THE PERCEPTIONS OF SAUDI STUDENTS ON USING FULLY ONLINE COURSES AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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in
Teaching International Languages

by

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Fall 2012
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Abdulmohsin Nasser Altawil

Fall 2012

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to the great people who made this dream possible; to my mother and father who passed away before seeing me achieving their dream; to my lovely wife and children; and to my brothers, sisters, and friends. I would like also to thank them all for their love, help, support, patience, encouragements, and prayers, which gave me the ability to complete my Master’s degree and successfully reach my goals.
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ABSTRACT

THE PERCEPTIONS OF SAUDI STUDENTS ON USING FULLY ONLINE COURSES AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

by

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Online learning is still emerging in Saudi Arabian universities. The literature review in this study showed the educational and cultural backgrounds that Saudi students have. The literature review also showed the seven generally used components of online learning. This study is an attempt to investigate the Saudi Arabian students’ perceptions of online learning, specifically regarding the seven components. This study investigates the questions of: What are Saudi Arabian students’ perceptions of online learning, specifically regarding seven generally used components? To what extent do Saudi ESL students perceive these components to help or hinder them in their fully online courses at the university level? Finally, to what extent do Saudi students believe online learning can be successfully applied in Saudi Arabia? A survey with 30 likert-scale questions was created by using SurveyMonkey. The survey was piloted by using the Cognitive
Interviews, and then posted in Saudi students’ Facebook groups and also on my personal Twitter account to get as many participants as possible. The data were collected after three weeks, and 709 participants completed the whole survey. The data were carefully analyzed, and some recommendations were suggested.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Educational technology is being used all over the world. Online Learning is considered as one of the most recent technological tools in education. Many universities, colleges, and even high schools have started keeping pace with the times and riding the wave of using the technology of online learning. This technology “has been increasingly popular in training and education” (Moloney & Oakley, 2010, p. 63), and has many different aspects, such as taking online courses, searching libraries’ websites, or even watching educational videos online. However, taking online courses is considered to be one of the most common usages of this type of technology. Since the beginning of the last decade, “online learning has experienced tremendous growth” (Moloney & Oakley, 2010, p. 56). Many universities have started offering fully online degrees, which means more and more students all over the world are getting their education through this means.

Background

In American universities, since the beginning of what might be described as the Internet revolution in the 1960’s (Palfrey, 2010, p. 981), online courses have been used. However, most of the growth has occurred during the last decade. In the United States of America, “the use of the Internet … has grown from just under half of American adults in 2000 to about 59% of adults at the end of 2002” (Young, 2005, p. 172). 

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Moreover, there are numerous advantages for students when using this instructional technology. Students take online courses for many reasons, such as enjoying the flexibility of online courses, being unable to attend classes at a set time, having no means to attend regular classes at the campus (Davies & Mendenhall, 1998, p. 3), or preferring to be away from the “power and oppression dynamics” (Limburg & Clark, 2006, p. 49) that can be present in face-to-face courses.

Similarly, Saudi Arabian Universities are beginning to adopt online learning as well; however, this type of online learning is limited for offering whole online degrees. There is an enormous encouragement from the Saudi Ministry of High Education to use the information technology (IT) for teaching and learning in the Saudi universities. Recently, many projects in Saudi Arabia are “continuously developed to provide adequate IT infrastructure as well as content development for higher education students” (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010, p. 49). The need of improving and using online learning in Saudi Arabian universities is increasing, especially with the rapid improvement of Internet usage in Saudi Arabia. According to the Communication and Information Technology Commission (CITC) in Saudi Arabia, the number of the Internet users jumped from 200,000 in 2000 to more than 9.8 million people in 2008, which is nearly 38.1% of the Saudi population of about 25 million (CITC, 2010, para. 1). In 2012, there are 33 universities in Saudi Arabia, of which twenty-four are government ones (Ministry of High Education, 2012, para. 1), and nine are private (Ministry of High Education, 2011, para. 1). However, there is still a limited ability of admitting more students in Saudi universities and colleges “compared with the rapid growth of students applying for college education” (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010, p. 49). Since most of these universities
are in big cities, the “Ministry of Higher Education endeavors to integrate web-based instruction with traditional instruction in universities” (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010, p. 49).

For the most part, when Saudi Arabian students come to the United States to get an American higher education, they are often taking online courses for the first time or they are taking them in English while they are learning English, which may pose problems.

