

The Application of Blackboard in the English Courses at Al Jouf University: Perceptions of Students

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Abstract—The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of students on the use of Blackboard in the Department of English at Al Jouf University. Al Jouf University is located in Al Jouf province in the northwestern part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A cohort of 50 male students of the university participated in this study. The sample population was selected randomly. The data was collected using a questionnaire. The results of the study suggest that though the students neither agree nor disagree about Blackboard offering a lively and interesting environment, they report that Blackboard offers variety in the learning of their courses and it helps them learn various aspects of their courses at their own pace. The findings imply that Blackboard could be used as an effective medium to provide variety in the instruction as well as to help create a motivational environment for learners.

Index Terms—use of blackboard, perceptions of students, courses of English, Al Jouf University

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Use of Technology

Technology integration has become part and parcel of modern day teaching and learning environment across educational institutions, especially in higher education. Blackboard software, a component of Learning Management System (LMS), has been adopted by many educational institutions the world over. Higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia are no exception to this phenomenon. Several universities in Saudi Arabia have embarked upon this tool for their teaching and learning purposes. Al Jouf University has jumped on the bandwagon just recently to adopt Blackboard for enhancing its teaching and learning environment across the departments.

Believing that studies in the field of ELT that contribute to discovering learners' attitudes to e-learning and technology integration are warranted, the present study aimed at investigating the application of Blackboard in the teaching and learning of courses in the Department of English at Al Jouf University. The results of the study are hoped to guide the instructors in enhancing the quality of technology integration in the university.

B. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this research is to survey the perceptions of students of the English department in utilizing the Blackboard as they receive instruction on various courses. The study seeks to examine these research questions:

Do students of the English department consider that Blackboard is an effective tool that enhances their learning?

What features of Blackboard are more frequently used by students and their course instructors?

Do students experience any practical problems in using Blackboard and do they need training to make the best use of Blackboard?

C. Participants

A total of 50 male students of the College of Administrative Sciences and Humanities of Al Jouf University participated in the present study. The sample population was selected randomly. The respondents study English courses of different levels in the department of English of the university. They study English Language and Literature courses as part of their Bachelor's degree program at undergraduate level. All the participants are natives of Saudi Arabia and their mother tongue is Arabic.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. *Face-to-face Instruction and Technology-mediated Instruction*

With the spread of the internet and smartphone network, technology use has become an integral part of modern day learning environments. Educational institutions have been in the fore front in adopting technology mediated instruction for enhancing teaching and learning environments.

Blended approach- a style of instruction that makes use of both traditional face-to-face instruction and technology-mediated instruction – has become a popular mode of instruction in many universities in Saudi Arabia as a result of increased use of e-learning platforms such as Blackboard Learn. As pointed out by Graham (2006), the three primary reasons for adopting blended approach to instruction include (1) improved learning effectiveness, (2) increased access and convenience, and (3) greater cost effectiveness.

B. *Blackboard and Its Features*

Blackboard is a learning management system (LMS) that facilitates online learning. Narwani and Arif (2008) define LMS thus: “Learning Management System is a broad term that is used for a wide range of systems that organize and provide access to online learning services for students, instructors, and administrators. These services usually include access control provision of learning content, communication tools, and organizations of user groups.” The interactive and collaborative nature of this e-learning software has enabled it to be adopted by administrators and instructors in many higher educational institutions as a tool for implementing technology-mediated instruction. A course instructor in an educational institution that makes use of Blackboard Learn could build and deliver the course by utilizing the default course menu that appears in the side bar of the platform. It has capabilities for bringing in online elements to courses traditionally taught face-to-face and for introducing completely online courses with few or no face-to-face interaction sessions. Potential benefits of Blackboard Learning System, according to Bradford et al. (2007), include 1) increased availability; 2) quick feedback; 3) improved communication; 4) tracking; and 5) skill building. Weighing up the pros and cons of the Blackboard Learn, Bradford et al. (2007) state the following: “The Blackboard Learning System provides the opportunity for students to use the familiar environment of the Internet for educational purposes. The argument is made here that the use of Blackboard as a curricular tool is good from the standpoints of both student learning and faculty instruction. It provides a medium to present curricular materials in a way that promotes the development of students’ organizational, communication, and time-management skills. However, critics point to the pedagogically restrictive nature of Blackboard, its Internet inefficiencies, its need for troubleshooting, and most significantly, its increasing cost. Viable alternatives are being found in open-source learning management systems.”

