear or kept cutting off". Ohood (in FG4) also stated that, "in online classes, sometimes we encountered poor voice quality; for example, I was becoming disconnected".

In addition, two students described that heavy rainfalls in Maddina caused the servers to go down and they had a break from studying. Zahra (in FG4) said "we had a break for two days as the system was down. Later we received a text message to inform us that the problem is now solved, then I can log in".

The lack of technical support was also considered a crucial problem for another group of students who recently participated in electronic practices. They depended on their classmates to answer or solve their technical problems. Ghada (in FG1) believed that "the absence of technical support is considered important. When we had any technical problems in the class, we didn't find any technicians to solve it. This caused us to cancel the activity or delay it and waste time".

Sara (in FG1) said that, "if we had any technical difficulty, we didn't know where to go. Only friends help us". This obstacle was also confirmed by Ahlam (FG3) as well as Ohood, Azhar, and Zahra (in FG4). Sana (in FG1) stated that "there was very slow response in communication between technicians and us. For example, when we sent an email, they didn't respond at the same time. This problem resulted in us not attending lectures".

5.4.3 Lack of Required Information to Use the University's Online System

More than half of participants (N=18, 64.3%) indicated a lack of necessary information about how to use or deal with universities' online systems and Blackboard. Sara (in FG1) reported that, "when I first enrolled, I knew that there were online classes, but I didn't know how to use the system or how to post in Blackboard". The majority of students from University A frequently complained about this obstacle as it negatively affected their opinions about blended learning. Samar, Abeer, Ahlam, and Mona (in FG3) illustrated this point. Mona indicated that:

I felt confused at first. Nothing was clear. I don't want to feel that I am lost in the very beginning stage. The lack of information about EF (online system) is a threat and caused panic, such as [how to upload assignments].

Similarly, Abeer reported that:

In the first week, we were divided into levels in English class [1 to 5]. Then administrators informed us that all lectures had been cancelled because of a national day of celebration [...]. I didn't know what to do. How could I register in EF? How could I attend virtual classes? I know it is our responsibility, but I needed this information initially to allow me to start.

Four students expressed annoyance about the lack of information at the beginning of the course that facilitated active learning. Thus, it reduced their involvement in the course as they were engaged quite late. Samar reported that "I thought the course is very good for us. But I am in the first year and I need more information about the online system before starting. My greater understanding occurred relatively late".

Several students from the fourth group agreed with these opinions. Some students described other related problems. Rabab (in FG4) stated that "EF will not open on my computer each time I changed my user name and password, and the same problem appeared".

5.4.4 Long Face-to-Face Class Hours

Nearly half of respondents (N=13, 46.4%) frequently mentioned long face-to-face class hours in both universities. Regarding the long hours in class, Linah, Randa, and Rawa (in FG2) agreed that they felt unfocused and bored. For example, Linah said that the "long face-to-face

class hours [4 hours a day] are too much for us. It makes us lose our concentration and feel bored”. Randa stated that “we have different subjects, and we didn’t have time to do all these skills”.

5.4.5 A Great Amount of Written Work

More than a third of participants (N=11, 39.3%) felt pressured by the huge number of assignments and workloads from University A, which unhelpfully affected their progression in language development. Abeer (in FG3) elaborated on this matter:

I think the great amount of homework will affect progress. The online system (EF) is very effective, but we did not focus on it because of the large number of assignments. For example, the math module required answering 100 questions weekly, communication skills modules required answering 40 questions weekly, and English had [two units and 4 speaking sessions] weekly.

Another three students highlighted a serious consequence as they have limited time to perform their tasks: they gave the assignment to someone else to complete. Bodoor (in FG3) said that “the large quantity of homework [was a problem], as I found myself forced to give it to someone to write it for me, which is not useful and was costly”.

Samar (in FG3) was also critical because, although unmarried students have extra time to do their assignments, they still feel overloaded:

I am not married, but I also became stressed and depressed from the great quantity of homework and assignments. It made me feel unbalanced. At the end, I just focused on finishing and submitting assignments regardless of focusing on self-development skills.

Moreover, two students commented on the limited time to accomplish tasks. Haia (in FG3) stated that the “time limit is a big obstacle. So, despite learning, we just want to finish and submit our task as soon as we can because we are going to be assessed every two weeks”. Meanwhile, Ahlam (in FG3) said that “time is very limited to perform all the required tasks. For example, during the weekly practices, I just do multiple-choice questions [randomly choose] quizzes without reading”.

Likewise, 187 responses to open-ended questions noted similar problems related to the

workload. For example, too many assignments related to several language skills had to be submitted during each term. Most undergraduates struggled to complete exercises, which required extra time and efforts to accomplish.

5.4.6 Insufficient Computers in Labs

With respect to insufficient PCs that could help students practice online activities, nine students (32.1%) reported different views. Narjis, Sara, and Mariam (in FG1) stated that there were limited numbers of PCs with poor conditions, and some of them did not have a PC at home. Sara said that “there are a very limited number of labs and PCs on campus. I come from a distant [village] far from the university; when I want to practice or access the Internet, unfortunately I can’t”. Narjis confirmed that “some PCs did not work. When I want to practice, there are a very limited number of computers in labs”.

Six EFL students’ responses to open-ended questions mentioned health problems associated with the use of technology, such as vision and back problems. Sitting in front of computers for long hours as students overwhelmingly practiced and searched for the required information resulted in such health issues, causing them to feel tired and exhausted. In addition, some participants added that more extensive online activities require a long time to complete, which makes them feel socially isolated to some extent.

5.5 Findings Related to Research Question 3 (What are Saudi EFL students’ suggestions on how blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool could be useful to develop English language skills in the preparatory year)

The majority of students (N=23, 82.1%) suggested having the English module alone in the preparatory year, which helped them be more productive and concentrate better. With respect to orientation sessions, most students (N=22, 78.6%) suggested that having orientation in advance would be beneficial for identifying some important issues in relation to the university online system and virtual classes. Similarly, a large number of students (N=22, 78%.6) repeatedly suggested the essential need to develop Internet connections at both universities and contact with technicians to solve technical problems. Furthermore, several students (N=19, 67.9%) suggested the need for more emphasis on student–teacher communication through online sessions (See table 5.20).

Table 5.20

Themes about Suggestion in Relation to the Third Research Question

| Themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| 1- Having English module unaccompanied by any other subject | 23 | 82.1% |
| 2- Preparing students with orientation sessions initially | 22 | 78.6% |
| 3- Supporting Internet connection and providing technical support | 22 | 78.6% |
| 4- Enhancing communication between students and instructor | 19 | 67.9% |

5.5.1 Having English Module Unaccompanied by Any Other Subject

The majority of students (N=23, 82.1%) suggested having the English module alone in the preparatory year, which helped them be more productive and concentrate better. Mariam (in FG1) stated that:

As English language has become a core requirement to pass the preparatory year and enable us to enrol in our major, I strongly suggest having it separately in an individual term without any other modules. This will help us concentrate and have extra time to practice.

Haia (in FG3) said that “studying for the final exam also needs a lot of time preparation; therefore, I recommend having English individually in the preparatory year, as our enrolment confirmation is highly dependent on it”. Other students expressed the concern that working students have other family commitments, making such a suggestion even more appropriate. Bodoor (in FG3) indicated that “I am a mother, and student; I strongly recommend having the English module in the preparatory year, alone, without any other subjects. This will benefit us to be more focused and more creative”. Abeer in the same group criticized that the excessive pressure she faced due to different module requirements adversely affected her opinion about blended learning. She stated that:

Besides all of that, the required scores of either 85 on STEP or 5,5 on IELTS. So, I recommend having English individually in the preparatory year. Although University A aimed to create active and independent learners, it didn’t apply blended learning in a way to serve students best.

Zohoor (in FG4) revealed that:

I like virtual classes. I feel I am going to the university every day. It is very convenient. Blended learning in my opinion has solved many of our language learning problems so it will be better by having English separately in the preparatory year to allow us to participate and focus more in online activities.

Having a separate English module during the preparatory year was also noted by 119 participants in response to the open-ended questions. Most participants frequently and clearly mentioned losing their concentration with the large number of assignments required in all modules in the preparatory year. Thus, understanding learners' needs is crucial to the practical implementation of blended learning.

5.5.2 Preparing Students with Orientation Sessions Initially

With respect to orientation sessions, most students (N=22, 78.6%) believed that having orientation in advance would be beneficial for identifying some important issues in relation to the university online system and virtual classes. Ahlam (in FG3) said that "I think blended learning is very useful but the problem is in its implementation [...] the most basic step in my opinion is to provide an orientation session about the new online university system". More than five students agreed that orientation day would develop their skills. Ghada (in FG1) mentioned that, "in my opinion, I think having an induction course before the actual course to learn, for example, how to be an independent learner, how to be engaged in blended learning [would be beneficial]".

Three students believed having short computer training courses before the course begins would be useful. Rabab (in FG4) said that "training courses about some basic technological skills [are necessary]. For example, [Microsoft Office, Blackboard, and EF] with written instruction manuals".

Maha (in FG3) mentioned the need to provide information about online library facilities and contacting librarians for study advice:

I strongly suggest having an orientation day about the electronic library, and provide us with professional librarian staff online to contact them. We need an orientation day before our course begins, as this university is totally new.

Similarly, 136 responses to open-ended questions repeatedly recommended that they need an orientation training session to guide them in using the technology. On the other hand, they added that training is needed to know how to prepare for online tests such as STEP and ILETS. The initial preparation could tackle any further obstacles that might occur during the semester. It is essential for students to be supported through appropriate training courses to cope with this new environment.

5.5.3 Support Internet Connection and Provide Technical Support

A large number of students (N=22, 78.6%) repeatedly suggested the essential need to develop Internet connections at both universities and contact with technicians to solve technical problems. For example, Rawa (in FG2) suggested that “improved Internet connections to increase the quality of chatting online is essential for us”. Samar (in FG3) said that, “in my opinion, the lack of technical support is a serious problem, especially when we have a lecture from outside Saudi Arabia. The connection is very slow. Technicians almost did not respond”. Mona (in FG3) stated that:

It is important to deliver a good Internet connection on campus. Regarding technical support, they either did not reply or were delayed by more than five working days. Personally, I suggest having a good technical support team that can provide immediate responses to students. Otherwise we can't log on or attend the lecture!

Azeeza (in FG4) agreed, saying that “I suggest having technicians physically present on campus so if we have any problems we can directly go to them and solve them without waiting days or weeks”.

In addition, five students indicated that the online system was often developed without initial notifications. Therefore, they suggested having announcements in advance. Ameena (in FG4) said that “I think keep us informed of any system developments or Blackboard maintenance times is important [...]. They normally worked on developments to the system without any announcement in advance”.

The responses to the open-ended questions shared nearly the same suggestions for improving blended learning in their universities. They frequently mentioned improving Internet connectivity on campus to ensure the effective implementation of blended learning. In addition, providing a fast and reliable Internet connection would help both students and

instructors develop blended learning programs. Moreover, 76 participants suggested the need to improve the university's website. Most online practices have been made through university websites such as module activities, curriculum delivery, registration for several courses, virtual classes, practice tests, announcements, and contact with instructors. Therefore, serious attention is needed for website updates, regular maintenance, and technical support to ensure effective learning.

5.5.4 Enhance Communication Between Students and Instructor

Several students (N=19, 67.9%) suggested the need for more emphasis on student–teacher communication through online sessions. Sana (in FG1) exemplified this point: “I am very satisfied with blended learning. It was very convenient for me. I suggest increasing online communication hours with tutors or creating some other social networks [Twitter/Facebook].”

Surprisingly, 19 students from University B suggested increasing either the online class hours or electronic applications in blended courses. According to Nada (in FG1):

I suggest maximizing online lectures because I benefited from them the most [...]. We have long hours in English classes, [and] I always felt that I was just a receiver learner. We enjoyed online discussions but we need to be more communicative and self-regulating to continue being motivated.

Narjis (in FG1) said that:

We live in the age of technology. I suggest expanding the use of [apps and trustworthy electronic websites]. For example, using learning apps in class will help overcome long boring class hours and make us compete to answer correctly. It is very distinguished to use technology in class as we all have mobile phones.

Mona (in FG3) agreed with the need to maximize online class hours: “Minimize face-to-face lectures and maximize online lectures in order to not get bored and to improve the most.” Sana (in FG1) also suggested “increasing online sessions, which are held online because they helped me communicate and interact with people”.

5.6 Summary

This chapter merged both quantitative and qualitative data to discuss findings related to the research questions about EFL Saudi students' perceptions concerning the use of blended learning in the development of English language skills, the strengths and weaknesses of this particular method, and recommendations for improving the skills from two Saudi universities with varying emphasis on proportions of face-to-face learning and virtual learning.

The quantitative findings of this study show that students across the two institutions had varied perceptions (from positive to negative), although their responses to most of the questionnaire's items were relatively similar. Generally, the majority of students expressed positive perceptions in the reading skills about the use of different online resources, EFL students still valued reading from printed books rather than from electronic materials. In relation to listening skills, the majority of students in both universities believed that blended learning's supplementary materials enhanced listening communication skills and developed autonomous listening practice. Furthermore, most students perceived blended learning as supporting their English language speaking skills during communicative tasks in the face-to-face or online class. Despite this, little progress has been made in writing skills, as the findings indicate that EFL students, particularly those from University A, believed that they still need some assistance and support to develop their academic writing to be able to produce longer pieces of academic writing.

EFL students believed the blended learning program, as it is beneficial for enhanced self-directed learning and provided students with time flexibility to practice the language at any convenient time. Although the EFL students believed the usefulness of the blended learning to support EFL, the findings also showed some drawbacks such as poor Internet connectivity and isolation.

In the qualitative phase, the specific quantitative results were reviewed in order to explain the initial results in more depth. Regarding reading skills, students perceived that BL supported reading comprehension as it maximized reading opportunities. Students noticed that online reading in blended learning increased their English vocabulary, helped them develop several reading techniques (e.g., speed-reading, skimming, and scanning), and provided more opportunities to practice reading with their research skills through the electronic library and its massive reading resources.

In listening skills, numerous difficulties prevented them from developing listening skills in the blended learning environment, such as tutors' different accents, speed rates, and pronunciations as well as unfamiliar words in the preparatory year. However, they appreciated the university's online listening activities through online system (synchronous, asynchronous online activities) which enabled them to practice listening at any time they wished and work autonomously to progress listening skills. They perceived BL as playing a crucial role in their learning by providing opportunities to different online activities to develop their listening skills and promote their autonomy as learners. With regard to speaking skills, students believed that BL provided further opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom, help them develop presentations to the class, and increase their self-esteem. Furthermore, they thought that online communication through virtual classes provided them with an appropriate platform for building their relationships with different classmates to exchange ideas. In terms of writing skills, students believed feedback, online group work, and asynchronous communications provided great opportunities to improve their academic writing and produce a well-written text.

Several students commented that the poor Internet connections, some technical problems, and the lack of technical support at both institutions caused either the cancelation or delay of lectures. Students indicated that poor Internet connections prevented them from engaging in different online communications, which in turn generated considerable disturbances. Unrealistic anticipations and feelings of isolation were also reported. The EFL students suggested providing appropriate support in terms of training, needs, and reliable and accessible technology infrastructure during the preparatory year to ensure that they can be more productive and concentrate more.

Considering these findings, although EFL learners reported that blended learning significantly contributed to their vocabulary knowledge and proficiency in a foreign language, its usefulness depends on both internal (e.g., student motivation, willingness, commitment, and personality characteristics) and external (e.g., the quality of the blended learning environment and teachers' ability to effectively employ the blended learning instruction model) factors which will be apparent in the next chapter.

6 Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogic tool, its use in the learning of EFL in terms of strengths and weaknesses of students' development of academic English in each language skill (reading, listening, speaking, writing), and learners' recommendations for improving these skills using the internet for online and digital language learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia. In light of the research findings, the following sections discuss these themes in turn. This chapter uses the principles of social constructivism and connectivism theories to comprehend EFL students' perceptions in this study. The assumption of the current study is that language development is built throughout social interactions via the Internet as learners can easily engage with limitless online tools at their own pace that support autonomous learning.

The findings make it clear that the use of modern technology as a part of blended learning is not only desirable, but also useful in terms of the specifics of learning the English language as well as the development of computer literacy. Making use of online resources and the Internet is a sensible course of action as it gives students flexibility in their studies and exposes them to practicing English in addition to the time that they spend interacting with their peers in the classroom.

6.2 Reminder of the Nature of the Study

An explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design was used, which included two phases of data collection and analysis; the process gathered quantitative survey data first, followed by explicating specific survey results that need further explanation by using in-depth qualitative focus group interview data. The survey was administered to 310 Saudi students whereas focus group interview data were gathered from 28 participants. The participants were recruited from two Saudi universities, with varying emphases on the proportions of students engaged in face-to-face learning and virtual learning. The interpretation of results in this study primarily focused on how qualitative findings explained survey data in relation to the study purpose.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the benefits of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?

2. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?

3. What are Saudi EFL students' suggestions on how blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool could be useful to develop English language skills in the preparatory year?

6.3 Discussion of First Research Question

The first research question asks about Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the benefits of blended learning on the development of academic English in each language skill in the preparatory year. The following sub-sections discuss the four language skills (i.e., reading, listening, writing, and speaking) and their related sub-themes in detail.

6.3.1 Academic Reading Skills

Based on the findings of this study, EFL students generally believed that the use of blended learning supported their reading comprehension and critical thinking and maximized their reading opportunities to extend and discover their knowledge as the internet has a richness of reading resources, reinforcing their research skills, and increasing their motivation and outcomes. The following sections discuss students' perceptions related to each benefit.

6.3.1.1 BL Supports Academic Reading Comprehension and Reading Strategies

The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that students perceived the using of blended (on-/offline) reading to be supported development in reading comprehension, critical thinking, and reading strategies (e.g., skimming, scanning, speed reading, note taking, and underlining) to become more interactive as it enhanced a closer relationship between the text and the reader. During the PYP, EFL students must employ new reading strategies as they go through the online reading process. For example, they learned how to evaluate reading resources and synthesise thesis information to ensure accuracy. Unlike in the past, students did not just read to look for information to answer the questions or depend on their teacher's

advice; rather, they have become more engaged and active in understanding the text. As EFL students must read different academic references online, they have further opportunities to increase and explore their information as the internet is rich in reading resources. As previously mentioned, reading online resources is completely different than reading page by page from printed books. The former requires students to employ a variety of navigational skills to comprehend the meaning. This finding is consistent with the data obtained from Hamdan et al. (2017), Yang (2012), and Saffkova and Tuma (2012).