Statement of the Problem

Online course work can be delivered in a variety of ways. The U.S. Department of Education (2012, p. 9) has shown that the “online learning can be fully online or blended with face-to-face interactions (also called hybrid).” Whether the courses are fully online (no face-to-face interaction) or hybrid (a mix of face-to-face and online interaction) not only students who are native speakers of English (NSE) take online courses, but also those who study English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL). In the United States, there are a lot of foreign students, who come from different countries to study or work. As mentioned in a report of World Education Services (2012, p. 10) about trends in international student mobility, Saudi students’ group is the fourth largest group of international students in the United States in 2011 with 43,910 students. According to Dr. Mody Alkhalaf (personal communication, October 10, 2012), Assistant Attaché for Cultural and Social Affairs in Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM), there are nearly 70,000 Saudi Arabian students currently studying in American universities in the United States. This number is expected to grow
increasingly every year, especially with the new coming students joining the scholarship program.

Although ESL and EFL learners seem to be similar because they both study a second or foreign language, there is a large difference between these two kinds of learners. Robinson, Keogh, and Kusuma-Powell (2002, para. 7) defined English as a Second Language (ESL) learners as those who are learning English in an English-speaking country (e.g., learning English in America). ESL students do not speak English as a first language, but are learning English in English-speaking countries. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are those who learn English in non-English speaking countries (e.g., learning English in Saudi Arabia). These learners have different learning needs because an ESL student is immersed in and surrounded by the target language and culture that he or she is learning. However, an EFL student is surrounded by and immersed in his or her own native language and has to take extraordinary steps to use and interact in the target language. When these ESL/EFL learners take online courses, they might have some difficulties according to different factors, such as educational systems or cultural differences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research will be to provide more research studies on the use of online learning among ESL/EFL learners, in particular Saudi Arabian English learners. It will also focus on the obstacles that these students may have when they take fully online courses. The questions for this study are: What are Saudi Arabian students’ perceptions of online learning, specifically regarding seven generally used components
(communication, course organization and design, time management, assignment, assessment, achievement, cultural differences)? To what extent do Saudi ESL students perceive these components to help or hinder them in their fully online courses at the university level? Finally, to what extent do Saudi students believe online learning can be successfully applied in Saudi Arabia?

This thesis focuses upon the importance of using the Internet for educational purposes, specifically addressing the needs of Saudi Arabian English language learners. Its focus will be on determining the difficulties, trying to find possible solutions, and using the findings and recommendations of this study and applying them to expand the use of online courses in all Saudi universities.

This topic is important not only for ESL/EFL students, but also will inform program developers, learning management system developers, professors, and English Language program teachers and administrators. Of course, ESL/EFL students want to see what kind of difficulties they may find when they take fully online courses. Instructors of these online courses would know how they could help make these students successful. Designers of the academic websites, such as Blackboard, would also share interest in this topic, because they continually work on improving these websites.

The obstacles and difficulties among ESL/EFL students taking online courses might lead to other more serious consequences, such as abandoning educational technology altogether or having their difficulties affect their GPAs when they get lower grades in these courses.

As mentioned previously, this research study would be an attempt to discover and discuss the possible obstacles that Saudi ESL/EFL students might have with fully
online courses. After determining these difficulties, there will be some recommendations to solve them. Learning about these difficulties might be used as a means of designing similar programs to be applied in Saudi Arabian universities.

Limitations of the Study

Theoretical Bases and Organization

As with any research, there are limitations to this study. University-level Saudi Arabian students studying in universities all over the world were sampled and studied. However, Saudi Arabian students represent themselves alone and any generalizations to other students learning English as a second language may not be warranted. For example, Chinese, Indian, and South Asian students may have different difficulties with online learning as they have different cultural orientations to technology, different school systems that prepare them, different languages, and different goals for learning English. Therefore, although there may be useful and generalizable results to use in ESL/EFL classrooms when preparing online learning opportunities, there may not be completely generalizable results that can be applied to all ESL/EFL students.

In addition, there are some limitations to using social media such as Facebook and Twitter for posting surveys. The loss of direct and visual communication with the participants could affect the accuracy of the results. Some participants might misunderstand questions, which would lead to wrong answers. They might also need to ask the researcher about some survey questions they think are unclear. Also some participants might not seriously deal with the survey.
Another limitation would be with the survey itself. There would be some incomplete answers. Some participants would start the survey, but would not finish it. Therefore, the first questions would have higher rates and percentages than the last ones. Moreover, some participants might not represent the target population. Some participants may have not taken fully online courses but only taken hybrid ones.