Administrators and course instructors of higher educational institutions such as universities could offer technology-mediated instruction to their students, including contacting them and providing for online learning outside of their class time, in a variety of ways by utilizing the Blackboard tools.

The Blackboard software comes equipped with many tools or features such as course introduction, course content, virtual classroom, discussion, assignment, email, calendar, and grade center. Course instructors and their students make use of this array of tools offered by Blackboard in ways they appear advisable or as instructed by their administrators. Presented below are some possible ways and purposes for which the Blackboard features are utilized.

The course introduction feature could be used by the instructor to place a welcome message to the students. The participants of the course are also informed of the course schedule, syllabus outline, and equipment or tools used on the course. The information placed here could give students sufficient background knowledge, help see the course in the proper perspective, have an overview of the course and see the big picture.

In the course description feature, the course instructor can upload information that provides a detailed introduction to the course. The instructor can place the information regarding scope, relevance, purpose and benefits of the course. The section also could include a list of course goals and objectives and teaching and learning activities and strategies required to accomplish them. Details of prescribed texts, recommended texts and other supported materials such as online resources are also given here.

Teachers can post course materials and other useful information in multiple content formats such as text, image, audio, video, animations in the course content section. Course instructor can upload multiple files as attachments from the computer. Availability of the files can be set by selecting the Display After and Display Until check boxes to enable the date and time selections or by using pop-up Date Selection Calendar and Time Selection Menu to select dates and times.

The assignment feature is utilized to post homework. Course instructors post assignments with specific instructions and deadlines as and when required, directing students’ attention to course objectives, course syllabus and content areas. Calendar tool is used to remind students of due dates of assignments. The students, in turn, submit their assignments in the form of files. Once the files are submitted, they are accessed by the teacher via the grade center. The teacher can view the file, grade and post comments and submit the files back. All the files can be downloaded at once and they can as well be removed at once after grading is done. The grade center feature on the Blackboard allows students to view their grades.

The virtual classroom or Blackboard collaborate feature is an easy to use web-conferencing platform intended for teachers and students to perform multiple tasks. Lectures, presentations, question and answer chats, white boarding and group web browsing are all possible at the convenience of course instructors and their students. The teacher can

schedule a session and then record the proceedings for the benefit of enhancing students' learning. The recordings can be shared across the courses. The collaborate tool is an ideal platform for incorporating blended learning into the curriculum. As the course instructor can schedule a session anywhere and anytime, course completion will be an easy task. In addition, the feature could possibly be used by course instructors to experiment with the innovative idea of flipped classroom, where in the concept or theory part can be done online and the mastery exercises or concept engagement through discussions can be taken up in the classroom.

Discussion feature allows course instructors to create discussion threads about a particular subject. The forums so created are used for the instructor and the students to share questions and answers, concepts and ideas on various topics of the course. The instructor can use forum settings such as view, grade, subscribe, create and edit, and additional options for performing various tasks for the benefit of the learners.

The email feature allows teachers and students to email to one another. Teachers can mass email to students on the course. The feature allows the teacher to send emails to anyone who is associated with the course. The emails can be sent to single, select or all users. This feature is ideal for the course instructor to be in contact with students, other course instructors, teaching assistants, observers, etc.

Students too could perform a host of activities on the Blackboard. The course instructors guide students in utilizing various features on the Blackboard through the announcements they post periodically. They are allowed to access the course menu consisting of course description, course content, discussion, assignments, and grade center. They can participate in a collaborative area with the teacher and fellow students via virtual classroom feature. They are also allowed to participate in a threaded discussion with their group members on the discussion forum.

Analyzing patterns in Blackboard tool use, Whitmer et al (2016) reported that successful students spent more time on tools such as grade center, course content, assessments, assignments and discussion.

III. OTHER RESEARCH STUDIES

Mohsin and Shafeeq (2014) in their research study at Najran University, KSA point out that the EFL teachers have positive perceptions on Blackboard applications to English language teaching. Most teachers view Blackboard as a structured e-learning platform that helps improve the teacher-student relationship in a course and aids to make teaching English more successful.