According to the findings, students believed that BL maximized EFL learners' reading opportunities to read at their convenience, thereby developing reading comprehension and independent learning. A large number of participants appreciated reading online in English (e.g., using online university system, Google Scholar, synchronous and asynchronous activities, interactive materials, CD-ROM) as it supported their reading comprehension of different topics related to their module. They enjoyed being able to complete online reading activities at any time and in any place, autonomously revisit materials, and build their academic reading skills, particularly when they related their previous knowledge to the reading text, using note taking and underlining skills in order to comprehend it. In this sense, EFL students had the ability to control their own learning and select any supported online materials suited to their needs. These results concur with the findings of Behjat et al. (2012), and Tehrani and Tabatabaei (2012), who indicated that reading comprehension is better enhanced through the use of BL as students have limitless access to online reading materials.

The study findings revealed that participants perceived online participation through blended learning as supporting their reading comprehension, assisting them in completing reading assignments, and helping them overcome some reading difficulties. This result supports the findings from Yang (2012), who indicated that BL enables students to develop reading skills and interactions with peers to exchange opinions and feedback to overcome some reading difficulties. This was certainly true when students were exchanging messages to raise different questions, reading comments about other colleagues or instructors, and discussing several answers. This interactive environment facilitated learning by making it more attractive.

Based on the current study's findings, some participants expressed a dislike for reading content in English and preferred to read it in Arabic to ensure a better understanding of the content and the general ideas. This attitude might have been influenced by students' frequent

use of their mother tongue in English classes—a practice considered normal in almost all schools in Saudi Arabia. From my experience as a Saudi student, this negative practice leads students to write English words with difficult pronunciations in Arabic so they can pronounce them correctly later. Are teachers aware that students still have reading difficulty in understanding some words in English? This question raises another concern about the importance of the teacher's role in supporting students' reading skills by using various CMC, such as synchronous and asynchronous communication and the need for teacher training on how to use innovative technological techniques to enhance students' reading in English. Another possible explanation for this situation might be that Saudi teachers of English were not properly trained to teach in a more professional way. Most teachers are Saudi and not highly qualified in technological and didactic improvements; they graduated from universities as specialists in English teaching, but with very limited teaching skills, and have rarely participated in professional development training programs that required being a successful English teacher. As a result, they tend to use Arabic to translate words and ideas for students, which negatively affects how English is practiced in class and how students study English.

A similar scenario has emerged at the university level, where bilingual foreign teachers from different Arab countries do not have adequate information about learners' needs in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the findings of this study, according to the students, suggest that training and professional development are priorities for avoiding waste in educational resources. As Ja'ashan (2015) explained, Saudi decision makers must further invest in teacher training efforts, particularly in terms of using technology to support foreign language teaching. Furthermore, teachers of English must be well trained on the latest EFL techniques and methods to support English learning. It is teachers' responsibility to continuously educate, train, and update themselves on advances in technological applications used in educational settings (Khan, 2011). Teachers have to fully understand the different features for both settings—namely, face-to-face and online—to support students in this integration. Furthermore, being able to train students in advance about how to use online activities for effective English reading is fundamental. Saudi EFL teachers have to make students aware of how to use online activities and how to read online in English.

6.3.1.2 BL Develops English Vocabulary Building

Students in this study perceived blended learning as allowing them to use intentional learning when learners searched online or downloaded an electronic dictionary for academic English,

which greatly enriched their academic vocabulary. They also highlighted the usefulness of glossaries to their comprehension. In the process of reading online materials, illustrations, diagrams, pictures, tables, videos, and audio materials included with the text were found to be essential for enriching learners' vocabulary and comprehension. This result corroborates the ideas of Tehrani and Tabatabaei (2012) and Hamdan et al. (2017), who showed that BL positively affected vocabulary knowledge; however, it differs from Tosun's (2015) finding that BL negatively affects students' vocabulary acquisition. A possible explanation for this difference might be the lack of motivation to encourage students to work autonomously outside the classroom.

The use of mobile phones might help students acquire new vocabulary through daily practice as most students use mobile phones to keep up with social media (e.g., Snapchat). Indeed, Zhang et al. (2011), Khazaei (2011), and Lu (2008) showed that blended learning through the use of mobile phones or text messages enhances vocabulary knowledge more than conventional learning with printed materials. As students frequently have ready access to their mobile phones, they might perceive them as a convenient technology for enhancing their English vocabulary acquisition. In this sense, Lu (2008) indicated that the level of continuity in reading text messages has affected vocabulary acquisition: more reading practice leads to increased vocabulary. This technique is a form of scaffolding; students constantly read text messages with new words on their mobile phones, which could include words useful for completing their final exams.

6.3.1.3 BL Enhances Research Skills through Electronic Library

Based on the findings, the participating students believed that the access to the Saudi electronic library website, which enabled them to read, download, and search for required sources to develop research skills and perform assignments. This result is consistent with data obtained by Trinder (2017), who pointed out that students have easy access to different technologies which they can engage for communication with others, entertainment, and research. She added that the internet, with its ease of downloading and streaming films and television series, provides exposure to English language usage in genuine settings and contexts, which has previously not been possible.

Undergraduate EFL students have only recently experienced searching through the electronic library because they were not trained on how to use online searches in high school or how to

search for academic references such as journal articles. Moreover, a large number of EFL students only come to campus to attend face-to-face classes and infrequently use the university library. As a result, EFL students have deficiencies in required research skills and are generally not familiar with online searches.

In general, therefore, it seems that the use of blended learning in universities in Saudi Arabia requires students to be well-prepared on how to use the electronic library properly. The Saudi electronic library website is highly dependent on the use of ICT; therefore, participants with digital illiteracy will waste time seeking out information without any benefits. As mentioned in the findings chapter, some participants in this study had never even heard about the electronic library, so there is a need to ensure that undergraduate students are provided with an orientation session and extensive training that includes how to use the electronic library; such efforts might solve part of the identified problem. Indeed, initial training is a major factor for enhancing research skills. Therefore, the key point is not to have a national electronic library website, but to explain its usability and facilitate accessibility to be effective for the users. These findings are consistent with Alasem's (2013) and Keisling (2018) results showing that electronic libraries have to address issues concerning website usability to encourage students to use them regardless of their academic and computer skills. Furthermore, libraries need to employ strong user evaluation programmes to enhance the quality of services they provide.

6.3.1.4 BL Increases EFL Students' Reading Satisfaction and Outcomes

The students in this study perceived that blended learning enhanced their motivation, enabling them to practice reading skills and engage in different activities with a strong sense of enthusiasm. The current findings further corroborate the ideas put forth by Tseng and Walsh (2016), Isiguzel (2014), and Yagci (2016) that blended learning motivates students more than traditional learning and positively affects their learning achievements and final results. These factors may explain the relatively good correlation between motivation and students' success. Practicing reading at any time seems to be the most favourable advantage for EFL students that motivates them to read more. The teacher plays a pivotal role in motivating and encouraging students to read and benefit from limitless online resources and making English reading a daily habit. The teacher's willingness to track and clarify students' understanding of specific issues and learning is important to the successful delivery of BL courses.

The findings of this study show that participants believed blended learning as a delivery method that contains online educational resources, attractive activities, social communication, and practice quizzes to enhance reading skills and, in turn, increase learning outcomes. For example, asynchronous activities such as reading prompt emails or materials uploaded in the LMS through Blackboard were useful for the majority of students in the current study. Such activities supported them in earning higher scores on tests and meeting learning objectives. These results seem to be consistent with findings from other studies (e.g., Alshehri, 2017; López-Pérez, 2011; Mugenyi et al., 2017; Saffkova & Tuma, 2012; Zacharis, 2015), which showed that using blended learning could positively affect students' results. Although learning outcomes are an essential concern when blended learning courses are being designed, more research is needed to determine associated factors such as student workload and the assessment of these learning outcomes.

6.3.2 Academic Listening Skills

Participants provided generally negative responses related to listening skills and identified them as the most difficult skills to learn, mainly because of the challenges EFL students faced in practicing such skills effectively.

6.3.2.1 Students Face Some Listening Difficulties in BL

The findings in this study revealed some difficulties related to the inability to utilize different listening cognitive processes, such as bottom-up and top-down, which negatively affected listening development. As a result, learners become stuck in analysing each single word in the spoken text instead of anticipating the general meaning. As mentioned earlier, listening and reading are highly reliant on understanding meaning by making predictions and connections between different ideas, whether in speech or reading text (Evans & John, 1998). However, listeners do not have a second opportunity to go back and check the meaning, as readers can do.

According to the students in this study, they believed that bilingual teachers' different accents caused complications for EFL students in the blended learning setting. As mentioned in the context of the study, the preparatory year in both universities employed high-qualified bilingual teachers to teach English for academic purposes. These teachers were from India, Pakistan, Sudan, Jordan, and other similar countries. Consequently, they used accents other

than standard American English. Often their accents were not clear, which negatively affected students' listening comprehension. As this study was conducted relatively recently, little research has endeavoured to explore the role of EFL teachers' accents in supporting learners' listening skills in Saudi Arabia. Thus, investigating students' perceptions of the effect of different accents and associated challenges is necessary. Noro (2005) concluded that different accents have a major influence on EFL/ESL listening comprehension, indicating that instructors have to consider different ways to make students familiar with these different accents, which is consistent with this study's results.

What is surprising is that the findings of the current study showed that listening comprehension was enhanced when the teacher was Saudi. Unexpectedly, EFL students believed that no listening comprehension difficulties when their instructor was Saudi. Thus, familiarity with the same language seems to affect listening comprehension. In other words, students tend to be more focused on the pronunciation which is already familiar to them. The familiarity with pronunciation and the same accents seems to help students extract the correct answers to the questions in the listening task and understand the information more easily. This finding is consistent with previous studies in different contexts (e.g., Alghofaili & Elyas, 2017; Kurita 2012; Wilcox, 1978). Wilcox (1978) concluded that Singaporean students understood English from Singaporean teachers more easily than teachers of other nationalities. Similarly, Alghofaili and Elyas (2017) found that EFL students better understand listening tasks from non-native speakers.

Finally, the current study's findings show mixed perceptions with regard to the use of the mother tongue in speaking class. Some students preferred native English speakers who did not use Arabic at all during speaking class, as they were more accurate in pronunciation, which might develop students' speaking skills. Others preferred non-native speakers because native speakers tend to speak faster, which makes concentrating while listening more difficult.

Moreover, the EFL learners in this study reported some challenges when they participated in listening comprehension tasks, such as unfamiliar pronunciation, new words, fast speaking, and unrecognized topics. This result is consistent with other findings (Chang, & Read, 2006; Elkhafai, 2005; Hasan, 2000; Noro, 2005) that the rate of speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and different native speakers' pronunciation caused listening comprehension anxiety, which in turn resulted in several reactions among students, such as irritation, aversion, lack of self-

confidence, and loss of concentration. It can thus be suggested that the use of an effective instructional mode to develop listening skills in BL can eliminate some of these difficulties, as previously mentioned in the literature review chapter. For example, in Lee and Lee's (2012) BL model, which contains online and offline classes, each setting includes pre-, while, and post-listening activities, as mentioned in Chapter 3. The model mainly aimed to enhance interactions in both f2f and online settings to develop listening skills. The offline session started with pre-listening activities, including the presentation of vocabulary, followed by while and post-listening activities that required more communication with peers. When the session ended, the teacher provided feedback and introduced the online session. More independent listening activities were included in the online session via Blackboard, followed by while and post-listening activities involving group collaboration. This BL instructional model was helpful with online synchronous and asynchronous activities as well as online group work. It was also effective for promoting learning and the sharing of opinions and feedback in autonomous learning, which activates chatting to improve listening skills.

6.3.2.2 Synchronous and Asynchronous Activities Support Listening Skills in BL

According to the findings of the current study, students believed that asynchronous and synchronous activities could enhance listening abilities. This result seems to be consistent with other research findings that listening logs are effective for encouraging listening for acquisition. Moreover, they perceived BL to be helpful with online synchronous and asynchronous activities; online group work is effective for learning and sharing opinions and feedback, thereby improving listening skills (Lee & Lee, 2012). Several practical practices might be useful in listening skills training, which in turn improves self-directed learning; for example, radio programs for listening to the news (e.g., BBC radio app) as well as digital audio and video podcasts available on mobile phones provide numerous media platforms. They give learners the opportunity to listen, pause, and listen again to a variety of topics (arts, education, health, kids and family, news and politics, society and culture, etc.). In addition, TV shows or real-life programs and episodes via the Internet (and CDs and DVDs in addition to those from the course book) might refine students' listening on their own time, and online activities associated with online systems in universities could enable users to listen to and read transcripts as well as complete activities to answer different kinds of questions (e.g., multiple choice). Thus, audio-visual materials allow for listening practice in both face-to-face and online settings.

6.3.2.3 BL Enhances Students as Self-directed Listeners

The findings of the current study indicated that utilizing various open educational resources such as YouTube supported students in becoming more autonomous. Using online resources to search for the information needed to build their understanding at any time, including outside the classroom, encouraged active learning. These results support the idea that interactive platforms might support students in working independently outside the classroom environment to acquire language skills and practice their English language. One possible explanation for this finding might be that new web generations have seemingly immersed themselves in continuous technology use, as evident when participants indicated the use of different sources of mobile learning via mobile phones and iPads to access rich multimedia forms. For example, students became more actively involved in the learning environment through the use of online learning as they have time flexibility to access knowledge at any time, making it more convenient. As 21st-century learners have become used to having extensive online resources available to them, researchers are faced with an endless need to discover what prompts students to learn and what skills they need to develop. Indeed, further study with a greater focus on understanding how self-directed listening (SDL) could be useful to support EFL in particular contexts, such as Saudi Arabia, is suggested. This result seems to be consistent with other findings that online learning resources are of great value to students—not only in terms of the practical benefits to their language learning, but also for improving their digital literacy and encouraging self-directed learning, which will be fundamental for their future learning practices (Levy, 2017).

Although the participants valued the ideas of SDL, on some occasions they still appreciated physical interaction with instructors. The participants were undergraduate students, meaning they were adult learners who should have been aware of the best learning materials to suit their needs, yet they still needed some assistance and training. One possible explanation for this might be that, during schooling, students were totally passive and dependent on their teachers to acquire information. This result is consistent with the findings of Banditvilai (2016) and Guangying (2014), who indicated that blended learning could enhance the relationship between students and lecturers to facilitate the learning process. Therefore, the transition to blended learning, based on the move from passive to active learners, could be a problem with learners who have no experience managing their learning outside the classroom.

The findings of this study also demonstrate that the teacher's role has dramatically changed in the blended learning environment. A teacher who is practically non-existent becomes more student-centred as students take on full responsibility for their learning and the teacher serves as a facilitator. In this sense, students search for information online, exchange feedback with their peers, develop their language abilities, prepare for the next lecture, and access online language materials, asking for the teacher's help only when they need a little guidance. Poon (2013) confirmed the importance of the teacher's role in engaging students to improve their skills and ultimately become active learners. The findings of this study indicate that the teacher's role has a vital impact on students' engagement with their peers and curriculum in the blended learning environment. As previously explained, teachers have to enhance cooperative learning and the value of group work in order to perform specific tasks according to particular objectives (Guangying, 2014). The community of inquiry framework by Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) could be used to guide the building of collaborations between learners. For example, in this study context, interaction between students and the lecturer via Blackboard could enhance students' engagement as they share views, share videos, and upload different language materials. The findings of this study also suggested that the establishment of an appropriate social network for language learning purposes could effectively engage students, thereby improving self-directed learning skills. These findings confirm the associations among online social tools to support self-regulated learning (Akgunduz & Akinoglu, 2016; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

6.3.2.4 BL Flexibility Enables Students to Develop Listening Skills

According to the findings of this study, participants perceived BL to be providing them with time flexibility to learn at any time, thereby making it convenient. Technology-enhanced learning can support flexible pedagogies and provide greater options for learners in terms of where they learn, the pace at which they learn, and their mode of learning. Therefore, they behave like adult learners who know their responsibilities and practice their skills to accomplish and download listening tasks at their own pace. Students considered this to be a key advantage. This finding is consistent with the results from other research, such as Banditvilai (2016), Gordon (2014), Guangying (2014), and, Thai et al. (2017) who indicated that technology-enhanced learning can support flexibility and provide enriched varieties for learners in terms of place, time, and pace. Conversely, some participants believed this kind of flexibility to be an ambiguity within the course content because they were unfamiliar with the

strategies of this new environment; such dissatisfaction could lead to anxiety and isolation because of their unfamiliarity with online systems. For example, they may not know how to manage virtual classes or may have difficulty following online instructions.

Furthermore, students who were married or employed were more likely to have additional responsibilities, such as family or job commitments. They believed that blended learning was more suited to them. This finding is consistent with the results from other research, such as Poon (2013) and Yam and Rossini (2012), who confirmed that the flexibility provided by blended learning is considered a fundamental factor for delivering a course. In Saudi Arabia, women generally get married and have kids at a young age, which might prevent them from pursuing higher education. For such students, flexibility is a vital characteristic of any learning opportunity. This result corroborates the ideas of Alebaikan and Troudi (2011) and Alaidarous and Madini (2016), who indicated that flexibility in blended learning allows Saudi females to complete their education while simultaneously preserving their family duties.

6.3.3 Academic Speaking Skills

According to the findings of this study, students believed that blended learning as an effective tool supporting their English-speaking skills in a key aspect—namely, BL supports EFL students' speaking skills through synchronous and asynchronous communications as it provides further opportunities for students to practice speaking outside the actual classrooms, BL enhances students' confidence, and BL as a rich intercultural platform supports speaking competence. These ideas are discussed in the following sections.

6.3.3.1 BL Supports EFL Students' Speaking Skills through Synchronous and Asynchronous Communications

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in Saudi Arabia, students are generally unwilling to engage in open conversations in English. They do not feel confident actively communicating with others, perhaps due to their deficiency in speaking skills. Currently, speaking skills seem to be the most required skill for Saudi EFL learners, yet they are often considered the hardest skill to acquire. According to the findings in this study, students perceived blended synchronous online communication (text-based discussions), particularly with native English speakers, as encouraging them to practice the language without fear of or hesitation in making errors. Furthermore, they believed that it offered additional opportunities for them to practice the language and express their opinions freely in English by integrating communication in both

settings. These findings concur with those obtained by Trinder (2017), who found that online learning resources create countless opportunities to practice English in a way that was not possible in traditional learning environments.