Definition of Terms and Abbreviations

- Automatically Excluding Questions: A feature provided by SurveyMonkey to exclude some participants who do not meet the survey requirements.
- CITC: Communication and Information Technology Commission.
- ‘Easy A’ Courses: Courses in which students are sure they will get a full mark.
- ESL: English as a Second Language.
- EFL: English as a Foreign Language.
- Face-to-Face Courses: Courses that require students to attend and meet with the instructors in classrooms.
- GPA: Grade Point Average.
- Haj: The pilgrimage to Mecca. It is done within ten days a year, and it is mandatory for a Muslim once in the whole life.
- Hybrid Courses: Online courses that are combined with face-to-face ones.
- IT: Information Technology.
- Kuttab: A traditional school where students, mainly children, can go and learn the Holy Quran and the Arabic language.
- NNS: Non-Native Speakers.
• NSE: Native Speakers of English.

• OL: Online Learning

• SACM: Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission.

• Umrah: Visiting Mecca to pray. It can be done at anytime with any number of visits.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of the literature will first discuss the Saudi Arabian schooling; it will show the beginnings of education in Saudi Arabia and then the modern Saudi education and how it has improved. The second part will represent the Saudi Arabian culture in general, and how it has changed, especially in the last decades; it will also show how technology has affected Saudi culture. Having discussed that, the third part will show the use of online education among Saudi students, whether they are inside or outside Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Schooling

Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by King Abdulaziz Al Saud. At that time, the kingdom was a young and a very poor country until the discovery of oil in 1938. After discovering oil, life changed suddenly within a few years. King Abdulaziz with full understanding of the importance of education paid a lot of attention to improving the country and people. There was a massive improvement anywhere in this country, social, health, education, transportation and other fields.

Before the foundation of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and establishing the modern educational system, people had a traditional teaching method called "Kuttab" in the Arabian Peninsula. Kuttab is a traditional school where students, mainly children, “can go
and learn how to read and memorize the Holy Quran” (Alabdulkareem, 2004, p. 5). They also learn how to write Arabic. There were also some traditional schools in the mosques for adults. In these schools, students learned some advanced Islamic sciences, such as Islamic economy and some religious fields of science.

After the foundation of Saudi Arabia in 1932, “education was [only] available to very few people, mostly the children of wealthy families living in the major cities” (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2012, para. 1). At that time, there was a small educational program in the whole country consisting of 12 schools with 700 students (Alamri, 2011. P. 88). However, those schools could not be considered as full-fledged elementary schools until 1939. At that time in the whole country, only 2,319 pupils were enrolled in schools (Alabdulkareem, 2004, p. 10). However, the number of schools in Saudi Arabia quickly increased, especially after the discovery of oil. In “1950 there were 365 schools educating 42,000 students” (Simmons & Simmons, 1994, as cited in Alamri, 2011, p. 88). The Saudi Ministry of Education was established in 1954 (Saudi Embassy, 2012, para 8). It includes all educational levels in Saudi Arabia. Initially, the education at that time was offered to males only, and there were no public schools offering education for females; however, there were a few private schools for girls (Al-Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p. 288). The girls’ education started in 1960, when the first elementary school for girls was opened in Riyadh (Al-Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p. 290).

In modern education in Saudi Arabia, everyone has the right of education; it has been free of charge and available for everyone, provided by the government. In fact, people were encouraged to enroll in schools, and also students were financially rewarded. That encouragement increased the number of students going to schools to learn. The
modern schooling in Saudi Arabia consists of six years of elementary and three years for each of intermediate and high school education. Nowadays, every single village has all of these three levels of schools. However, the number of these schools depends on the population of each village or city. Of course, big cities have more schools; each neighborhood has its own schools. Recently, there are 13,628 elementary schools, 7,999 middle schools, and 5,013 high schools. In addition, there are other schools for special education and also for illiterate adults. The total number of all kinds of schools in Saudi Arabia is 33,280, counting every city and village in Saudi Arabia. In these schools, there are 5,146,165 students (Ministry of Education, 2011, para. 1).