Al Zahour et al (2013) in their study at King Khalid University, KSA proved that blended learning helped broaden reading opportunities and English vocabulary of their students.

Kashghari and Aseel (2014) in their pilot study at King Abdul Aziz University, KSA reported that using Blackboard helped their students in improving their listening skills. However, they were not sure if Blackboard helped their students in improving their speaking skills.

In his case study at King Khalid University, KSA, Al-Maqtri (2014) revealed that though both male and female teachers consider E-learning through Blackboard effective, the student community, both male and female, in general do not consider E-learning effective. He also pointed out that female students had a more positive attitude to E-learning than their male counterparts. He further stated that students are not motivated to work with E-learning. He also identified that students misuse Blackboard system in large scale plagiarism. The study also revealed that many Blackboard related activities were not carried out by students owing to lack of access to the Internet.

IV. METHODS AND MATERIALS

In an attempt to discover the participants' perceptions on the use of Blackboard with the courses of the English department, a questionnaire was used as an instrument in this study. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items. For most questions the respondents were asked to choose from a 5-point Likert scale statement. The questionnaire was in English; however, the respondents were allowed to clarify their doubts with the administrators in either Arabic or English. Data obtained from the respondents were calculated using descriptive statistics: percentages and frequencies.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

TABLE 1:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF ITEMS (1-6 & 9-15) ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE (N=50)

	A	B	C	d	E
1) I think Blackboard offers a lively and interesting way of learning.	26%	16%	33%	16%	6%
2) I think Blackboard offers much needed variety in the learning of my courses.	16%	40%	20%	13%	10%
3) I think using Blackboard helps me to learn various aspects of my courses at my own pace.	19%	41%	17%	14%	7%
4) I think using Blackboard helps me to improve my linguistic abilities.	13%	21%	34%	17%	14%
5) I want to learn using both face-to-face instruction and Blackboard.	11%	27%	33%	14%	6%
6) I visit the Blackboard.	21%	36%	29%	13%	2%
9) I want my teachers to use Blackboard more often.	19%	36%	24%	14%	3%
10) I think the Blackboard is an unnecessary digression.	2%	23%	32%	35%	5%
11) I think learning through Blackboard is not useful.	3%	13%	21%	22%	38%
12) I don't have access to the internet which is why I can't use Blackboard.	7%	6%	33%	33%	10%
13) I think using Blackboard helps me to develop my knowledge of computer and internet.	9%	21%	44%	16%	8%
14) I face technical problems while using Blackboard.	6%	20%	43%	13%	13%
15) I want training so that I can use the features on the Blackboard better.	6%	26%	34%	14%	17%

TABLE 2:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF ITEMS (7& 8) ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE (N=50)

	A	B	C	D	E	f	g	h
7) The features I frequently visit on the Blackboard.	35%	23%	27%	30%	38%	17%	14%	12%
8) The features on the Blackboard I want my teachers to use more often.	26%	14%	36%	26%	35%	19%	19%	13%

VI. FINDINGS

Reflecting upon the analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire on the students' perceptions about the application of Blackboard for the courses in the department, the results of the study are presented as follows:

A majority of respondents are neutral about Blackboard offering a lively and interesting way of learning. However, a good number of respondents feel that it offers a lively and interesting way of learning.

A majority of respondents consider Blackboard to be a medium offering much needed variety in the learning of their courses.

A great majority of respondents consider that Blackboard helps them learn various aspects of their courses at their own pace.

A significant chunk of respondents is neutral about Blackboard helping them improve their linguistic abilities.

A majority of respondents are neutral about the use of both face – to – face instruction and Blackboard for their learning. However, a good number of respondents feel that they want to learn following both the types.

A majority of respondents visit the Blackboard two or three times a week.

Most respondents frequently visit the features on the Blackboard such as assignment, announcement and course introduction.

Most respondents want their teachers to frequently use the features on the Blackboard such as assignments, announcements and course content.

A majority of respondents want their teachers to use Blackboard more often. However, a good number of respondents are neutral about it.

A majority of respondents disagree that Blackboard is an unnecessary digression. However, a sizeable chunk of respondents seem to be neutral about it.

A good majority of respondents consider that learning through Blackboard is useful. However, a slight majority of respondents are neutral about it.

Though a good majority of respondents disagree that they can't use Blackboard because they don't have access, the equal number of respondents seem neutral about it.