Based on the findings of this study, students believed that online communication via live chats or virtual classes is a convenient platform for not only overcoming shyness, but also interacting with foreign students outside the actual classroom. The current study revealed that interactions with foreign learners offered many advantages to support foreign learners' speaking skills, especially in terms of imitation and intonation, as EFL students tried to reproduce sentences and useful phrases heard from their foreign colleagues. This result is consistent with Guangying's (2014) findings, which suggested that online communication with native speakers could enhance EFL Chinese students' English speaking and prevent them from thinking in Chinese to produce spoken words.

It is possible, therefore, to suggest the use of podcasts and video blogging, as CMC, to help EFL students become more accurate and fluent in their speaking skills. Several CMC tools have been found to be useful for improving speaking skills—mainly pronunciation and grammar—for EFL students (Chen, 2015; Kirkgöz, 2011; López-Pérez, 2011). It is not surprising that learners regard these skills as more important when they practice speaking skills in class as well. As blended learning provides them with the opportunity to practice speaking inside and outside the classroom, students paid more attention to speech via the aforementioned tools and learned useful expressions that they could later employ in different situations. In some circumstances, students recorded online sessions, giving them an effective way to learn how to use good expressions from their peers on final exams. Based on the findings of this study, students recognized how to avoid mispronunciations when speaking and became more aware of the appropriate use of vocabulary and grammar structures.

Moreover, participants in the current study believed the use of Blackboard as an LMS has the potential to support speaking skills. Blackboard includes various interactions using asynchronous and synchronous tools to enhance students' speaking skills. This finding is in line with previous findings from Smirnova and Nuzha (2013), who concluded that LMS software within BL helps EFL students develop academic presentation skills. Participants in this study used a PowerPoint presentation in class to practice speaking and received feedback from instructors through Blackboard.

Based on the findings of this study, the delayed and general feedback from instructors caused various errors, as students did not know whether their performance was satisfactory. Although Blackboard's interactive tools have been shown to be effective on English skills development in many existing empirical studies (e.g., Chen, 2015), the findings of the current study indicate instructors' lack of experience in providing general feedback to students via Blackboard.

Overall, EFL students believed that blended learning supports social collaborations that promote knowledge construction, develop critical thinking, and engage learners in the learning situation to build active learning which is mainly the focus of the community of inquiry (COI) framework developed by Garrison and Arbaugh (2007).

6.3.3.2 BL as a Rich Intercultural Platform to Enhance Students' Speaking Skills and Support Confidence

According to the findings, blended learning presents a number of potential benefits for Saudi women pursuing an education. To begin with, the mixture of virtual and real-life media has the potential to enable Saudi women to further their studies and establish cultural connections among themselves and with other across the world. The blended learning method enables female students within the Saudi education system to achieve a wider level of inclusivity when it comes to assimilating knowledge in the English language. At the same time, the finding of this study reveals that the use of blended learning enables female students to acquire an important level of skills that can be applied to the world of work. This is an aspect of paramount importance, due to the efforts instigated by the Saudi leadership in order to improve access of women to all segments of public life in the country (Horn and Staker, 2014).

As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, according to Hofstede's (2001) scale, Saudi Arabia has a high uncertainty avoidance with a score of 80. As a result, there are continuous challenges to adapting a new approach, such as blended learning. Based on the findings of this study, participants believed that they are willing to use BL to improve their EFL skills. Students also enjoyed speaking with others in online classes about the Saudi cultures and traditions and, in turn, gained information about various cultures. Blended learning offered a rich, intercultural diverse environment in which to practice English. This finding and other current developmental changes in Saudi Arabia (as mentioned in Chapter 2) might change

Hofstede's score of this particular dimension in the future. According to the findings, the inclusivity of Saudi female students is fostered through the blended learning method by creating a stress-free environment that allows the virtual connection with male students in order to investigate the different cultural and practical aspects related to the acquisition of knowledge in the English language. This result is consistent with the study of Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017).

According to the findings, online environment that is part and parcel of the blended learning method enables female Saudi students to promote their personal growth by enhancing the element of confidence in their ability learn new skills. Furthermore, the blended learning environment is able to foster the kind of critical and analytical skills that will enable women to thrive when they become part of the workforce. The research done on the subject of blended learning highlights the way in which this method allows students to gain knowledge about the world and to establish cultural connection in a manner that enhances their standing in society (Garrison and Vaughan, 2007). This is a facet of particular importance for female students, as the Saudi work is rapidly integrating women in all areas of public life.

According to the findings, blended learning also has significant advantages when it comes to including women living in a rural environment into the education system. The research finding reveals that the blended learning environment is foment the inclusivity of this segment of the population into the education system and reduce inequalities in terms of learning skills that are necessary for the purposes of gaining employment at a latter stage (Eid and Nuhu, 2011). Although the government greatly invests in the development of the information technology infrastructure as well as the education sector, higher education is still not available to all individuals (Alojaiman, Alturise & Goodwin, 2014) in Saudi Arabia. Many individuals, especially women living in rural areas have no access to higher education. Blended learning offers these individuals with an opportunity for developing their skills, qualities and competencies, including foreign language proficiency (Alzahrani, 2017). It is important to note that there is a growing constituency of students that prefer the online methodology of learning to its traditional counterpart. Alojaiman, Alturise and Goodwin argue that many students, "tend to get the motivation for using e-Learning as a means of gaining admittance to higher education...while to others it could be a traditional course element, other students would rather undertake online courses entirely. For the latter group especially, e-Learning could provide higher education access that they would otherwise not have had access to

owing to their time and geographic constraints” (Alojaiman, Alturise and Goodwin, 2014, p. 183).

The findings of this study indicate that the blended learning is also beneficial for the purposes of motivating the students to work in a more collaborative and interactive way to improve speaking skills. This is done by promoting the participation of several students across the digital space in projects where it is required to work in conjunction with others. It should be stressed that the virtual environment is also conducive to ensuring that female students are able to practice their English language skills without having to be conscious about making mistakes. This is an aspect of significant importance when it comes to building confidence in the capacity to acquire knowledge of a foreign language that is so vital in order to do well in the workplace. This result concurs with the findings of Szilagyi (2015) Hamdan (2014), and Mulhim (2014) who found that online communication developed various learning skills, such as self-directed learning, motivation, and satisfaction, which undoubtedly affected language learning. Therefore, it seems that e-learning in general and blended learning in particular permit EFL students to practice their foreign language in a stress-free environment, which significantly contributes to their knowledge and proficiency. Hence, by participating in blended learning programmes, Saudi women can further develop their English language skills, even if they are married or live in rural areas. This is certainly not the case in a traditional learning environment.

The findings of the current study revealed that online discussion provides an opportunity for female students to practice their English language freely, without fear or hesitation. Saudi students were already experienced in communicating in mixed multicultural classes with different international environments through the Scholarship Program (KASP), which is entirely funded by the government and provides equal opportunities for both genders to travel overseas to complete their education and get academic certificates in top prestigious universities all over the world. When students returned to Saudi Arabia, they reflected the positive practices to others, which in turn contributed to this change. However, Hockly (2018) underscored some cultural considerations which must be taken into account in terms of the impact of blended learning. For example, studies by Zhu, Valke, and Schellens (2009, cited in Hockly, 2018) and Liu and Chiu (2016, cited in Hockly, 2018) found that students may be hesitant to participate in written or oral discussions on the internet through a genuine fear of making errors. The findings of these two studies indicate that the design of blended learning

courses must consider a multitude of different factors which can impact upon language learning (Kessler, 2018).

Indeed, in traditional settings, students tend to be shy and unresponsive, which might have stemmed from being brought up with the belief of needing to be quiet and just responsive (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2012). The Saudi educational system has long been criticized for failing to satisfy learners in terms of critical thinking and self-development skills (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). From my perspective as a Saudi student and lecturer, the material we learned was inapplicable to our lives and professions. In other words, students were not educated to be critical thinkers, to debate, to question, or even to participate in problem-solving techniques. Great emphasis was placed on the Islamic curriculum rather than how to develop students' learning skills or how to become independent learners. Passive learning, which is deeply rooted in the Saudi educational system, has negatively affected students' skills by training them to be reliant on memorization and become passive learners. When students enrolled in universities, they carried these challenges with them and faced new difficulties there. Studying English as a foreign language during the preparatory year was considered a big challenge from the students' perspectives, as they were used to learning by memorization while ignoring problem-solving or critical thinking skills.

In contrast, students believed that BL enables them to work with each other, identifying errors and correcting each other's mistakes in English, thereby enhancing confidence and critical thinking. According to the students in this study, participants' confidence increased as they shared opinions and completed tasks together, such as presentations in front of the class. They believed that BL offered new learning techniques that facilitated active learning skills and in turn developed language skills and self-confidence. These results support Guangying's (2014) findings that students value blended learning, as it enables them to develop the required self-development skills that are significant for their learning needs. However, these results differ from Al-Hassan & Shukri (2017) who found that more than half of the female participants were reluctant to participate in blended learning programmes in the future. These results can explain that students may lack the skills (e.g. autonomous learning and time management) necessary to effectively deal with the blended learning approach. Additionally, this method of achieving inclusivity could have a significant impact in reducing the costs of entry into the education system, both for the students and the government. The research has found that the

use of the blended learning method increased student satisfaction, as seen from the fact that the students', "positive responses outweighed their negative responses mainly in terms of richness of learning resources, opportunity to interact in foreign language [and] appropriateness and variety of content" (Al-Hassan and Shukri, 2017). The adoption of a blended learning method has the potential to enable female Saudi students to combine family and work life in a successful manner. This is not an opportunity that was available to previous generations of Saudi women.

6.3.4 Academic Writing Skills

With respect to the writing skills developed through the use of blended learning, the findings of this study show that students had mixed perceptions. The discussion of these perceptions will focus on the role of feedback, asynchronous communication, and online assignment submission.

6.3.4.1 BL Supports Academic Writing Skills through Instructor and Peer Feedback

As previously mentioned, this study was conducted with EFL undergraduate students who had recently moved from high school to the university level; thus, their perceptions about the nature of instructor or peer feedback were relatively unclear, mainly because they had not been specifically trained in offering feedback. This result is consistent with the study by Tsui and Ng (2000), who reported some difficulties with peer feedback—namely, students' failure to provide useful feedback and their tendency to comment on just general errors instead of content. The fundamental role of feedback supporting English language was frequently mentioned by participants, particularly in the development of speaking and writing skills. One explanation for this might be that online feedback on speaking and writing skills could be easier for both the teacher, who has limited face-to-face class hours to evaluate all students, and the learners, who can practice more at their own pace. There are, however, other possible explanations. Speaking and writing are considered productive skills, which require human evaluations of their outcomes (Sharma & Barret, 2007). Although students recognized the benefits of different types of feedback (i.e., instructor, peer, and self) for their writing skill development, they preferred the teacher's feedback and indicated a strong desire to receive it

on a regular basis. The instructor's feedback might enhance students' writing accuracy by providing specific details about errors.

Although students appreciated teachers' feedback about their writing, the teachers tended to provide general feedback about the two essays students produced each term. Meanwhile, peer feedback during online classes (e.g., through email and chat boards) seemed to be more useful and interactive than during offline classes when developing essay topic ideas and style, revising other drafts, and using academic words. The flexible nature of these communicative tools enables EFL students to collaborate with their colleagues regardless of the time constraints inherent in face-to-face sessions (Ho & Savignon, 2007). These results are in line with those of previous studies by So and Lee (2012), Young and Lee (2010), and Yoon (2011), indicating that the effective role of feedback could support the development of EFL students' writing skills in blended learning. It is also interesting to note that some students acknowledged their errors and tried to fix them in the second draft of their essays. Therefore, encouraging EFL students to continue to revise their essays based on peers' comments can help them improve their writing skills (Paulus, 1999). Furthermore, peer feedback and self-feedback training is highly recommended to develop the quality of academic writing (Min, 2006; Young and Lee, 2010). It would also be useful to have a group leader to make the process flow better and be more structured. Finally, the time organization of each online and offline feedback session should be considered to provide equal opportunities for providing feedback to students without time limitations (So & Lee, 2012).

Providing students with immediate feedback rather than general and undetailed comments about their performance during a presentation or speaking situation is critical according to the students in this study. Instructors should employ strategies that facilitate providing feedback to each individual to help him or her overcome weaknesses in speaking abilities. In terms of peer feedback, students should be encouraged to be effective listeners of their colleagues in class or during online discussions by explaining to them the benefits of this process for general speaking development. Within this collaborative process, EFL students learn how to listen to each other's ideas and how to defend their own opinions. These results support the findings of previous research by Chen (2015), Yang (2012), Ernest, Heiser, and Murphy (2011), and White (2009) on the useful role of peer and instructor feedback in supporting writing and speaking skills.

6.3.4.2 BL Supports Academic Writing Skills through Online Group Work and Encourages Students to Avoid Plagiarism

Based on the findings on this study, students believed that blended learning to be beneficial for organizing EFL students' writing process in a systematic way in terms of creating the main and supporting ideas, promoting innovative thinking skills, and relating ideas effectively. With the advent of technology, writing in English is becoming much easier as it can be amended evaluated, and shared in mass domains. According to the students in this study, sharing ideas in an online group was a key factor for developing writing skills. This was evident in the case of using the mind map during online and offline sessions as an effective interaction writing strategy. A mind map is a new development method for brainstorming (Motteram & Sharma, 2009). In this study, students enjoyed creating several mind maps by hand or freestyle using the MindMeister website (www.mindmeister.com). Although some students were unfamiliar with this technique, they became more involved later on during the course. This result supports Al-Jarf's (2009) idea that more EFL student training is desirable to develop writing skills in the Saudi context.

The findings of this study revealed that intentional plagiarism is considered normal among the majority of EFL students. They are used to handing in assignments copied and pasted from the internet. They assume that, as this information already exists on the internet, there is no need to acknowledge the writer's name. As recent high school graduates in Saudi Arabia are used to copying others' ideas for use in their own work, which is a normal practice for them. This unexpected finding suggests that students and teachers have to be taught what plagiarism means and the serious consequences of plagiarism. Such training should be conducted in schools, before students reach the university level, through specific simple techniques for using references as well as other writing techniques, such as summarizing and paraphrasing. This result seems consistent with those of Madkhali (2017), who found that plagiarism practices are still considered normal among Saudi students. He further clarified that the lack of information on how to use citations properly is the main reason.

The findings of this study indicated that plagiarism was an unfamiliar term to almost all EFL students in both institutions, highlighting two important issues. First, students did not know how to avoid plagiarism or what the serious consequences of it were. The reason for this might be that Saudi instructors did not understand the instructions on academic misconduct as

they graduated from Saudi universities. However, workload might be another explanation for this result in that difficulties in time management resulted in intentional plagiarism. Second, anxiety about failing their preparatory year was a primary concern for these students. Consequently, students who have limitations in academic writing were unintentionally plagiarise. Therefore, blended learning could be used to educate EFL students to organize their time effectively in order to manage their writing assignments. These results corroborate the ideas of Al Zumor et al. (2013) and Alaidarous and Madini (2016), who suggested that intensive and extensive efforts have to be made to increase plagiarism awareness among students as well as faculty members before the adoption of blended learning.

Universities in Saudi Arabia have to change their policies and practices toward plagiarism and take it more seriously. Indeed, Aljarf (2013), Madkhali (2017), and Razek (2014) suggested that intensive and extensive efforts have to be made to increase plagiarism awareness among students as well as faculty members before adopting blended learning. As academic writing is considered challenging in Saudi Arabia, students have to be well prepared prior to and during preparatory year; such training takes time and practice to help students master the ideas. Some serious precautions have to be considered prior to the adoption of blended learning in terms of strict instructions about confidentiality, security, and plagiarism. Students have to be educated on how to respect all these concerns is the best solution as there is a lack of awareness in Saudi universities about ethical considerations in online learning (Madkhali, 2017).

6.4 Discussion of Second and Third Research Questions

This section examines the challenges to blended learning and EFL students' suggestions for addressing these challenges. This section is divided into four sub-sections; the first sub-section discusses BL implementation which divided into four sub-headings: planning, resources, support, and learners' needs.

6.4.1 BL Implementation

Garrison and Kanuka (2004, p. 96) argued that BL is both "simple and complex"; the difficulty occurs with the endless opportunities in virtual designs and the potential to use them in different educational settings. However, Singh and Reed (2001) pointed out that learners "need to approach blended learning as a journey rather than a destination" (p. 7). This highlights the importance of creating an effective plan to ensure an effective process in the

BL implementation journey. Blended learning implementation requires careful planning and clear university policy. Effective planning will help effectively tackle any problems that might occur later. Administrators should prioritize institutions' needs and goals in handling technology prior to the adoption of blended learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). In addition, effective BL needs to evaluate financial, human, and technical resources. Moreover, affording support to students and staff is also crucial for the effective implementation of BL. Finally, keeping up to date on all of students' needs is crucial. All these aspects will be discussed in detail in the following sub-sections.

6.4.1.1 Planning

Regarding planning, providing appropriate infrastructure is essential to implement BL. Although the universities in this study provided wide Internet coverage, the study findings revealed that students had difficulty connecting to it, indicating an unsatisfactory IT infrastructure in both universities. Despite the Ministry of Education's tremendous efforts to provide Internet access for free in universities, low speed connections remain a key problem (Ja'ashan, 2015). This situation resulted in several frustrating scenarios: students utilized wireless Wi-Fi in different places on campus (e.g., cafés and restaurants), brought their own Wi-Fi, or connected through their mobile phones to access the Internet. This challenge was even more frustrating for students who did not have access to the Internet at home. Consequently, this problem hampered students' success and discouraged them from continuing to learn as all English learning activities, lectures, and communication with instructors occurred via the Internet. Moreover, this situation prevented students from participating in online language classes. Therefore, these issues have to be addressed by offering high speed Internet connectivity to all students to encourage learning productivity and enable them to gain the maximum benefit from EFL courses. Moreover, continuously developing the quality of the Internet connection at universities can lead to successful blended learning implementation, as strongly voiced during focus group interviews. Universities' visions have to support effective integration with language teaching and learning.

6.4.1.2 Resources

6.4.1.2.1 Financial Resources

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) reported that the effective implementation of blended learning requires three essential resources: financial resources, human resources, and technical

resources. In terms of financial support, the findings in the current study indicate a lack of available computers on campus. Students must have access to an adequate number of computers in English labs to be able to participate in vast blended learning language activities. This result concurs with the findings of a recent study by Dwaik, Jweiless, and Shrouf (2016), who found that financial support to develop universities' infrastructure is an important factor that has to be well-thought-out to ensure effective blended learning implementation and students' progress. Due to this assumption, generous financing in educational technology might lead to substantial outcomes, particularly in the EFL context. The evidence of this can be clearly seen in the case of the tremendous success in educational technology in the United States, China, and Ireland. For example, the United States financed \$66 billion in only 10 years whereas China spent \$13.2 billion on educational technology based on the strong belief in the association between financial investment in educational technology and students' academic progression (Lei, 2010). Therefore, financial support to develop the university infrastructure, curriculum, teachers' training and professional development, and modules that satisfy learners is necessary to sustain blended learning and facilitate access to educational resources (Hamdan, 2014).