The higher education in Saudi Arabia started in the 1950s. There was a big need to establish higher education “to educate Saudi students instead of sending them abroad for education” (Alabdulkareem, 2004, p. 11). Therefore, King Saud University was established in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia, in 1957. It had only three colleges with a limited number of students. After a few years, many universities were opened only in big cities. Recently, there are 25 government universities and 30 private ones that have more than three hundred thousand students altogether (Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, 2012, para. 1). These universities and colleges are not available only in big cities, but also in small towns as well. Having branches of these universities in small towns has helped stop people from leaving and moving towards big cities.

The purposes of education policy in Saudi Arabia are (a) promoting an understanding of Islam, including the Islamic values and Islamic faith; (b) “developing constructive behavioral trends; (c) reforming society economically, socially, and culturally; and (d) preparing individuals for a useful and constructive role in society”
(Ministry of Education, 2012a, para. 3). This policy ensures the goals of higher education in Saudi Arabia, which “represent Islamic principles and values, while ensuring and complementing the general aims of the comprehensive development plan” (Saudi Arabian Information Resource, 2012, para. 2).

As a growing country, Saudi Arabia has one of the highest birth rates in the world. In Saudi Arabia, over 50% of the population is under the age of 20 (Ali, Sait, Altawil & Khan, 2003, p. 394). In the 2011 census, the population in Saudi Arabia was 28,376,355 and 19,405,685 of them are Saudis (Central Department of Statistics and Information, 2012, para. 1). Therefore, there has been a big demand for enrolling in Saudi higher education schools. Although more universities and colleges have been establishing, the capacity growth rate of these universities “doesn’t match the current growth rate in enrollment demand” (Ali, Sait, Altawil & Khan, 2003, p. 393). This means that there is a big need for other solutions that support the educational process, not only in higher education, but also from the beginning by applying more programs in public grade schools.

Modern Saudi Arabian schools have started using modern programs in terms of e-learning. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has established some programs that are related to using computers in schools by both the students and teachers, and also training teachers to apply these technological tools in improving the teaching process. One of these programs is the Jehazi project (Ministry of Education, 2012b). In this project, the MOE is enabling its staff, teachers and employees to own electronic devices, such as laptops, printers, projectors, screens, and scanners, by paying reasonable prices in the form of monthly installments (Ministry of Education, 2012b). In addition, MOE launched
the Google Educational Program in 2008. This program currently involves 1,200 schools and more than 20,000 teachers. Participants are provided with personal emails and access to office applications (Alkhalifah, 2010, p. 753). Moreover, MOE has also started a project for online teachers’ training through this website: http://www.tadreebi.com/ar/index.php (Ministry of Education, 2012c). The website offers both the technological and educational aspects of e-learning and teachers are given certificates upon successfully completing each course (Alkhalifah, 2010, p. 761). However, these programs focus on computer studies in general and training the students how to search for information and use online data. There are not any online courses yet offered for K-12 Saudi students.

Institutions of higher education have also started inserting e-learning. Saudi public universities are “beginning to embrace e-learning” (Alkhalifah, 2010, p. 763). Many programs and centers have been established to fulfill the goal of benefitting from and expanding the use of e-learning in Saudi Arabia. For example, King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals established the E-learning Centre in 2003. This center “promotes the use of the web in teaching and learning at the university using WebCT to offer integrated access to online resources by students and instructors” (Alkhalifah, 2010, p. 763). There are many other centers that facilitate the use of e-learning in Saudi higher education. Consequently, many public and private universities and colleges such as King Saud University in Riyadh, King Fahad University for Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran, Prince Mohammed bin Fahad University in Dammam, and Effat College in Jeddah have already “[taken] it upon themselves to establish e-learning as a method for augmenting the educational experiences of their
students” (Mirza, 2007, p. 6). This would be a good basis for establishing e-learning in all Saudi universities.

**Saudi Culture**

Saudi Arabia has a unique religious culture. Most of the aspects of Saudi culture are derived from an Islamic background and culture. That is, “Islam plays a central role in defining the culture, and acts as a major force in determining the social norms, patterns, traditions, obligations, privileges and practices of society” (Alsaggaf, 2004, p. 1). The official religion in Saudi Arabia is Islam (Saudi Government National Portal, 2012, para. 1), and “Saudi Arabia is [considered] the birthplace of Islam” (Kayed & Hassan, 2010, p. 395) and the home of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina. Therefore, tens of millions of Muslims, from different countries and cultures, come and visit Saudi Arabia every year to practice *Haj* and *Umrah* (Ministry of Haj, 2012, para. 2). Therefore Saudi Arabian people are familiar with many different cultures and backgrounds.