A great majority of respondents are neutral about developing their knowledge of computer and internet as a result of using Blackboard.

A majority of respondents feel neutral about facing technical problems while using Blackboard. However, a good chunk of respondents seem to face technical problems as they use Blackboard.

A majority of respondents are neutral about needing training so that they can use the features on the blackboard. However, a good number of respondents seem to suggest that they need training.

VII. DISCUSSION

Since the introduction of Blackboard software is in its infancy in the department and its use has not become widespread yet, one needs to be cautious in generalizing the findings. However, by virtue of our association with department where the research project was carried out, we could state that some of our assumptions about the use of Blackboard are testified by the findings of our study. It was heartening to note that the students thought Blackboard

offered much needed variety in the learning of their courses, and it helped them learn various aspects of their courses at their own pace. The finding that they neither agreed nor disagreed about Blackboard offering a lively and interesting environment could be due to a variety of factors such as the early stage of application, and lack of awareness on the benefits it offers. Pedagogically speaking, the majority of learners, in the present study, should be given more time to be familiar with varied features of the Blackboard so as to decide for themselves if learning via Blackboard is really effective. Administrators should encourage students to make the best use of the Blackboard by way of providing required training and access to the internet. It would be advisable for course instructors to use more features on the Blackboard with greater frequency.

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

With the constraints under which the present study was conducted the data only seemed to suggest that the respondents were slightly in favor of using Blackboard, though it could not be established fully how far Blackboard had been productive. However, it is considered that the use of e-learning tools such as Blackboard could not only provide variety in their instruction but also help create a motivational environment for the students. It is recommended for future studies to utilize varied data collection instruments such as interview and observation protocol to eliciting and triangulating data so that the results could be more comprehensive and reliable.

IX. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was limited in the small number of respondents. Therefore, the findings ought to be interpreted or generalized with caution. It is suggested that future studies collect data from larger samples of population in order to make more plausible generalizations.

The present study employed only single data collection instrument (questionnaire) to investigate the respondents' perceptions on the use of the Blackboard. It is recommended for future studies to utilize multiple data collection instruments such as interviews and participant observation to eliciting and triangulating the data so that the studies could be more comprehensive and reliable.

The present study collected data only from male respondents. It is suggested that studies maybe conducted to see the differences among the male and female populations of the university.

It is also recommended that longitudinal studies maybe conducted to see if students' perceptions change over time.

APPENDIX. QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Participant

Please complete this questionnaire to help us know what you think about how Blackboard is being used by you and your course teachers in the Department of English, Al Jouf University. Please read each statement/question carefully and choose the response that best reflects your viewpoint. There is no right or wrong answer to these statements or questions. If you have any questions, ask the person who is administering this questionnaire for clarification. Please note that the information you provide will be kept confidential and your responses will be anonymous.

Thank you very much for your participation.

1) I think Blackboard offers a lively and interesting way of learning.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

2) I think Blackboard offers much needed variety in the learning of my courses.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

3) I think using Blackboard helps me to learn various aspects of my courses at my own pace.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

4) I think using Blackboard could help to improve my linguistic abilities.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

5) I want to learn using both face – to – face instruction and Blackboard.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

6) I visit the Blackboard (Tick the correct choice):

a. every day b. three times a week c. two times a week d. once a week e. Any other

7) The features on the Blackboard I frequently visit. (Tick all appropriate choices)

a) Announcements ()

b) Course description ()

c) Course content ()

d) Course introduction ()

e) Assignments ()

f) Discussion forums ()

g) Virtual classroom ()

h) Email ()

i) Any other: _____

8) The features on the Blackboard I want my teachers to use more often. (Tick all appropriate choices)

- a) Announcements ()
- b) Course description ()
- c) Course content ()
- d) Course introduction ()
- e) Assignments ()
- f) Discussion forums ()
- g) Virtual classroom ()
- h) Email ()

i) Any other: _____

9) I want my teachers to use Blackboard more often.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

10) I think the Blackboard is an unnecessary digression.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

11) I think learning through Blackboard is not useful.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

12) I don't have access to the internet which is why I can't use Blackboard.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

13) I think using Blackboard helps me to develop my knowledge of computer and internet.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

14) I face technical problems while using Blackboard.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

15) I want training so that I can use the features on the Blackboard better.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

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