Although King Abdullah's project for public education reform provided \$3.1 billion to develop several areas in education, Internet services are still unsatisfactory (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). More recently, the Saudi Vision 2030 governmental plan made investments in educational technology as a priority required for education transformations (Mosad, 2016). Therefore, the identified barriers have to be considered by policymakers in Saudi higher education.

6.4.1.2.2 Technical Resources

According to the findings in this study, students perceived university websites' technical problems (e.g., slow uploading or downloading in LMS) and audio difficulties in online sessions as major constraints. These results are in line with those of Thang et al. (2012), Piccoli, Ahmad, and Ives (2001), Al-Jarf (2005a), Hara and Kling (1999), Smyth et al. (2012), Thang, Mahmud, and Abd Razak (2012), Abdelraheem (2006), Vaughan (2007), and Al Mahrooqi and Troudi (2014), Hamdan et al. (2017), who suggested the need to provide appropriate technical tools in universities, including good and quick Internet connections and computer availability on university campuses.

6.4.1.2.3 Human Resources

The current study suggests that practitioners must not only understand the reasons behind using modern technology to supplement and enhance teaching and learning, but also embrace this concept to improve their classroom practice and enhance their delivery of the curriculum. Equally important is the balance between face-to-face and online activities and/or time in order to ensure that all students' needs are met. Some students prefer to work as individuals, alone at their own pace, whereas others value the interaction that occurs in face-to-face encounters in the classroom. Clearly, certain issues need to be addressed and/or resolved, such as ensuring that the library facilities are capable of delivering this type of approach towards the curriculum, online materials are suitably supportive of students required to access them, and the design of blended learning approaches take into account students' preferred learning methods, assessment of their courses, and the workload required to be successful.

Qualified and trained instructors are essential for the delivery of BL. As already mentioned in several areas, the teacher plays an essential role in supporting students' language skills in the blended learning environment. Unlike traditional learning, in blended learning, the teacher's role shifts from being a dominator to a helper (Yang, 2012). Based on this study's findings, students still need to interact with their teachers regularly, suggesting the need to create various supporting activities to significantly improve interactions. For example, the teacher could create a Twitter account to keep in touch with students and practice the language. This technique develops both speaking and writing skills, as students respond via messages. One unanticipated finding of the current study was that some of teachers' traditional teaching approaches remained unchanged. Despite the general belief, a teacher who is skilful in traditional face-to-face classes will not necessarily be skilful in an online class (Easton, 2003). A possible explanation for this is the lack of adequate training for teachers seeking to blend features from both environments effectively. It is possible, therefore that, teachers might require additional expertise in focusing on self-development learning skills to encourage students to work independently and manage their time effectively to complete one task at a time.

6.4.1.3 Training and Support

Based on this study's findings, the universities in this study lack technicians who could support and solve students' technical problems through websites or on campuses. They either

provide delayed responses or no responses at all. This caused students to encounter further obstacles that prevented them from logging in to the system to attend or participate in online classes, submitting assignments on time, and contacting their instructors. During particularly bad weather (e.g., heavy rainfall), the online systems went down completely, creating further dissatisfaction and distractions for students. Universities should therefore provide continuous maintenance of their online systems and offer timely online technical support system 24/7. A radical change has to be made to provide a professional and active technical support team with the necessary technological skills to support students with any technical difficulties, as evident from the students' comments.

Contrary to the expectations, the findings reveal that all the required information about how to register using the university's online system and how to solve some complicated technical problems were answered by students' classmates. Perhaps universities should provide a learning support system that facilitates all students' learning skills related to becoming independent learners and communicating with tutors during the preparatory year to support new undergraduate students effectively (Dzakiria et al., 2006). Students need to be assisted in acquiring the skills necessary for learning as well as encouraged to create a reflective learning setting to ensure effective blended learning implementation (Cobanoglu et al., 2017; Rivers et al., 2014). Indeed, Poon (2013), Gedik, Kiraz, and Ozden (2012), and Garrison and Vaughan (2007) suggested developing learning support systems in higher education institutions.

In light of these research results, students are appropriately trained for working in the blended learning environment. The lack of some basic technological skills and unfamiliarity with effective synchronous and asynchronous tools are serious challenges that have to be addressed. This finding is in line with Ja'ashan's (2015) findings of similar negative perceptions related to the lack of information and clear instructions to follow for online systems. Blended learning requires specific training for both faculty members and students (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). Thus, English instructors should have access to a professional support team to assist them in managing time during online and offline classes, meeting learners' needs, achieving the course aims, and identifying the best online applications for integration into their blended learning classroom as it helps and guides them in their efforts (Cobanoglu et al., 2017).

Although several professional development trainings have been launched in Saudi Arabia, such as the Tatweer project, teachers still need continuous professional development

particularly in ICT skills (Al-Madani & Allaafajiy, 2014). In general, therefore, it seems that there is a need for several developmental projects to promote teachers' professional development across the kingdom. Continuous investment in human resources to keep up with the rapid development of technological tools through workshops, seminars, and helpdesk support would be rewarding. Institutional support seems to be key for the success of blended learning implementation. Administrators should encourage instructors to acquire basic and emerging technological skills and participate in professional development programs that best fit their classes. In addition, English language teachers have to knowledgeably select adequate technologies that suit their students' learning needs (López-Pérez, 2011). These results are consistent with those of Fraser (2013), Al-Sarrani (2010), Al-Jarf (2005a), and Gedik et al. (2012), who warned that a lack of qualified and trained teachers impedes students' development. The findings of this study also revealed that students still valued physical communication with the instructor to enhance and support their English language learning. Therefore, teachers should be trained on how to harness technology to facilitate teaching and learning instead of using it to impede learners' development (Thang, Wong et al., 2012).

Thus, instructors have to be knowledgeable enough to utilize different technological resources and have the basic IT skills to facilitate virtual classes or guide synchronous discussions. Therefore, training for teachers on how to use CMC inside and outside the classroom environment would enhance the implementation of blended learning as well as engagement in the discourse. Although blended learning could be used as a tool for teachers' training around the kingdom to improve their profession, this study found that blended learning could contribute to teachers' professional development training problems. Many Saudi higher education institutions that adopt blended learning neglect the role of teacher training and how teachers communicate with students in this new environment. Instead the focus has been on the technology used (Ja'ashan, 2015). Therefore, it generally seems that practitioners' CPD activities ensuring the most effective use of educational technology are essential (Englund et al., 2017).

Furthermore, this study found that EFL undergraduate students had only recently experienced blended learning, which required new learning skills to cope with technology, particularly for those students with limited computer literacy. A few students in this study had not studied computers in school, which limited their basic IT skills (e.g., using Microsoft Word). In general, therefore, it seems that initial training for students should focus on how to

communicate with technology in relation to their English module, how to register for online classes, and how to upload assignments. Providing an orientation session about the university's online system would make students more comfortable. The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is the absence of familiarity with a standardized test's (STEP) computer techniques and how to deal with the Saudi electronic library website. Thus, special attention on language for standardized test techniques and the use of the online library website is warranted. This result further supports Piccoli et al.'s (2001) and Poon's (2013) findings in terms of the necessary role of preliminary training for students to actively engage them in the blended learning environment.

6.4.1.4 Learners' Needs

The findings revealed that students were overwhelmed with workloads in both online and offline settings, which caused some negative impressions of blended learning as tedious and isolating. This result is consistent with studies by Al Zumor et al. (2013), Tosun (2015), and Thang, Wong et al. (2012), who found general dissatisfaction with BL courses. One possible explanation for this is that students expected blended learning to result in fewer class hours (Vaughan, 2007). Language homework in all different modules required time to complete. For example, math required answering 100 questions, while communication skills had 40 questions, and English had questions for two complete units as well as the need to participate in four online speaking sessions. All of these tasks must be completed as students were assessed weekly. It is somewhat surprising that most of these findings were revealed from unmarried students, who were expected to have more flexibility than married students. For the English module workload, students felt forced to give the task to someone else to complete, which cost them financially, or finish the assignment very quickly regardless of its quality and precision. These results concur with those obtained by Thang, Wong et al. (2012), Gedik et al. (2012), and Poon (2013), who found that workload could negatively affect students' progress in blended learning. The current study highlighted the importance of meeting the needs related to students' characteristics and background when utilizing a blended learning course.

EFL students in this study also strongly suggested offering only the English module in the preparatory year to enable them to be more focused and productive to pass and enrol in their desired majors. As mentioned in Chapter 2, preparatory years include intensive math, communication skills, and English modules as compulsory entry requirements for desired majors. All these modules are presented in English. The students' suggestion seems

reasonable. When all module materials are in English, focusing on other modules that will not be useful later in their academic careers might be a waste of students' time and efforts. This suggestion is most practical for married students who have other family commitments. Interestingly, Taif University in KSA recently sought to address this challenge by incorporating verticality in the preparatory year program to be more effective. In other words, it offers English during all upcoming years rather than only in the preparatory year, as most students complete the rest of their programs in Arabic, which resulted in them forgetting everything they learned in English.

6.5 Theoretical Contribution: Blended learning instructional framework

The framework used is based on combining traditional learning theories such as social constructivism with contemporary theories as cognitivism in order to develop a BL instructional framework to facilitate teaching and active learning in relation to technology. Based on the previous theories, various models have been established to reinforce technology-enhanced learning, such as Salmon's (2002) five-stage model, Mayes and Fowler's (1999) conceptualisation cycle, and the COI framework of Garrison and Arbaugh (2007). Each model has its pros and cons. Thus, the framework in this study espoused a combined approach based on the assumptions of learning theories (social constructivism, cognitivism) and the three identified models. In this regard, Conole (2010) advised that these pedagogical models can be used for guidance to enhance teaching and learning practices and activities, facilitate active learning, and develop the appropriate course design in the digital age. The adopted framework is mainly concerned with the role of interaction and collaborative work between learners to construct knowledge through the Internet leading to the development of English language skills. The role of peers' and the instructor's feedback is also considered.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, COI mainly focuses on developing critical thinking and collaboration among learners to build active learning in BL settings. Mayes and Fowler (1999) suggested three phases of the learning cycle linked to learning theories that could be applied in BL settings (i.e., conceptualization, construction, and dialogue). In the dialogue stage, for example, knowledge is tested through collaborative work and conversation between learners and their peers, such as online chats, online discussions, and video-conferencing, which is related to connectivism theory. For Mayes and Fowler (1999), there is a requirement to consider the development of communities of practice via conceiving e-learning to foster relationships as integral to the success of a course of instruction. Salmon (2013) focused on

three dimensions of fostering interaction: between learners and content, between learners and other people (both peers and educators), and the issues potentially raised by cross-cultural communication. According to Salmon (2002, 2013), a mix of interactions, engaging with materials via a spectrum of media, is an important aspect of working for learners. The focus on supporting interaction between the different parties involved here highlights the links back to social constructivist theory more clearly (Salmon, 2011).

The current study explores EFL students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning on the development of their academic English skills, which necessitates the effective implementation of each academic language skill in both f2f and online settings. Based on this study's findings, language learning is developed through social interactions via the internet as learners can easily engage with online tools that support their active learning.

Choosing an appropriate blended learning framework is highly reliant on several dimensions of interactions, such as time, fidelity, humanness, and space (Graham & Dziuban, 2008). In the *time* and *fidelity* dimensions, synchronous learning allows learners to engage in close communication at the same time, which is similar to f2f interactions. Likewise, *humanness* dimensions require human communication such as that which occurs in collaboration work and virtual classes. In *space* dimensions, movement towards distributed simulation environment increases to facilitate interactions. However, each online and offline environment has its strengths and weaknesses. The effective blend could balance the weaknesses of one dimension by enhancing the strengths in another (Yoon & Lee, 2010).

As mentioned in Chapter 3, several types of BL frameworks consider particular levels of blends (activity, course, program, institution). *Activity level* (when the combination of f2f and online learning occurred within the activities, such as operating virtual learning within the activities), *course level* (when the mixture happens as a part of the course), *program level* (often when the students select between online or f2f learning), and *institutional level* (when the university establishes a BL model as an institutional change) (Graham, 2006). Other types address various categories of blends (enabling, enhancing, and transforming). The *enabling blend* can be offered as additional flexible opportunities for learners to suit their needs in which online programs or blended programs are presented. For example, blended learning facilitates accessibility for students in distance learning lectures. The *enhancing blend* focuses on minor modifications of the curriculum, such as adding supplementary online materials within the course level, such as a LMS. The *transforming blend* provides a radical change in

the way of teaching, utilizing both approaches as the main method of teaching, which concentrates on learners' active role to construct knowledge through technology and used f2f learning to construct knowledge via interactions between learners. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this category requires fundamental change in the teaching method, concentrating on active learning to construct knowledge via interactions between learners.

Consequently, the level of BL in this framework is the course level, as students have both f2f classes and online classes. The specific category of BL used in this framework is transforming blends, in which students actively construct understanding through technology with f2f learning. This framework also considers several factors, such as how each language skill could be taught in both (on-/offline) settings to encourage interactions and self-directed learning via online collaborative work. Some elements in Young and Lee's (2010) blended learning writing model were espoused for the writing skills, but with few modifications. This model is based on the process approach. It is important to mention that, in each of the language skills, an f2f session is employed initially to build community between students and the teacher (social environment), as in the COI model.

In the following figures, a circle is used as a symbol of online sessions whereas a square is used as a symbol for offline sessions. Figure 6.1 illustrates how writing skills could be presented in both online and offline environments. The aim is to develop students' writing skills to produce a number of academic essays by using the process approach, as explained in Chapter 3, and train students how to provide valuable peer feedback. It starts with an f2f session to provide students with information about what they need to learn. Instructors begin to introduce and explain the course content; how to use different writing processes (planning, drafting, proofreading); the use of correct grammatical structures, punctuation, and spelling; and the use of study skills, such as how to write references to construct an accurate essay or assignment. In addition, this session covers how to provide reliable peer feedback, how to benefit from the instructor's feedback, and how to avoid plagiarism. At the end of this session, the instructor gives students an essay topic. Students have opportunities to utilize several online tools to search about the topic, develop a mind map, and work independently. The next step provides the learner with a meaningful task to implement what they have already done in the first step. The instructor posts the first written draft using LMS tools (Blackboard) for peers'/instructor's feedback, followed by an f2f session to discuss feedback on the collaborative work. The teacher divides students into groups controlled by a leader to

each group to facilitate the flow of the discussion among students. Using the written feedback, the second draft is revised and posted on Blackboard again. The next step is to provide feedback for the second draft through group discussion to revise comments, as with the first time. Students in this stage are advised to communicate with each other to perform different tasks and to use different online tools to develop the second draft, such as an online dictionary, or use written asynchronous communication with their peers to exchange and create new ideas. All the feedback from both the teacher and students is sent by email. The final draft is posted on Blackboard. The final step is students' reflection about any difficulties faced during the process. The same process is repeated for the second essay.

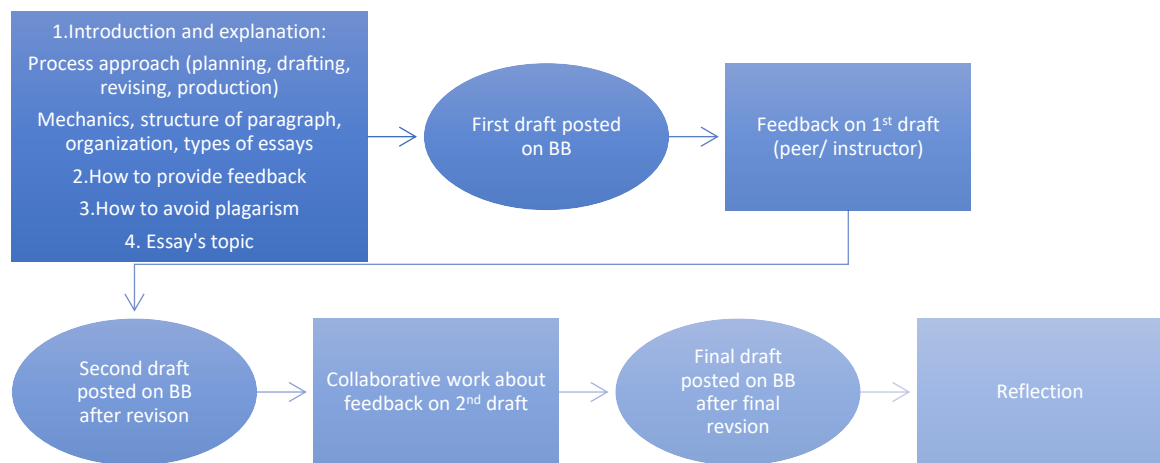


Figure 6.1 Blended learning instructional framework on writing

Figure 6.2 presents speaking skills: f2f starts with an introduction to the topic, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, along with collaborative group discussion. The aim is to develop students' speaking skills to produce a number of academic presentations (individually and in groups) for different purposes throughout the semester. The first step is to provide sufficient information about the course. The second step is to download speaking tasks from LMS for online sessions. Group presentations focusing more on turn taking, rate of speech, and roles of participants are also explained. Next, students are encouraged to share knowledge and exchange ideas by engaging in discussions to negotiate with others in VLE classes or asynchronously about their presentations. The next f2f session produces the first individual presentation. In this step, students are ready to perform presentations and become more independent. Next, feedback from instructor on the first presentation is posted in the LMS,

followed by an online session to discuss mistakes and errors based on feedback through interactions and an exchange of ideas. The same process is repeated until completing the required number of presentations. The final step is students' reflection about any difficulties faced during the process.