Saudi Arabia is a country that has a wide area. Most of that area is a desert. Before the oil era, people used to live in traditional houses that were made of mud or rocks in rural areas. Some Bedouin people used to live in the desert in tents. This kind of life has shaped Saudi culture. Therefore, Saudi Arabian society can be described as a closed one, except the areas that are near Mecca and Medina, like Jeddah. These areas are more open than the others. Saudi people are “ethnic Arabs” (AlAbdulkareem, 2004, p. 2), who share the same religion, which is Islam. “The typical Saudi Arab is a proud individual, confidant of his own values and culture. In addition, he is reasonable and
relatively unemotional in thought and act” (Abdul-Al, (1994) as cited in AlAbdulkareem, 2004, p. 3). In addition, Islamic culture played an important role in Saudi educational culture as mentioned before with the traditional method of teaching, which was called “Kuttab.”

After the discovery of oil, life completely changed in Saudi Arabia. New big cities were founded and the small villages became big towns. People moved from the desert and from the small villages into the big town and cities to have a modern life. “Until the 1960s, most of the population was nomadic or semi-nomadic; due to rapid economic and urban growth; more than 95 percent of the population now is settled” (Al-Ghanem, 1999, p. 28). Nowadays, people no longer live in mud-houses or tents. In general, the society in Saudi Arabia has been transformed, over the last three decades, from a traditional society to one in which life is textured by imported consumer technology. Life is completely new; the “Bedouin encampment, tent, mud-house, and camel have yielded to the city, cement house, high-rise building, dishwasher, television set, car, and all the trappings that modern technology can supply” (Elmusa, 1997, p. 354). The new life in Saudi Arabia is really amazing. Although the big cities are indeed “surrounded by vast deserts, … [they are] serviced by a network of excellent highways and airports” (Onsman, 2011, p. 520).

In their modern life, the Saudi Arabian people have many new cultural perspectives. For example, education, health, agriculture, economy, transportation, family relationships, or business has been changed throughout the history of Saudi Arabia. The whole society is being changed and now becoming more open to everyone, especially after the expansion of using technology; it has had some effects on the new Saudi culture.
Technology has changed and re-shaped the Saudi culture, especially among young people, with the wide usage of the Internet. These young generations are more “likely to use the internet” (Ali, Sait, Altawil & Khan, 2003, p. 397). Almost every Saudi house has computers, smart phones, or any kind of new technological devices. These devices are being used for many purposes. Most of these usages are for business or entertainment; however, the Internet and these new technological devices are also being used for education. These educational usages include searching the web for information, learning new languages, benefiting from online learning, and also doing other things.

Saudi educational culture has some unique characteristics. In Saudi schools, teachers usually provide the students with information. Students are not used to having workshops inside the classroom. Therefore, Saudi students are dependent (Alsaggaf, 2004, p. 10) on the teachers, because the cultural and traditional teaching method affected their expectations. They are used to receiving the information from their teachers without any noticeable negotiation (Mirza, 2007, p. 5). The assignments in Saudi schools are similar to many schools in the world; they are usually written. Students are used to answering questions in their notebooks and then having the teachers correct them.

On the other hand, American educational and cultural systems have some differences from the Saudi Arabian ones. The American educational system is highly decentralized; it is not controlled by a Ministry of Education (Al-Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p. 292). In addition, American students are used to interacting directly, thinking critically and not memorizing, studying in groups (Harrell, 2008, p. 38), asking questions, challenging their ideas, and being more independent (Al-Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p. 294). Moreover, for students in "western education, to challenge a teacher or tutor is seen
as part of the self-development process as dialogue and interaction are encouraged in the learning process” (Robinson, 1999) as cited in Liu, Liu, Lee, & Magjuka (2010, p. 179).

Unlike the American educational method, Saudi students are asked to memorize some parts of what they study. They memorize parts of the Holy Quran, poems, and also famous speeches (Alkhalifah, 2010, p. 763). The assessment method in Saudi schools has changed in the last few years. In the past, students had to pass final exams to move to the next grade, but nowadays, students move to the next grade by “continuous evaluation” (Ministry of Education, 2011, para. 3).