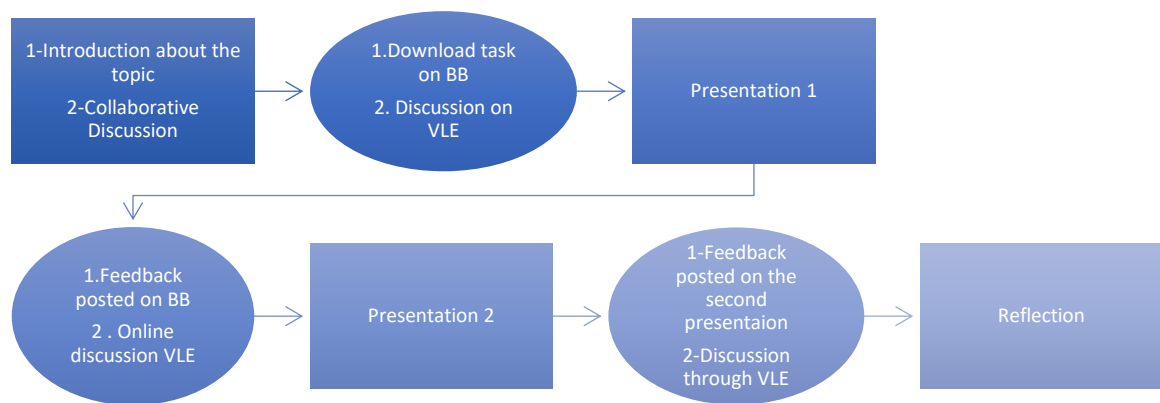


Figure 6.2 Blended learning instructional framework on speaking

Figure 6.3 shows the process for listening skills. The aim is to develop students' listening skills to be able to construct listening comprehension in order to understand a range of academic contexts, such as lectures and seminars, through on-/offline collaborative work. It starts with an introductory f2f session to provide students with information about what they need to learn on the topic and vocabulary through a set of audio and visual listening materials. In this step, the teacher clarifies what students will do in each (pre-, while, post-) listening process. The teacher encourages students to utilize both top-down and bottom-up cognitive processes to understand the listening tasks' speech after explaining them clearly. Some listening strategies (pre-, while, post-) in Lee and Lee (2012) are adopted for this skill. This step is associated with interactions and allow them to know each other and communicate with peers about the listening task. After the offline session, the teacher encourages students to engage with more online listening practices uploaded to Blackboard (podcast) before the online session. The next step is the online session. During the online class, the same listening strategies (pre-, while, post-) are followed, but with collaborative work between groups to share information. In the pre-listening stage, learners use predictions; during the while-listening stage, top-down and bottom-up note taking is used; and in the post-listening, group

discussion is used to check answers. At this stage, the teacher is a facilitator who encourages students to work independently. The answers about the listening task are posted on Blackboard to be checked by the teacher. Feedback is sent to students by email. The final step is students' reflection about any difficulties faced during the process.

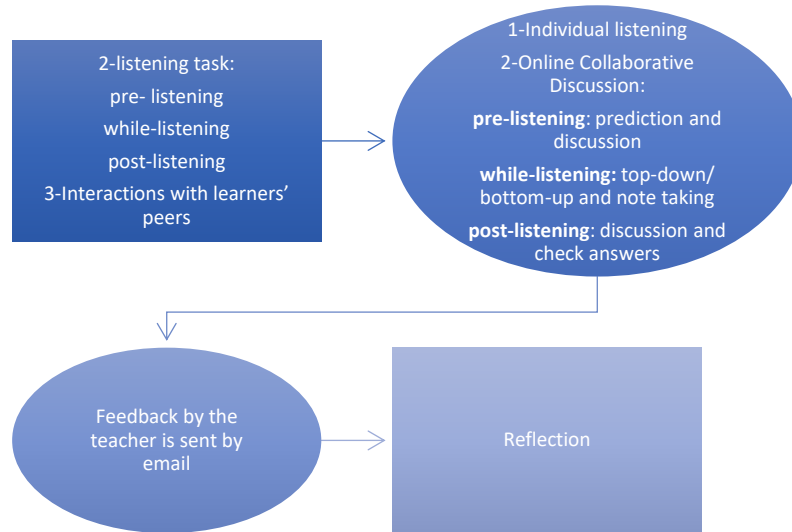


Figure 6.3 Blended learning instructional framework on listening

The final skill is reading, as presented in Figure 6.4. The aim is developing students' reading skills by enhancing reading comprehension by employing several reading strategies with online group work. F2f starts with an introduction to the topic by asking students to predict the topic through collaborative work. This is followed by an explanation of several academic reading strategies, such as note taking, summarizing, skimming, scanning, predicting, and underlining. They are encouraged to apply what they already completed in the first session. This session ends with a vocabulary task and reading text uploaded to Blackboard for the online session. The next step is through VLE; students work and communicate in groups to use each of the reading strategies in each paragraph to comprehend the meaning and extract the main ideas of the reading text. This session ends by summarizing the reading text in each group and sending the summary by email to the teachers for feedback. The next offline session is for discussing the feedback and an introduction to the next topic. The same process is then repeated. The final step is students' reflection about any difficulties faced during the process.

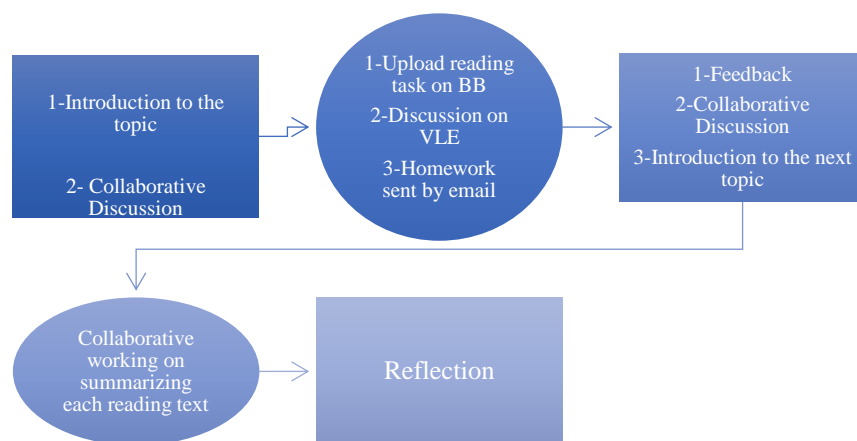


Figure 6.4 Blended learning instructional framework on reading

The discussion herein demonstrates that BL is all about students' engagement and interaction, which lead to constructing information and resolving any problem in language learning. Fundamentally, none of these processes can be achieved without the presence of a teacher who has the expertise and innovative ways of teaching to engage students effectively. The teacher has to be aware of how to manage both settings, encourage collaborative work, and support students to take responsibility for their learning.

6.6 Summary

The students in this study perceived blended learning to support the development of their English as a foreign language in preparatory year. The use of online resources and the Internet allows students flexibility in their studies and to expose themselves to and practice English, in addition to the time that they spend interacting with their peers in the classroom. Clearly, there are issues which need to be addressed such as ensuring that the library facilities are capable of delivering this type of approach, online materials are suitably supportive of the students who are required to access them, Internet connections and the workload that is required to be successful.

7 Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 General Summary of Key Research Findings

As mentioned earlier, Saudi Arabia is one of the fastest-growing countries in the world, and it is currently engaged on a steady and growing controlled programme of internationalisation, including a rapid expansion of EFL provision at all levels of the education system, at its primary, secondary and higher education levels (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Since 2006, the education system has been allocated a quarter of the national budget, and within that educational focus, the reforms to schools and colleges have produced a much higher volume of EFL teaching, including the teaching of key technical subjects, such as medicine, engineering, and science in English (Faruk, 2013). The reason for this huge EFL expansion is the recognition by the Saudi government of the need to diversify the nation's economy from a too large dependence on the oil industry as well as a desire to create "a knowledge-based economy that can support sustainable development and economic growth" for the future (Alrabai, 2016, p. 22). Many of people in Saudi Arabia, especially those who live in the nation's larger towns and cities, view English "not only as prestigious, but also as an essential requirement for a better job" (Habbash & Troudi, 2014, p. 57). On the other hand, other people, especially in the rural areas, are worried about the potential threats accruing from globalisation and especially the imposition of hegemonic ideas from the Western world that do not match the Islamic traditions in the Arabic-speaking world. This continuing gap between the traditional and modern approaches to foreign language pedagogy, however, means there are new challenges in terms of increasing the quality as well as the quantity of EFL provision in Saudi Arabia. The focus herein that it is possible to maintain important traditions and yet simultaneously promote internationalisation and the expansion of EFL. The Saudi Arabian government is not departing from its traditional emphasis on the teaching of Arabic, but it is also embracing the global nature of Islam as well as the role of English as a *lingua franca* for the country and the world's economic, cultural and religious domains.

The purpose of this study is to explore EFL undergraduate students' perceptions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogic tool on the development of their academic English in each language skill (reading, listening, speaking, writing) as well as their recommendations for improving the skills using blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia.

This study used an explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design. First, a quantitative survey was used to collect data, followed by explaining the survey results using in-depth qualitative focus group interview data. The survey was administered to 310 Saudi students, while the focus group interview data were gathered from 28 participants. The participants were recruited from two Saudi universities with varying emphasis on proportions of experiences with face-to-face learning and online learning.

Generally, participants highlighted the benefits of making use of technology in language learning in that students believed that they are able to review lectures, supplement existing information, and expand this information with new material, thereby enabling them to gain a deeper expertise and understanding through exposure to other teaching and learning styles/materials via the internet. The increased availability of new technologies in the modern world creates innumerable opportunities to practice English in a way not possible in traditional face-to-face learning environments. Students perceived BL to support their academic English language skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing). Moreover, this study provides suggestions to address typical challenges when implementing blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia. A number of fundamental factors that lead to successful implementation of blended learning are discussed.

Most studies in the field of blended learning in higher education in relation to English language in Saudi Arabia have focused on certain areas in terms of general benefits or challenges. The present study aims to fill a gap in the literature as few previous studies have investigated the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning in the development of academic English in greater detail in each specific skill (i.e., reading, listening, speaking, writing) during the preparatory year. As the use of blended learning is in its initial stages in the Saudi educational system, the findings of this study could be used to promote the efficient implementation of blended learning by providing useful suggestions to address the challenges faced when implementing blended learning in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia. The findings also have potential value for policymakers seeking to address areas of weakness while rethinking how to make preparatory year a useful experience.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that effective interactions, cultural connections, and collaborative working between students in the blended setting can play an important role in addressing the issue of language deficiency in Saudi Arabia. Blended learning has the potential to enable Saudi women to further their studies and establish cultural connections

among themselves and with other across the world. The blended learning approach enables female students within the Saudi educations system to achieve a wider level of inclusivity when it comes to assimilating knowledge in the English language. At the same time, the finding of this study reveals that that the use of blended learning enables female students to acquire an important level of skills that can be applied to the world of work.

A deficiency in English has been an obstacle to almost all Saudi students who are used to learning English by memorization, rather than by engaging in problem solving and critical thinking skills for language development. The students in this study perceived that BL supported their interactions, engagement, and self-directed learning, which ultimately led to language development and served as a good indication of its usefulness. They also believed that it changed their perceptions towards learning to take responsibility for their learning when spending long hours searching for information online to acquire knowledge and practice their English language skills. EFL students in this study perceived BL to support their language as it presents an opportunity to communicate and become involved in online activities, which enhance fluency and self-confidence.

According to the findings, implementing blended learning in Saudi higher education requires investigations of successful experiences, good practices, and the evaluation of challenges faced in specific contexts. The transition to blended learning requires orientations for both students and teachers as well as the regular use of feedback as a module evaluation to update universities' actions plans precisely. More importantly, prior to the adoption of blended learning, it is crucial to address the infrastructure to avoid unnecessary pressure and workloads.

Specifically, this study explored the three following research questions:

1. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the benefits of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?
2. What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?
3. What are Saudi EFL students' suggestions on how blended learning courses could be

useful for developing English language skills in the preparatory year?

This section provides conclusions about the main findings of each research question.

7.2 Key Findings

7.2.1 First Research Question

The first research question asked “1. What are Saudi EFL students’ perceptions concerning the benefits of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?” The following sub-sections outline the key results (i.e., reading, listening, writing, and speaking) in turn.

7.2.1.1 Academic Reading Skills

The students in this study perceived BL to support their academic reading skills, specifically their reading comprehension, academic vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies, reinforced research skills through online reading and the electronic library, and increased motivation and outcomes. In general, students’ perceptions across both institutions were quite similar. Both groups of students believed that the integration of face-to-face instructions with computer-mediated communication in a blended learning environment was beneficial for improving reading comprehension.

The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that EFL learners perceived blended (on-/offline) reading to support their reading comprehension, critical thinking, and reading strategies (e.g., skimming, scanning, speed reading, note taking, and underlining). Unlike traditional f2f learning, students did not just read to look for information to answer the questions or depend on their teacher’s advice; rather, they became more engaged and active in understanding the text. Although these practices were considered relatively new practices for EFL students, most of them were highly interactive and appreciated the online activities. Blended learning also saved time and reduced their study hours as it provided opportunities to revisit materials and build their English skills, with support for academic vocabulary acquisition. They also highlighted the usefulness of glossaries to their comprehension. When dealing with online reading materials, illustrations, diagrams, pictures, tables, videos, and audio materials included with the text were essential for enriching their vocabulary and comprehension.

A large number of participants appreciated reading online in English (e.g., using Google Scholar, synchronous and asynchronous activities) as it reinforced reading comprehension of different topics related to their module. As EFL students are required to read different academic references online, they have further opportunities to increase and explore their information as the internet is rich in reading resources. As previously mentioned, online resources are completely different than reading from printed books page by page. The former requires students to employ a variety of navigational skills to comprehend the meaning. However, some participants expressed a dislike for reading the online text in English and preferred to read it in Arabic to ensure a better understanding of the content and the general ideas. These findings suggest that teachers have to recognize that students still have difficulty reading and understanding written text in English and eliminate these negative practices from occurring.

EFL students valued access to the Saudi electronic library website as well as being able to read, download, and search for required sources to develop research skills and perform assignments. The availability of enormous resources likely made a fundamental contribution to supporting reading skills. EFL undergraduate students have only recently experienced search activities through the electronic library because they were not trained on how to use online search functions in high school or how to search for academic references via journal articles. However, the study has shown that some EFL students were unfamiliar with doing online searches and others had never even heard of an electronic library. This finding was unexpected and suggests that further emphasis is needed to ensure that undergraduate students are provided with an orientation session and extensive training that includes how to use the electronic library. Furthermore, libraries need to employ strong user evaluation programmes in order to enhance the quality services they provide.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, one of the major concerns for all EFL students in preparatory year who are seeking to enrol in their desired majors was to get higher GPA. During the preparatory year, EFL students complete an extensive English language program along with other modules as a compulsory college entry requirement. This study showed that online activities supported them in earning higher scores on English tests. Online reading resources and communication assisted them in understanding the various topics in the modules as well as different types of exam questions. For example, asynchronous online activities such as prompt emails or materials uploaded in the LMS through Blackboard were useful for the

majority of students. In general, therefore, it seems that, the teachers play a crucial role in motivating and encouraging students to benefit from limitless online reading resources.

7.2.1.2 Academic Listening Skills

In general, students' perceptions across both institutions were relatively similar. Both groups believed that online activities gave students further opportunities to improve their listening skills and make sense of spoken words. EFL students perceived blended learning to support their academic listening skills, specifically their self-directed learning and flexibility enabling them to complete their education while simultaneously fulfilling their family duties. However, EFL learners reported some challenges when they engaged in listening comprehension tasks, such as unfamiliar pronunciations, new words, fast speaking, and unrecognized topics which, caused several students to experience irritation, aversion, a lack of self-confidence, and a loss of concentration. Technology-enhanced learning can support flexible pedagogies and provide greater options for learners in terms of where they learn, the pace at which they learn, and their mode of learning.

Regarding self-directed learning, the results of this study support the idea that interactive platforms support students in working independently outside the classroom environment to acquire language skills and practise English language. The participants in this study believed that utilising various online educational resources supported students in becoming more autonomous. Online learning resources are of great value to students in terms of not only the practical benefits to their language learning, but also enhanced digital literacy and encouraged self-directed learning, which will be fundamental for their future learning practices (Levy, 2017).

Self-directed learning had clearly emerged among most of the participants as they behave like adult learners who know their responsibilities and control their learning. Although self-directed learning is a relatively new concept in the Saudi educational system, the majority of participants believed that blended learning has the potential more than the traditional approach because it encouraged them to take responsibility for their learning and positively affected all of their general learning skills, such as time management and computer literacy. However, although self-directed learning was valued, most of the information about how to be independent was from students' colleagues. Therefore, this study highlighted the important role a teacher plays in supporting them in learning decisions while guiding and training them

to become independent learners. Terry and Reinders (2008) claimed that it is challenging for learners to exhibit autonomy without teachers' intervention and guidance. As the participants were undergraduate students, it seemed that they still desired some assistance and training.

This study also demonstrated that synchronous and asynchronous activities enhance listening abilities and decrease the level of anxiety among students. This finding suggests that EFL teachers have to select appropriate tasks with adequate known vocabulary to help students get more involved in communications. Furthermore, teachers have to consider learning to listen and listening to learn processes, as mentioned in Chapter 3.

The findings of this study revealed some difficulties related to the inability to utilize different listening cognitive processes, such as bottom-up and top-down, which negatively affected listening development. As a result, learners became stuck in analysing each single word in the spoken text instead of anticipating the general meaning. According to the students in this study, they believed that bilingual teachers' different accents caused complications for EFL students in the blended learning setting. Despite the general belief that the best approach for learning a language is from native speakers, the findings of the current study suggest that listening comprehension was enhanced when the teacher was Saudi. Contrary to the expectations, EFL students reported no listening comprehension difficulties when their instructor was Saudi. The findings revealed bilingual teachers' different accents caused listening complications. Thus, this result supports the important role English teachers play in communicating and interacting with students to support listening skills comprehension. Thus, the use of effective instructional modes is needed to develop listening skills in BL and eliminate some of these difficulties, as previously mentioned in the literature review chapter. For example, Lee and Lee's (2012) BL model contains online and offline classes; each setting includes pre-listening, while listening, and post-listening activities (see Chapter 3). The model mainly focuses on enhancing interactions in both settings to develop listening skills.

7.2.1.3 Academic Speaking Skills

Generally, students' perceptions across both institutions were somewhat similar. Both groups of students believed that the integration of face-to-face instructions with computer-mediated communication in a blended learning environment was beneficial for improving speaking comprehension. EFL students perceived blended learning to support their academic listening skills specifically through live chats, virtual classes, and the use of Blackboard as an LMS, as

it provides further opportunities for students to practice speaking outside the actual classrooms. Moreover, they perceived BL as a rich intercultural platform to support confidence. Online learning resources create countless opportunities to practice English in a way not possible in traditional learning environments (Trinder, 2017).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, in Saudi Arabia, students are generally unwilling to engage in open conversations in English. They do not feel confident actively communicating with others, perhaps due to their deficiency in speaking skills. Currently, speaking skills seem to be the most required skill for Saudi EFL learners, yet they are often considered the hardest skill to acquire. According to the findings in this study, participants believed that blended synchronous online communication (text-based discussions), particularly with native English speakers, encouraged them to practice the language without hesitation or fear of making errors.

Based on the findings of this study, students thought that online communication via live chats or virtual classes is a convenient platform for not only overcoming shyness, but also interacting with foreign students outside the actual classroom. The current study revealed that interactions with foreign learners offered many advantages to support learners' speaking skills, especially in terms of imitation and intonation, as EFL students tried to reproduce sentences and useful phrases heard from their foreign colleagues.

This study also demonstrated that students enjoyed speaking with others in virtual classes about the Saudi cultures and traditions, which in turn increased their information about various cultures and improved their critical thinking skills.

7.2.1.4 Academic Writing Skills

In general, students in both groups (particularly those from University A) were somewhat uncertain about the development of academic writing skills through the use of BL. However, almost half of them believed that BL supported them in systematising academic writing skills specifically through the role of feedback, asynchronous communication, and online assignment submission.

This study findings showed that students believed the role of feedback was fundamental to developing writing skills. Although students appreciated teachers' feedback about their writing, peer feedback seemed to be useful too as the teachers tended to provide general

feedback about the writing that was produced each term. Peer feedback during online classes (e.g., through email and chat boards) seemed to be more useful and interactive than during offline classes when developing essay topic ideas and style, revising other drafts, and using academic words. It is also interesting to note that some students acknowledged their errors and tried to fix them in the second draft of their essays. These findings suggest that having a group leader assists in providing feedback to make the process flow better and more structured.

Students in this study believed that the use of blended learning to support academic writing processes that are essential for essays, such as summarizing, paraphrasing, note taking, and referencing. Students perceived blended learning to be beneficial for organizing EFL students' writing process in a systematic way in terms of creating the main and supporting ideas, promoting innovative thinking skills, and relating ideas effectively. This was evident in the case of using the mind map during online and offline sessions as an effective interaction writing strategy. The data suggest using Young and Lee's (2010) blended writing model to support collaborative working, peer/teacher feedback, and learning management when learning to write. The model is based on the idea of developing English writing as a social practice. As mentioned in Chapter 3, students who used this model appreciated the opportunities that were given outside of classrooms to reflect on and produce a well-organized essay, the role of online/offline peer feedback, interactive activities, and online chatting, which positively affected their improvement in writing skills.

However, the study discovered that plagiarism was an unfamiliar term to almost all EFL students in both institutions. The lack of information about plagiarism could negatively affect students' writing skills. As recent high school graduates in Saudi Arabia, they are used to copying others' ideas for use in their own work, which is a normal practice for them. Taken together, these findings suggest the need for institutions to prepare students during the preparatory year by providing all the information about plagiarism as a poor academic practice and its negative consequences on writing skills. As the study findings suggest, greater efforts are needed to ensure that universities in Saudi Arabia change their policies and practices toward plagiarism and take it more seriously as plagiarism was an unfamiliar term to almost all EFL students.

7.2.2 Second Research Question

The second research question asked: “What are Saudi EFL students’ perceptions concerning the challenges of developing English language skills using blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool in the preparatory year?” This section outlines the key results in relation to the challenges that emerged with the use of blended learning.

Students across both institutions were dissatisfied with their experiences due to the slow internet speed. The findings of this study revealed an unsatisfactory IT infrastructure at both universities. Although the universities provided wide Internet coverage, students had difficulty connecting to it. This challenge was even more frustrating for students who did not have access to the Internet at home. This finding suggests the need to offer high speed Internet connectivity to all students to enable them to gain the maximum benefit from EFL courses. Moreover, some technical difficulties emerged, such as unclear audio in online class while practicing or slow downloads from Blackboard. Therefore, it seems that continuously evolving the quality of the Internet connection at Saudi universities could lead to positive blended learning application.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the lack of technical support, which resulted in obstacles when logging into the system to attend or participate in online classes, submitting assignments on time, and contacting instructors. Therefore, this study suggests that providing technical supports online 24/7 is crucial. Contrary to expectations, the findings reveal that all the required information about how to register using the university’s online system and how to solve some complicated technical problems was provided by students’ classmates. A radical change has to be made to provide a professional and active technical support team with the necessary technological skills to support students facing technical difficulties.

The second major finding regarding challenges was the lack of appropriate training offered to students. Students believed that they were not appropriately trained for working in the blended learning environment, which requires basic technological skills and an effective use of synchronous and asynchronous tools. As these EFL undergraduate students had only recently experienced blended learning, they required new learning skills to manage technology, particularly for those students with limited computer literacy. In general, therefore, it seems that initial training for students should focus on how to communicate using technology in relation to their English module, how to register for online classes, and how to

upload assignments.

Teacher training on how to use CMC inside and outside the classroom environment is also fundamental to enhance the implementation of blended learning and engagement in the discourse. Although blended learning could be used as a tool for teachers' training around the kingdom to improve their profession, this study found that blended learning could contribute to teachers' professional development training problems.

The clearest finding to emerge from this study is a deficiency of available computer devices in classrooms. Students must have access to computers on campus to be able to practice blended learning language activities. In general, further financial support is necessary to develop the curriculum, teachers' training and professional development, and modules that satisfy learners to sustain blended learning and facilitate access to educational resources (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Hamdan, 2014).

Another significant finding was that pressure from a large number of assignments and workloads and long f2f class hours were unhelpful for EFL student progression and engagement. Although blended learning flexibility is advantageous, the findings revealed that students were overwhelmed with workloads from both online and offline settings, which caused some negative impressions of blended learning as tedious and isolating. Thus, EFL teachers might need to play a more active role. They could encourage students to work independently and manage their time effectively to complete one task at a time. Moreover, providing students with immediate feedback rather than general and undetailed comments about their performance during a presentation or speaking situation is critical according to the students in this study.

7.2.3 Third Research Question

The third research question asked: "What are Saudi EFL students' suggestions on how blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool could be useful to develop English language skills in the preparatory year?" This section outlines the key results.

According to the students in this study, the most frequently mentioned suggestion from the aforementioned results is to have only the English module in the preparatory year. This will be useful for students to enable them to be more focused and productive in passing and enrolling in their desired majors. As mentioned in Chapter 2, preparatory years include

intensive math, communication skills, and English modules as compulsory entry requirements for all majors. All these modules are presented in English. Thus, focusing on other modules that will not be useful later might be a waste of students' time and efforts. This suggestion is most practical for married students who have other family commitments.

Second, initial training for students should be focused on how to communicate using several CMC tools in relation to their English module, how to register for online classes, how to deal with the Saudi digital library website, and how to upload assignments. Providing an orientation session about the university's online system would make students more comfortable with this new experience.

Lastly, as mentioned in several areas in this study, the teacher plays an essential role in supporting students' language skills in the blended learning environment. Unlike traditional learning, in blended learning, the teacher's role shifts from being a dominator to a helper (Yang, 2012). It is possible, therefore, that EFL teachers have to encourage students to learn how to listen to each other's ideas and how to defend their own opinions—in other words, learn how to be independent learners. Passive learning, which is deeply rooted in the Saudi educational system, has negatively affected students' language skills by causing learners to become reliant on memorization and supporting passive learners. When students enrol in universities, they carry these challenges with them and face new difficulties. Studying English as a foreign language in the preparatory year was considered a challenge from students' perspectives, as they were used to learning by memorization while ignoring problem solving or critical thinking skills. Therefore, a BL platform has potential benefits to enhance English language and encourages students to take charge of their learning through a richer communicative platform by enabling students to work with each other, create errors, and correct each other's mistakes in English (Woo & Reeves, 2007). In this environment, a student is only responsible for learning, is the only one who decides how and when to learn, and chooses suitable resources that suit individual learning needs.

7.3 Limitations of the Study

A main limitation of this study is that the sample is only from female EFL students. This is due to the difficulties of accessing males on campus because the educational system in Saudi Arabia is segregated by gender. Therefore, it will be valuable to include both genders to examine EFL male perceptions about the effectiveness of blended learning in relation to

English language skills in future research. It is also unfortunate that the study did not include various groups of students in different disciplines.

Another limitation of this study is that the questionnaire used was problematic in eliciting reliable, robust, and valid data. One reason for that was the differences in interpretations of some questions in the instrument. In other words, some of the responses to the questionnaire items might have been influenced by other responses.

Furthermore, the use of the survey tool Likert-type items (strongly agree to strongly disagree) was based on combined responses to individual items to create a Likert scale or “summated rating scale” (Kumar, 2011, p. 159). Some methodology textbooks argue that treating this type of response as continuous data is an “illegitimate inference” because the difference between strongly agree and agree cannot be assumed to be the same as the difference between disagree and strongly disagree (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 387). This study overcame this issue by paying careful attention to the questionnaire items’ phrasing and response options to help avoid such concerns about reliability. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha after the data were collected.

The most important limitation lies in the fact that as undergraduate students commonly see questionnaires as untrustworthy and do not respond to them appropriately. One reason for that is that the sample of the study is only EFL students in preparatory year; some of them might have misunderstood the questionnaire. Therefore, the benefits of the questionnaire were explained in a brief introduction to the students in both the pilot and the actual study before the questionnaires were distributed by hand. The benefits of participation and completing the questionnaire about blended learning in Saudi Arabia were also explained to students.

Additionally, it was challenging to gain deeper insights into research problems from different points of view as the interviewees focus the discussion on a certain topic. Generally, Saudi students are often unwilling to take part or participate to express their opinions orally. This is mainly because they are used to being highly dependent on their teachers; as a result, they appear unresponsive to communicating in classroom conversations and unwilling to ask or even try to speak. In such a setting, teachers dominate the majority of the lecture and rarely offer students with the space to talk. Therefore, probes were occasionally needed during focus groups interviews, which involved asking participants to elaborate on and clarify their opinions.

Furthermore, it was essential to translate all of the research tools into Arabic as English is not normally used for communication in Saudi Arabia. The translation process of the questionnaire and focus groups from Arabic to English and checking the equivalency and quality of the original meaning of the questionnaire items, as well as transcript with the translated versions was challenging. Due to the new emergence of blended learning in Saudi higher education, this study was limited by the absence of any documented policy about such implementation. Finally, the study did not evaluate EFL teachers' perceptions about the usefulness of the use of blended learning in relation to English teaching.

7.4 Implications and Recommendations for Institutions, Practitioners, Policymakers, and Future Research

7.4.1 Institutions

The findings of this study have a number of practical implications. First, for institutions, the successful implementation of blended learning is highly dependent on effective application and careful planning for both settings: face-to-face and online learning.

One suggestion is to use Khan's (2001) octagonal framework as mentioned in Chapter 3 to ensure appropriate systems, services and support for BL. Singh (2003) pointed out that Khan's octagonal framework is useful for the effective application of BL. In the institutional dimension, addressing infrastructure obstacles earlier could avoid any workload pressures and learning anxiety later (Thang, Wong et al., 2012). In the technological dimension, institutions have to address issues about technical support and infrastructure as well as establish an appropriate LMS that suits a BL program. In this regard, more consideration should be made to ensure the capabilities of required technical resources in the programs. Poon (2013) suggested that "the first suggestion for institutions that intend to implement blended learning is that they must be realistic about the investment of time, efforts, and resources that are required for developing and implementation" (p. 282). The current study recommends that training and professional development must be prioritized to avoid waste in educational resources. A key policy, therefore, has to be to plan for the long-term training for teachers on how to use CMC inside and outside the classroom environment. Furthermore, for the resources support dimension, technical issues have to be addressed in the institution, such as how to use the university's online system learning support system to facilitate learning.

Students need to be assisted in acquiring the skills necessary for learning to ensure successful blended learning implementation (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The last dimension addressed ethical issues, clarifying cultural and equal opportunity issues in the program. For example, students and teachers have to be taught about what plagiarism means and the serious consequences of plagiarism. As academic writing is considered challenging in Saudi Arabia, students have to be well prepared prior to and during the preparatory year; such training takes time and practice to help students master the ideas. Universities in Saudi Arabia have to change their policies and practices towards plagiarism and take it more seriously.

Clearly, greater efforts need to be addressed and/or resolved, such as ensuring that the library's facilities are capable of delivering this type of approach towards the curriculum, online materials are suitably supportive of the students required to access them, and the design of blended learning approaches take into account students' preferred learning methods, the assessment of their courses, and the workload required to be successful.

Therefore, there is a definite need for the clear understanding of the nature of blended learning and its essential requirements prior to adoption. The evidence from this study also suggests that expanding the *blended learning culture* within the university should be a priority for any organization.

7.4.2 Practitioners

There are a number of important implications for teachers' practice. As already stated in numerous parts, the teacher plays an essential role in supporting students' language skills in the blended learning environment. Unlike traditional learning, in blended learning, the teacher's role shifts from being a dominator to a helper (Yang, 2012). Based on this study's findings, students still need to interact with their teachers regularly. It can thus be suggested that creating various supporting activities to significantly improve interactions. This study indicated that a large number of students prefer to use printed materials (e.g., course book) to develop their reading skills. Thus, instructors have to be aware of these students to provide them with different kinds of training.

Moreover, it is possible for teachers to support students to work collaboratively to solve problems and share feedback about each other's work. Ideally, selecting appropriate tasks that aim to challenge students and promote problem solving could simplify communications. This

effective approach encourages students to learn from each other while providing them with opportunities to take charge of their preparation and self-directed learning. Instructors could select some interactive activities that support critical thinking and problem-solving techniques. More importantly, teachers have to understand learners' perceptions of this new environment to support them with needed learning and language skills. This study suggests that practitioners must not only understand the reasons behind using modern technology to supplement and enhance teaching and learning, but also embrace this concept to improve their classroom practice and enhance their delivery of the curriculum. Equally important is the balance between face-to-face and online activities and/or time in order to ensure that all students' needs are met; some will prefer to work as an individual, alone at their own pace, whereas others will value the interaction that occurs in face-to-face encounters in the classroom.

7.4.3 Policymakers

The findings of this study have an important implication for Saudi policymakers. Rethinking needs to occur about how to make preparatory year a useful experience instead of an obstacle. This study suggests that an English module should be provided unaccompanied by any other module to enable learners to be more focused and productive in passing and enrolling in courses for a specific major. As previously mentioned, focusing on other modules that will not be useful later might be a waste of students' time and effort.

Greater efforts are needed to ensure that universities in Saudi Arabia change their policies and practices towards plagiarism and take it more seriously as plagiarism was an unfamiliar term to almost all EFL students. Extensive efforts have to be made to increase awareness of plagiarism among students as well as faculty members before the adoption of blended learning. The lack of a clear university policy about publisher copyrights might inhibit efforts to stop this practice, as does the absence of plagiarism detection software in Arabic and English. As academic writing is considered challenging in Saudi Arabia, students have to be well prepared prior to and during the preparatory year; such training takes time and practice to help students master the ideas. Training should be conducted in schools before students reach the university level, in particular through specific simple techniques for using references as well as other writing techniques, such as summarizing and paraphrasing.

The lack of information about plagiarism could negatively affect students' writing skills, particularly Saudi students. As recent high school graduates, they are used to copying others' ideas for use in their own work, which is a normal practice for them. However, the workload might be another explanation for this result in that difficulties in time management resulted in intentional plagiarism. Anxiety about failing their preparatory year was a primary concern for these students. Therefore, blended learning could be used to educate EFL students on how to organize their time effectively in order to manage their writing assignments.

7.4.4 Future Research

Lastly, the findings of this study have a number of important implications for future practice. As this study only investigated EFL Saudi undergraduate students' perceptions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning on the development of their English language skills, future research should concentrate on the investigation of postgraduate students in different programs in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, it is recommended that further research investigate in greater depth challenges associated with BL. Understanding challenges associated with BL will be useful for tackling any complication prior to its implementation. The participants valued the ideas of SDL. Therefore, it would be interesting to focus on understanding how SDL could be useful in relation to language skills in particular contexts, such as Saudi Arabia. In addition, further research could be useful for exploring EFL teachers' perceptions about the usefulness of blended learning courses in relation to language learning in terms of the willingness to engage with technology in Saudi Arabia. Teaching materials, assessments, teacher training, classroom practices, and key issues like resourcing and student motivation will require considerable further investment, improvement and more research if the government's ambitions for EFL in Saudi Arabia are to be fully realised in the years ahead. Finally, further investigation into the impact of blended learning in relation to cultural considerations in different contexts is strongly recommended.

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Appendix I: Ethical Approval Forms

University of Reading
Institute of Education
Ethical Approval Form A (version May 2015)

Tick one:

Staff project: ___ PhD ___ EdD ___

Name of applicant (s): Hebah Sheerah

Title of project: An explanatory mixed methods study of EFL students perceptions' concerning blended learning impact on enhancing English language teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia.

Name of supervisor (for student projects): Prof. Andy Goodwyn

Please complete the form below including relevant sections overleaf.

| | YES | NO |
|---|--------------------------|----|
| Have you prepared an Information Sheet for participants and/or their parents/carers that: | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| a) explains the purpose(s) of the project | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| b) explains how they have been selected as potential participants | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| c) gives a full, fair and clear account of what will be asked of them and how the information that they provide will be used | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| d) makes clear that participation in the project is voluntary | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| e) explains the arrangements to allow participants to withdraw at any stage if they wish | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| f) explains the arrangements to ensure the confidentiality of any material collected during the project, including secure arrangements for its storage, retention and disposal | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| g) explains the arrangements for publishing the research results and, if confidentiality might be affected, for obtaining written consent for this | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| h) explains the arrangements for providing participants with the research results if they wish to have them | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| i) gives the name and designation of the member of staff with responsibility for the project together with contact details, including email . If any of the project investigators are students at the IoE, then this information must be included and their name provided | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| k) explains, where applicable, the arrangements for expenses and other payments to be made to the participants | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| j) includes a standard statement indicating the process of ethical review at the University undergone by the project, as follows: 'This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct'. | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| k) includes a standard statement regarding insurance: "The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request". | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Please answer the following questions | | |
| 1) Will you provide participants involved in your research with all the information | <input type="checkbox"/> | |

| | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| necessary to ensure that they are fully informed and not in any way deceived or misled as to the purpose(s) and nature of the research? (Please use the subheadings used in the example information sheets on blackboard to ensure this). | | |
| 2) Will you seek written or other formal consent from all participants, if they are able to provide it, in addition to (1)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| 3) Is there any risk that participants may experience physical or psychological distress in taking part in your research? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4) Have you taken the online training modules in data protection and information security (which can be found here: http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/Staffpages/imps-training.aspx)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | |

| | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5) Have you read the Health and Safety booklet (available on Blackboard) and completed a Risk Assessment Form to be included with this ethics application? | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| 6) Does your research comply with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research? | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| | YES | NO | N.A. |
| 7) If your research is taking place in a school, have you prepared an information sheet and consent form to gain the permission in writing of the head teacher or other relevant supervisory professional? | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| 8) Has the data collector obtained satisfactory DBS clearance? | | | N/A |
| 9) If your research involves working with children under the age of 16 (or those whose special educational needs mean they are unable to give informed consent), have you prepared an information sheet and consent form for parents/carers to seek permission in writing, or to give parents/carers the opportunity to decline consent? | | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10) If your research involves processing sensitive personal data ¹ , or if it involves audio/video recordings, have you obtained the explicit consent of participants/parents? | | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11) If you are using a data processor to subcontract any part of your research, have you got a written contract with that contractor which (a) specifies that the contractor is required to act only on your instructions, and (b) provides for appropriate technical and organisational security measures to protect the data? | | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12a) Does your research involve data collection outside the UK? | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| 12b) If the answer to question 12a is "yes", does your research comply with the legal and ethical requirements for doing research in that country? | | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13a) Does your research involve collecting data in a language other than English? | | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13b) If the answer to question 13a is "yes", please confirm that information sheets, consent forms, and research instruments, where appropriate, have been directly translated from the English versions submitted with this application. | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| 14a. Does the proposed research involve children under the age of 5? | | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| 14b. If the answer to question 14a is "yes": My Head of School (or authorised Head of Department) has given details of the proposed research to the University's insurance officer, and the research will not proceed until I have confirmation that insurance cover is in place. | | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| If you have answered YES to Question 3, please complete Section B below | | | |

Please complete **either** Section A **or** Section B and provide the details required in support of your application. Sign the form (Section C) then submit it with all relevant attachments (e.g. information sheets, consent forms, tests, questionnaires, interview schedules) to the Institute's Ethics Committee for consideration. Any missing information will result in the form being returned to you.

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| A: My research goes beyond the 'accepted custom and practice of teaching' but I consider that this project has no significant ethical implications. (Please tick the box.) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc. | |

¹ Sensitive personal data consists of information relating to the racial or ethnic origin of a data subject, their political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, sexual life, physical or mental health or condition, or criminal offences or record.

Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words noting:

1. title of project
2. purpose of project and its academic rationale
3. brief description of methods and measurements
4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria
5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary)
6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them.
7. estimated start date and duration of project

The study is being conducted at the University of Reading as part of Hebah Sheerah's PhD dissertation. This study attempts to probe deeply into two contexts—namely, the University A (exclusively electronic learning) and University B (exclusively face-to-face learning). The design of the current study is considered as explanatory mixed methods because it begins with quantitative data and is followed by a qualitative strand to explain the initial quantitative results. Its aim is to investigate EFL students' perceptions considering to the impact of blended learning on their English language enhancement, the pros and cons of this particular method, and their ideas and recommendations for improving the English learning environment in their universities. It hopes to make recommendations regarding how can blended learning be more effective to improve the EFL students' performance and how can this new method best encourage them to reflect upon their weaknesses and find some resolutions to overcome them. In this study, the target population is all female EFL undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia. I selected a study sample that included female EFL students from two Saudi universities—namely, University A and University B who were in their preparatory year in different colleges. The study will involve the required sample size for the initial quantitative phase for University A was 365 (A subgroup) and for University B was 371 (B subgroup) female EFL students (736 in total). The second phase of this study will involve interviewing a small sample of targeted Saudi ESL students in order to gain in-depth insights into blended learning in relation to English language. Only four focus groups (two groups from each campus) will be interviewed; each group containing six Saudi EFL students

from the two universities in Saudi Arabia. The participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire, which is divided into three main sections to identify individuals' attitudes and opinions. The first section consists of demographic or background questions to assess individuals' personal characteristics, followed by data on students' Internet proficiencies, computer knowledge, and e-learning background experiences. The second part contains 33 Likert-type statements concentrating on English language skills that students developed, or enhanced, through blended e-learning courses as well as benefits, limitations, and recommendations for improving their English language skills. The third section aims to obtain qualitative data through three open-ended questions considering students' perceptions about difficulties, advantages, and improvements to the blended learning setting to enhance their English proficiencies in Saudi Arabia's higher education system.

After the interpretation of quantitative results from the first phase, focus group interviews then will add in-depth understandings to Saudi EFL students' perceptions. Thus, the structured exploratory focus group was considered appropriate as it allowed for interactions between interviewees with different experiences by asking a few open-ended questions to obtain answers from participants. The focus group interviews will last one hour and be held in a convenient, quiet, and informal environment on the campus to avoid potential noises and interruptions.

As the current study uses mixed methods, ethical concerns need to be addressed for each phase of the study. In the quantitative phase of this study, I will prioritize efforts to obtain informed consent and ensure that participants fully understood the research before conducting any stage. Each participant will be shown an information sheet that identifies the purpose of the study and nature of the data collection as well as declaring the confidentiality and anonymity of the data. It will require them to indicate their voluntary participation, meaning they could decide whether to participate or leave the study at any point.

In the qualitative phase, during the first meeting with the participants, the aim of the study will be explained, and I will stress the need to provide truthful opinions to help increase the trustworthiness of the study. I will inform the participants of the expected timeframe of the interviews and obtain their permission to record the interviews on a digital


| | |
|---|--|
| recorder, reconfirming that the recording would be kept securely and would be transcribed by me. | |
| B: I consider that this project may have ethical implications that should be brought before the Institute's Ethics Committee. | |
| Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc. | |
| <p>Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. title of project 2. purpose of project and its academic rationale 3. brief description of methods and measurements 4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria 5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary) 6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them. 7. estimated start date and duration of project | |

C: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:

Note: a signature is required. Typed names are not acceptable.

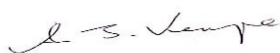
I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm that ethical good practice will be followed within the project.

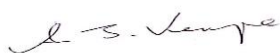


Signed:  Print Name: Hebah Sheerah Date: 28/1/2016

STATEMENT OF ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE ETHICS COMMITTEE

This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.



Signed:  Print Name Andy Kempe Date 10.2.16
(IoE Research Ethics Committee representative)*

* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters. Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.

University of Reading
Institute of Education

Risk Assessment Form for Research Activities February 2014

Select one:

Staff project: PGR project: MA/UG project:

Name of applicant (s): Hebah Sheerah

Title of project: An explanatory mixed methods study of EFL students perceptions' concerning blended learning impact on enhancing English language teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia.

Name of supervisor (for student projects): Professor Andy Goodwyn

A: Please complete the form below

| | | |
|---|---|------------|
| Brief outline of Work/activity: | With university agreement, participants would involve by asking to complete a questionnaire and interview focus group session. I will use paper pen/pencil and audio recorders. | |
| Where will data be collected? | Two Saudi universities; the University A and University B | |
| Significant hazards: | None identified. The universities themselves have a duty to maintain a safe area of work within the school. | |
| Who might be exposed to hazards? | N/A | |
| Existing control measures: | The rooms fall within the school's Health & Safety responsibilities. | |
| Are risks adequately controlled: | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| If NO, list additional controls and actions required: | Additional controls | Action by: |
| | | |

B: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:

I have read the Heath and Safety booklet posted on Blackboard, and the guidelines overleaf.

I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm risks have been adequately assessed and will be minimized as far as possible during the course of the project.



Signed:
Date: 22/1/2016

Print Name: Hebah Sheerah

STATEMENT OF APPROVAL TO BE COMPLETED BY SUPERVISOR (FOR UG AND MA STUDENTS) **OR** BY IOE ETHICS COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVE (FOR PGR AND STAFF RESEARCH).

This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.



Signed:
Date: 10.2.16

Print Name: Andy Kempe

* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters. Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.

Guidance notes for the completion of the risk assessment form

Significant hazards:

- Only list those that you could reasonably expect to cause significant injuries or affect several people
- Will the work require the use of machines and tools? How could you or anyone else be injured? Will injury be significant?
- Will the research take place in a high-risk country?
- Will the work require the use of chemicals? Check safety data sheets for harmful effects and any exposure limits?
- Will the work produce any fumes, vapours, dust or particles? Can they cause significant harm?
- Are there any significant hazards due to where the work is to be done, such as confined space, at height, poor lighting, high/low temperature?

Who might be exposed?

- Remember to include yourself, your supervisor, your participants, others working in or passing through the work area.
- Those more vulnerable or less experienced should be highlighted as they will be more at risk, such as children, people unfamiliar with the work area, disabled or with medical conditions e.g. asthma.

Existing control measures:

- List the control measures in place for each of the significant hazards, such as machine guards, ventilation system, use of personal protective equipment (PPE), generic safety method statement/procedure.
- Existing safety measures and procedures in place in the establishment
- Remember appropriate training is a control measure and should be listed.
- List any Permits to Work which may be in force.

Are risks adequately controlled?

- With all the existing control measures in place, do any of the significant hazards still have a potential to cause significant harm.
- Use your judgement as to how the work is to be done, by whom and where.

Additional controls:

- List the additional control measures, for each of the significant hazards, which are required to reduce the risk to the lowest so far as is reasonably practicable.
- Additional measures may include such things as: increased ventilation, Permit to Work, confined space entry permit, barriers/fencing, fall arrest equipment, etc.
- PPE should only be used as a last resort, if all else fails.

Appendix II: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form



Researcher: Hebah Sheerah

Phone:

Email:

Supervisor: Professor. Andy Goodwyn

Phone:

Email:

Participant information sheet

Research Project: Title of project: An explanatory mixed methods study of EFL students' perceptions' concerning blended learning impact on enhancing English language teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia.

Project Team Members: Hebah Sheerah – researcher

Professor Andy Goodwyn - supervisor

What is the study?

The study is being conducted at the University of Reading as part of Hebah Sheerah's PhD dissertation. The study sets out to investigate EFL students' perceptions considering the impact of blended learning on their English language enhancement, the pros and cons of this particular method, and their ideas and recommendations for improving the English learning environment in their universities. It hopes to make recommendations regarding how can blended learning be more effective to improve the EFL students' performance and how can this new method best encourage them to reflect upon their weaknesses and find some resolutions to overcome them.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the project because you are one of the English as foreign language students that match the focus of the study. You also have experiences and beliefs about the actual and effective blended learning that can help to improve the English language proficiency in the Kingdom.

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you participate. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the project, without any repercussions to you, by contacting directly using the contact details above.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire about the impact of blended learning on English language development its advantages, limitations and your suggestions for improvements. This should take about 20 minutes to complete.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information you give will remain confidential and will only be seen by the research team listed at the start of this letter. Neither you, or The University, will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about individuals will not be shared with The University. I do not anticipate there to be any risks associated with taking part in this study.

Participants in similar studies have found it interesting to take part. We anticipate that the findings of the study will be useful for teachers in their expectations about the effective use of blended learning in relation to English language development. An electronic summary of the findings of the study can be made available to you by contacting the Principal Researcher.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers will link you, or The University, to the study and no names will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Participants will be assigned a number and will be referred to by that number in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the research team will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study may be presented at national and international conferences, and in written reports and articles.

What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. During the research, you can stop completing the activities at any time. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, we will discard your data.

Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Prof. Andy Goodwyn at University of Reading by phone on _____ or by email on _____

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information, please contact Hebah Sheerah by phone on or by email on

What do I do next?

We do hope that you will agree to your participation in the study. If you are happy to take part, please return the attached consent form to the school office (reception) as soon as possible.

Thank you for your time.
Yours sincerely,

Miss Hebah Sheerah

Participant Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of student: _____

Name of university: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

| | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| I consent to completing a questionnaire | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix II: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Title of project: An explanatory mixed methods study of EFL students perceptions' concerning blended learning impact on enhancing English language teaching and learning in

Saudi Arabia. The study is being conducted at the University of Reading as part of Hebah Sheerah's PhD dissertation. The study sets out to investigate EFL students' perceptions considering the impact of blended learning on their English language enhancement, the pros and cons of this particular method, and their ideas and recommendations for improving the English learning environment in their universities. It hopes to make recommendations regarding how can blended learning be more effective to improve the EFL students' performance and how can this new method best encourage them to reflect upon their weaknesses and find some resolutions to overcome them.

I hope that you will allow me to 15 to 25 minutes for distribution and collection of questionnaires questionnaire, and almost 25 minutes for the focus groups interviews. If consent is granted, each participant was shown an information sheet that identified the purpose of the study and nature of the data collection as well as declared the confidentiality and anonymity of the data. It required them to indicate their voluntary participation, meaning they could decide to participate or leave the study at any point.

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers will link you, or The University, to the study and no names will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Participants will be assigned a number and will be referred to by that number in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the research team will have access to the records. The results of the study may be presented at national and international conferences, and in written reports and articles.

Thank you for your time.
Yours sincerely,
Miss Hebah Sheerah

Permission to access universities

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مساعد وكييلة عمادة كليات إسلامية
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م. هـ / السيد /

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Appendix III: Focus Group Interview Transcripts

Colour Coding FG #1

| Code | Themes and subthemes | Stu. # | Exact quotation |
|-----------|--|--------|---|
| RQ1 a) | Development of Reading skills 1- Increase reading comprehension 2- Effective teaching strategies 3- Online library 4- Increase new vocabularies 5- Improve Reading strategies 6- Increase motivation and outcomes | St1 | <p>In blended learning, I enjoy reading in English because I understand what I am reading. So, for example, our tutor creates a very good strategy to connect both settings (face-to-face and online learning) to teach us the reading passage. She gives us a reading text twice: one (face-to-face) in the lecture for discussion and one (online) to read again to answer the related questions. This is very helpful to support my reading comprehension. But honestly, I prefer printed textbooks than online reading. It makes me concentrate more. I think it is better to read directly from books; it saves more time to go to the library to find out exactly what I want. After I spent hours in online searching, I didn't get what I want [...]. It took extra time. For me it is easier to research from books in the library. Also, I found the online library website to be very difficult. I think it is only suited for academic or professional users.</p> |
| | | St2 | <p>When I have reading homework, I try to understand the reading text first. When I get confused I try to search online and read similar topics to expand my knowledge. So, my understanding ability is gradually improved while I experience some online topics. So, I can understand online chatting more easily than before. In addition, I used scanning, and skimming while reading. Very helpful. I like what I do. I have a better attitude towards online reading. The online platform has a massive range of reading sources. I can read and increase academic words at the same time. Later, I can use these words, which I have gained in several situations. The digital library is very beneficial, especially for research. For example, it contains valuable [books] with easy language, which encouraged me to buy some of them to read.</p> |

| | | | |
|-----------|--|-----|---|
| | | | buy some of them to read. |
| | | St3 | I think the online discussion in BL before reading a certain topic is very effective in two ways. On one hand, we engage in talk and practice the language. On the other hand, I can explore different topics online to expand my reading in English. Regarding to online library, I found the language on the electronic library website is very difficult for me to understand. |
| | | St4 | Blended learning is useful for me in terms of gaining new academic vocabularies more quickly than in a traditional setting. The online library is very interesting for me to read massive resources. It develops my speed-reading strategy more than reading from textbooks. It also saves my time; when I am searching online, I try to limit my search to specific information so I get what I want very quickly. |
| | | St5 | I think I have gained many more academic and non-academic words than before. For example, in virtual classes, I read online instructions and rules which contain a great number of new words. Then I generated a list of new words in Microsoft Word for each unit and tried to use and memorize them. I updated them frequently. I feel reading in English is becoming easier on/ off line outside the classroom [...] I can save any viewpoints and underline any difficult words to facilitate understanding the reading text very quickly. I can also talk to my friend about any reading difficulties or improvement. Furthermore, the online reading test has different useful tips that helped with time management. |
| RQ1 b) | Development of Listening skills 1-BI flexibility to practice listening at anytime 2-Online listening activities | St1 | My understanding is quite developed when I listened to my teacher. Her accent is so clear to me. She is Saudi [...] but when I watch a movie and or listened to the teacher in online classes, I can't understand the language. I feel my level of English is the same as at the secondary school level. I have irritation because I couldn't understand and then I lose my concentration. I personally believe that communication with |

| | | | |
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| | <p>3-live chatting supported listening skills</p> <p>4. Some listening problems</p> <p>5. BL enhances SDL</p> | | <p>my tutor is important. She gives me very useful suggestions about the course. Later on, I learned to correct my mistakes myself and plan my study to achieve my goal.</p> |
| | | St2 | <p>I think communicating online with different tutors and colleagues is effective but quite complicated for me. I have listened to many people and tried to understand unfamiliar words.</p> |
| | | St3 | <p>Oxford Learn contains huge listening activities that I can use to practice at any time. It is very useful. I like online lectures. They suit my hectic routine. As a mother of four children, I preferred BL. It gave me time flexibility, especially when I did listening tasks. So, I can study and take care of my children simultaneously. I take responsibility for my learning.</p> |
| | | St4 | <p>I feel that the (Oxford Learn) website provides us with very useful listening materials on different topics, such as (descriptions, academic talks), so I can find all of this in one place with flexibility to practice any time I wish. This really saves my time. I am becoming a more active and responsible learner, so I try to understand what I have listened to with some listening audios online without waiting to ask my tutor. I am working independently to develop my language. For example, I use my mobile phone apps or bring my iPad to listen to some materials to help me understand the listening task.</p> |
| | | St5 | <p>At the beginning, I found listening to be an obstacle. I always got low marks on the test and just had one try. If I didn't pass, I would not enrol in my major, so I lost my confidence. But when I practiced it differently, everything changed. My tutor first gave us time to listen to the conversation and answer the questions. Later, we were divided into groups for online discussion. This strategy was effective for both listening and speaking improvements.</p> |
| RQ1 | Development of | St1 | <p>In my opinion, the most effective way that</p> |

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| c) | <p>Speaking skills</p> <p>1-Effective teaching strategies</p> <p>2-Synchronouns and asynchronous communication to support speaking skills</p> <p>3-Enhancement of presentation skills</p> <p>4-Support for self-esteem</p> <p>5- Bl as rich intercultural platform to support speaking skills</p> | <p>enhanced my speaking was the strategy used by my tutor. She strictly prohibited speaking Arabic in class and imposed a punishment if anyone did so. For example, an extra additional task in writing would be used as a punishment. This encouraged us to practice the language more than once. Besides, online discussion is very useful as well. It makes me overcome my shyness and build up social community and I can communicate with them in English. I overcome my fear when speaking online so it is helpful. When I tried to speak English with my family at home, they depressed me and I said, "just listen to me," but they did not. So, online conversation is really helpful because I cannot practice language elsewhere. I was so excited.</p> <p>St2 In online discussion (English village), we learn to be brave and express our opinions freely no matter how many errors we make. So, we speak with each other, listen to different accents, correct others' mistakes, and learn new academic vocabularies. We learn how to speak academically in order to prepare for the test.</p> <p>St3 Online discussion helped me develop my presentation skills, so I became more prepared and confident in what I was saying. I also have some foreign friends in virtual classes which enriching my language. So, it is absolutely right that blended learning will eventually replace some forms of face-to-face learning.</p> <p>St4 I feel my speaking has improved rapidly this term. This is mainly because of the strategy that my tutor recently added. She created a (Twitter) account to follow and communicate with her. We communicated with each other and discussed many topics. My writing and speaking developed at the same time. For example, my grammar was more improved-unlike in the past, when I became confused when I met someone who didn't speak Arabic and I couldn't communicate with him/her even if I understood what he/she said, but I was never be able to reply. In the online classes, I am free to speak. No one can joke about anything I have posted. It was very stress-free. So, I can improve my language easily. I have some interesting background information about different culture when</p> |
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| | | | communicating online. |
| | | St5 | I tried to mimic my tutor's technique with my family. It is so funny. So, for example, I chatted with them online using microphones and web cams to discuss certain topics. In fact, they were so excited to speak English. Thus, blended learning opens the doors for us to practice and love what we learn. Another thing about this strategy is that we all communicate with each other and correct each other's mistakes and practice the language |
| RQ1 d) | Development of Writing skills 1-Online group writing to support academic writing 2-Submission of writing online (avoid plagiarism) 3-Improved spelling 4-Well-informed feedback | St1 | I have received very useful (written feedback) from my tutor, which has helped me improve my writing. We practiced (peer review) by email. This way also developed my writing style. Online group work is very beneficial. So, we were working, for example, to generate an essay in a systematic academic way [e.g., dividing ideas, main themes, supporting details, and conclusion]. I learned the difference between synonyms and antonyms by using Google search as well. In the end, we were able to produce a good written work. I learned not to copy [steal] written ideas. Using different sources and providing references are useful techniques to avoid plagiarism. I think it is a new form of exercise for me. |
| | | St2 | My writing is becoming more improved than before. When my tutor introduced a new topic for us, she gave some (recommended websites for further reading) to be more engaged with some information. Generally, blended learning helped me improve my spelling and grammar. The more I practiced writing online with my group, the more developed I became. |
| | | St3 | Another useful technique we used is creating (a mind map) in online group work. It helps me organize my work and ideas effectively. Creating [a mind map] in online group work helps me organize my work and ideas effectively. In this way, I can write and produce an academic work with a variety of academic vocabulary, which helped me gain |

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| | | | <p>high scores on the test. Each student participates with different ideas.</p> <p>So, it provides some useful features (online activities, quizzes), which helped me gain high scores on the test. I think getting well-informed feedback about writing is so valuable and also an advantage. For example, the teacher emailed me [model answers] about the topic; these showed a variety of writing approaches. For example, I received a comment about how to use punctuation effectively, how to write a topic sentence, and how to present arguments. I prefer teacher feedback; it is very helpful. I feel my progress in understanding written feedback. When I received comments from my tutor or colleagues, I spent more than 4 hours to learn my mistakes so I feel more comfortable in writing.</p> |
| | | St4 | <p>We never write at home; we normally practiced writing in an online class. This made me upset, to be honest, in the beginning. I like online group writing. We are divided in two groups, and each one has different task to generate written work at the end. A very interesting point I want to add here is that before I couldn't differentiate between academic and general English, which confused me. In blended learning, I have learned how to search and which topics are more academic. Comments I have received from my tutors showed me my exact weak points and where to begin to modify them.</p> |
| | | St5 | <p>Online writing and submission at the same time is considered rewarding. It strengthens self-esteem. Regarding feedback, she gave us a written report or we could request a private online session with her.</p> |
| RQ2 | <p>Challenges</p> <p>1-Technical problems in the online class</p> <p>2-Insufficient computers</p> | St1 | <p>I don't have enough information about Oxford Learn. There is a poor Internet connection at the university. Also, the audio is not clear in the online class, some PCs did not work. When I want to practice, there are a very limited number of computers in labs.</p> |
| | | St2 | <p>I also experienced poor Internet Wi-Fi on campus. I missed teaching support in listening, but what is difficult to me is speaking in different accents. When I first enrolled, I knew that there were online</p> |

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| | <p>3-Poor connection and lack of technical support</p> <p>1-Listening difficulties</p> <p>5-Lack of information about how to use <i>university online system</i></p> <p>4- long f2f classes</p> <p>7- Great amount of homework</p> | | <p>classes, but I didn't know how to use the system or how to use or post in Blackboard. The homework exercise is too much for us.</p> <p>St3 There are a very limited number of labs and PCs. I come from a distant (village) far from the university; when I want to practice or access the Internet, unfortunately I can't. So, there are insufficient computers for students.</p> <p>St4 For me the biggest obstacle I have is poor internet connections on campus. Our tutor requested that we use our mobile Wi-Fi phones to connect for some urgent purposes. Sometimes, the tutor used her own Wi-Fi to connect. This is a shame. In addition, we have too much homework in both online/off sessions.</p> <p>St5 A lack of technical support is considered important. When we faced any technical problems in the class, we didn't find any technicians to solve it. This caused us to either cancel the activity or delay it and waste time.</p> |
| RQ3 | <p>Recommendations</p> <p>1-Have English module unaccompanied with other modules</p> <p>2-Offer initial orientation session</p> <p>3-Maximize online class</p> <p>4-Provide qualified staff</p> <p>5-Enhance Internet connection</p> <p>6- Enhance communication between students and instructors</p> | St1 | <p>Firstly, I strongly suggested having an English in the foundation year without any other subjects. As we live in the age of technology, I suggested expanding the utilization of (apps and reliable electronic websites). This will enhance and support learning. For example, using learning apps in class will help communication with the teacher and overcome boring class hours. It makes us compete to answer correctly. It is very distinguished to use technology in class as we all have mobile phones. (We need to) work to enhance the poor Internet connection on campus. In my opinion, I think having an induction course before the actual course to learn, for example, how to be an independent learner, how to be engaged in blended learning [would be beneficial].</p> <p>St2 We have practiced some new information about different cultures in an online setting, and I suggested having an introductory course about different cultural backgrounds as an orientation day and English only in the foundation year. I suggested increasing colour images and short stories to provide better explanations in both settings. Increasing online sessions, which are held</p> |

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| | | | online because they helped me communicate and interact with people. |
| | | St3 | As English language has become a core requirement to pass the preparatory year and enable us to enrol in our major, I strongly suggest having it separately in an individual term without any other modules. This will help us concentrate and have extra time to practice. I suffered from a bad connection on campus. |
| | | St4 | I suggested maximizing online lectures because I benefited from them the most [...]. We have long hours in English classes, [and] I always felt that I was just a receiver learner. We enjoyed online discussions but we need to be more communicative and self-regulating to continue being motivated. I also recommended having an English course exclusively in the foundation year to make us concentrate more. |
| | | St5 | In my opinion, I think having an induction course before the actual course to learn, for example, how to be an independent learner, how to be engaged in blended learning [would be beneficial]. I am very satisfied with blended learning. It was very convenient for me. I suggest increasing online communication hours with tutors or creating some other social networks [Twitter/Facebook]. |

عزيزتي الطالبة السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

هذا الاستبيان هو أداة للدراسة تمدها الباحثة ببرنامج بالمشكلة المتعددة، لإكمال متطلبات الحصول على درجة البكالوريوس في تخصص مناهج وطرق تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية مع التركيز على التعلم الإلكتروني، ويهدف الاستبيان إلى استطلاع آرائكم حول تجربتكم في استخدام التعليم المدمج في دراسة مقررات اللغة الإنجليزية من حيث المميزات والعيوب وتقنيات تطوير التجربة، وآراءه على تحسين تعلم المهارات اللغوية الأساسية (القراءة، والكتابة، والاستماع، والمحادثة). والتعلم المدمج هو الذي يجمع بين التعلم الإلكتروني والتعليم التقليدي. وبما أن الغاية هي المستهدف والمستفيد الرئيس من هذه التجربة، فلما نرجو منكم تعبئة الاستبيان التالي بكل موضوعية وصدق حتى يتم تقييم التجربة تقييمًا واقعيًا.

الباحثة
هبة أسعد شيرة

نشكركم على التعاون والمشاركة في عمليات تطوير البحث العلمي لما يؤدي لبيئة تعليمية أفضل للجميع.

Part 1

| Questions | Answers |
|--|--|
| 1 المعدل التراكمي (GPA) | |
| 2 How do you rate your computer literacy? كيف تقيمين معرفتك باستخدام الحاسب؟ | <p>Weak <input type="radio"/> Good <input type="radio"/> Very Good <input type="radio"/> Excellent <input type="radio"/></p> |
| 3 Do you have a computer at home? هل لديك حاسب في البيت؟ | <p>Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/></p> |

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| 5 | Do you agree with those who say that e-learning is a waste of time هل تتفق مع الذين يقولون ان التعلم الالكتروني مضيعة للوقت؟ | Yes <input type="radio"/> | No <input type="radio"/> |
| 6 | Do you have access to the Internet at home? هل لديك انترنت في البيت؟ | Yes <input type="radio"/> | No <input type="radio"/> |
| 7 | Where do you prefer to use the internet for e-learning? اين تفضلين استخدام الانترنت من اجل التعلم الالكتروني؟ | At home | |
| | | At the university | |
| | | other places | |

Part 2

For each of the statements below, please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement by ticking (✓) the appropriate box. Where

5= strongly agree, 4= agree, 3= undecided, 2= disagree, 1= strongly disagree.

مع علامة (✓) في العطار المناسب، حيث:

= 5 موافق بشدة، 4 = موافق، 3 = غير متأكد، 2 = غير موافق، 1 = غير موافق بشدة.

5 = موافق بشدة، 4 = موافق، 3 = غير متأكد، 2 = غير موافق، 1 = غير موافق بشدة

| السؤال باللغة العربية | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| Question in English | | | | | |
| 1- I think that using blended learning helps me gain new vocabulary. | | | | | |
| 2- I think that using blended learning helps me recognize synonyms and antonyms in the text. | | | | | |
| 3- I prefer to learn reading skills from book rather than from electronic materials. | | | | | |
| 4- I think that using blended learning helps me easily understand the text. | | | | | |
| 5- I think that using blended learning helps me improve my skimming reading strategy. | | | | | |
| 6- I think that using blended learning helps me improve my scanning reading strategy. | | | | | |
| 7- I think that using blended learning helps me relate my general knowledge to the text topic. | | | | | |
| 8- I think that using blended learning helps me improve my reading speed in general. | | | | | |
| 9- Blended learning helps me predict what will happen in the context. | | | | | |
| 10- The listening instructions provided in blackboard are difficult to follow | | | | | |
| 11- Blended learning develops my ability to focus on | | | | | |
| التعلم المدمج يساعدني على زيادة حصيتي اللغوية من المفردات الإنجليزية. | | | | | |
| اعتقد أن التعلم المدمج يساعدني على توقع ما سوف يحدث في سياق الكلام أثناء الإستماع. | | | | | |
| اعتقد أن التعلم المدمج يساعدني على تحسين استراتيجي الإستعراض السريع للنص لإستخراج المعلومات من النص. | | | | | |
| اعتقد أن التعلم المدمج يساعدني على ربط معلوماتي العامة مع النص. | | | | | |
| اعتقد أن التعلم المدمج يساعدني على تحسين سرعة قرأتي. | | | | | |
| اعتقد أن التعلم المدمج يساعدني على فهم و التفاعل المباشر بيني وبين النص. | | | | | |
| اعتقد أن التعلم المدمج يساعدني على تحسين مهارة القراءة السريعة لمعرفة الفكرة والهدف من النص. | | | | | |
| اعتقد أن التعلم المدمج يساعدني على تحسين استراتيجي الإستعراض السريع للنص لإستخراج المعلومات من النص. | | | | | |
| اعتقد أن التعلم المدمج يساعدني على ربط معلوماتي العامة مع النص. | | | | | |
| اعتقد أن التعلم المدمج يساعدني على تحسين سرعة قرأتي. | | | | | |
| التعلم المدمج يساعدني على توقع ما سوف يحدث في سياق الكلام أثناء الإستماع. | | | | | |
| يصعب متابعة التعليمات السمعية الموجودة في نظام بلاك بورد. | | | | | |
| يطور التعلم المدمج قدرتي في التركيز بين الاصوات المختلفة | | | | | |

| Question in English | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | السؤال باللغة العربية |
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| different sounds in speech to match them to relevant questions. | | | | | | يمكنني التعرف التمييز بينها وبالتالي أستطيع الإجابة على الأسئلة الموجودة في النص. |
| 12- Blended learning activities enable me to practice listening whenever I wish. | | | | | | يمكنني التعلم المدمج بأنشطته السمعية المختلفة من ممارسة مهارة الاستماع في الوقت المناسب لي. |
| 13- My listening communications improved with blended learning. | | | | | | يطور التواصل والتفاعل عن طريق التعلم المدمج مهارة الاستماع لدي. |
| 14- Blended learning prepares me for interactive listening in real life. | | | | | | يجبني التعلم المدمج مستعدة للإستماع بشكل تفاعلي في المواقف الحقيقية. |
| 15- Blended learning enables me to speak confidently and effortlessly in real-time interactions. | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج في التحدث بثقة وبسهولة في مواقف التفاعل الحقيقية. |
| 16- Blended learning helps me produce a wide range of spoken words accurately. | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج على إنتاج حصيلة كبيرة من الكلمات التي أستطيع نطقها بسهولة ودقة. |
| 17- Blended learning improves my gradual development ability in real conversations. | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج على لتطوير قدرتي تدريجيا في المحادثات الحقيقية. |
| 18- Blended learning helps me interact in pairs or small groups. | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج في التفاعل والانماج مع زملائي . |
| 19- Problem-solving activity materials used in blended learning help me improve my pronunciation. | | | | | | تساعدني ادرات حل المشكلات المستخدمة في التعلم المدمج على تطوير طريقة النطق السليم للكلمات . |
| 20- Blended learning helps me overcome creating errors in real communication. | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج على التقليل من الأخطاء في مواقف الاتصال الحقيقية. |
| 21- Blended learning helps me improve my oral presentation skills. | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج يساعدني على تطوير مهارة تقديم العروض الشفهية. |
| 22- Blended learning helps me produce a piece of academic work. | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج على الكتابة الأكاديمية. |
| 23- Blended learning enables me to use a systematic | | | | | | يمكنني التعلم المدمج من إستخدام إطار منظم لعملية الكتابة من خلال |

| Question in English | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | السؤال باللغة العربية |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| 23- Blended learning enables me to use a systematic framework for the writing process (planning, drafting, and revising). | | | | | | يمكنني التعلم المدمج من استخدام إطار منظم لعملية الكتابة من خلال التخطيط ، كتابة المسودات و مراجعتها. |
| 24- Blended learning writing activities help me paraphrase text (restate the main ideas, but in more detail). | | | | | | تساعدني الأنشطة وتمارين الكتابة في التعلم المدمج على إعادة صياغة النص باستخدام كلمات جديدة وبشكل مفصل. |
| 25- Blended learning helps me summarize text (provide fewer details). | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج على تلخيص الأفكار الرئيسية للنص. |
| 26- Blended Learning is more convenient for me than face-to-face learning. | | | | | | بالنسبة لي التعلم المدمج أفضل من التعلم التقليدي في الفصل الدراسي. |
| 27- Blended Learning improves communication between students and teachers. | | | | | | يفيد التعلم المدمج عملية التواصل بين الطلاب وأسئلة المقرر. |
| 28- Blended Learning makes teaching and learning more effective; because it integrates all forms of media, print, audio, video, and animation. | | | | | | يجعل التعلم المدمج عمليات التدريس والتعلم أكثر فاعلية كونه يدمج بين الوسائط المتعددة من نصوص مكتوبة و أفلام فيديو ومفاتيح سمعية. |
| 29- I find blended learning interesting and useful. | | | | | | يجمع التعلم المدمج بين المتعة والفادة. |
| 30- I like blended learning because I can work according to my own pace. | | | | | | أحب التعلم المدمج كونه أستطيع التعلم وفق سرعتي الذاتية. |
| 31- Blended learning helps me to develop knowledge of computer and Internet. | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج على تطوير معرفتي بالحواسب والانترنت. |
| 32- I feel more confident when I use English online than when I use it in the class. | | | | | | أشعر بثقة كبيرة عندما أستخدم اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال التعلم الإلكتروني أكثر من الثقة التي أشعر بها عندما أستخدم اللغة في قاعة الدرس . |
| 33- Blended learning helps me to use time effectively. | | | | | | يساعدني التعلم المدمج على التحكم بالوقت بفاعلية |

المميز (3)

| Question in English | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | السؤال باللغة العربية |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 34- I benefit from the feedback given by my instructor through Blackboard. | | | | | | استفيد من الملاحظات والتغذية الراجعة التي تقدمها استاذتي من خلال نظام الـ Blackboard. |
| 35- I think socially isolated when I use blended learning. | | | | | | أشعر بالعزلة الاجتماعية عندما استخدم التعلم الإلكتروني. |
| 36- Blended Learning is difficult to handle and therefore frustrating to use. | | | | | | بالنسبة لي التعلم المدمج أمر صعب ومحبط. |
| 37- Slow internet connectivity is a major problem I face in using blended learning. | | | | | | بطء شبكة الانترنت هي أهم المشكلات التي تواجهني في التعلم المدمج. |
| 38- I face technical problems when I use blended learning | | | | | | تواجهني مشكلات تقنية في التعلم المدمج. |
| 39- I prefer to learn from the book rather than from the course website. | | | | | | أفضل التعلم من الكتاب على التعلم من الموقع الإلكتروني المقرر. |
| 40- Blended learning facilitates cheating and plagiarism. | | | | | | التعلم المدمج يسهل الغش وعدم الأمانة في الواجبات والتكليف. |

المعوقات

Part 3

1- In your opinion, what are the advantages of blended learning in your English language development?

من وجهة نظرك، ما هي أهم مميزات التعلم المدمج والتي أدت الى تطوير لمتك الإنجليزية بشكل أفضل خلال السنة التحضيرية ؟

2- In your opinion, what are the limitations of blended learning that affect your English language development in during this year?

من وجهة نظرك، ما هي أهم عيوب ومشاكل التعليم المدمج التي أثرت على تطوير لغتك الإنجليزية خلال السنة التحضيرية؟

3- What suggestions can you make concerning improvements to blended learning course at the university in the foundation year?

ماذا تقترح حين تطوير التعليم المدمج في الجامعة؟