Components of Online Learning

Saudi schooling clearly is different from American schooling, and also Saudi educational culture is different. Therefore, these educational and cultural factors would affect Saudi students in online learning. Research shows that online learning in general is characterized by having seven main components. The seven components are: communication, course organization and design, time management, assignments, assessment, achievement, and cultural differences. In the literature review that follows, the research regarding each component is discussed, focusing upon the possible impacts on Native Speakers of English (NSE) and then on ESL students. The research overall on online learning and language learners focuses upon ESL students in general rather than upon Saudi students specifically.

Communication

In the educational field of online learning, communication is a technological means that is used for interaction; this technological means helps improve the learning
process (Al-Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p. 293). For example, online “education courses
[often] include multiple communication methods such as threaded online discussions,
video conferencing”, and email, (McAlister & Curtis, 2001, as cited in Cheng & Myles,
2003, p. 30). According to Thirunarayanan and Perez-Prado (2001, p. 131), the
communication technologies that are Web-related help students interact easily with their
teachers and also with their classmates. These communication methods showed the
importance of the communication in the use of online learning. Therefore, many of the
difficulties that students have could be related to this online component. Communication
and interaction between instructors and students is supposed to be very clear. However,
Bigelow and Walker (2004, p. 18) stated that “one issue that surfaced for some students
… was that the online course did not provide enough interaction with the instructor of the
course” (Choi & Park, 2006, p. 321). The lack of interaction impacts the students’
performance. So instructors of online courses “should be aware of the importance of
communication and interaction with students and [also] prepare for enhanced facilitation
during course planning” (Choi & Park, 2006, p. 321).

Online courses have different means for communication and interaction
between the instructors and students. Communication is enhanced with the “maximum
use of the interactive electronic bulletin board with threaded discussions” (Cheng &
Myles, 2003, p. 29). Other communication means could be online chat rooms, personal
emails, or course emails.

Some students have mentioned that they prefer taking online courses because
they can have more chances to participate in discussion than classroom-based ones.
Nittaya Campbell (2007, p. 39) reported that some ESL students suffer from being
intimidated in face-to-face courses by some native speakers of English, who dominate the
discussions. In addition, Campbell (2007, p. 37) stated that Asian ESL students might
feel uncomfortable in a discussion because “the mode of communication is a rather alien
concept for them.” They might also feel a “sense of marginalization, or, sometimes even
alienation,” (Shattuck, 2005) as cited in Liu, Liu, Lee, & Magjuka (2010, p. 177). These
studies were done on Asian ESL students; therefore, these Asian ESL students try to find
some solutions for their problems by switching from face-to-face classes to online ones.

Course Organization and Design

There are websites or e-learning software programs that have been widely
used in most of the colleges and universities, such as Blackboard, WebCT, or Moodle.
They provide universities or any other educational users with many facilities and usages.
These programs are supposed to be designed in a good manner to help achieve
educational goals. They are designed to “enhance the quality of learning experience and

One of the main usages of these programs is to create an environment that
enables communication between the university staff, faculty members, students, and any
other users of these programs. These programs can also be used for all course methods,
such as face-to-face, hybrid, or fully online courses. Instructors have full access to
choose, create, or edit the components of their courses. To fulfill higher expectations, it is
very important for instructors or “course designers to keep positive during the design
process—to keep looking forward to new possibilities” (Cheng & Myles, 2003, p. 37).
There are many choices from which instructors can create their course rubrics. These
courses can be classified and evaluated according to their components. For example, the
Chico State website provides a Rubric for Online Instruction (ROI). This rubric helps instructors create high quality online courses. This rubric has three levels, baseline, effective, and exemplary (California State University, Chico, 2009, para. 1). In addition, online “education courses should include multiple communication methods such as threaded online discussions, video conferencing (if available) and printed materials for optimal learning” (McAlister & Curtis, 2001 as cited in Cheng and Myles, 2003, p. 30).

Since the instructors have the opportunity to include or exclude what they want in their courses, the online courses vary according to how they have been designed. The online courses are expected to be well designed. Instructors also are expected to provide their students, especially ESL students, with clear requirements and directions for their online courses. They should “not assume that such information is obvious or readily available to non-native students” (Tan, Nabb, & Aagard, 2010, p. 13).

Students, especially ESL students, who have courses with poorly designed pages, might have more obstacles than exemplary ones. Having poor course rubrics might also confuse ESL students. There might be some challenges, such as cultural difficulties or language barriers that prevent ESL students from learning through online courses. Therefore, the “instructional designers should anticipate and consider the possibility of cultural differences in students, and incorporate diversity and cultural understanding into lesson plans” (Tan et al., 2010, p. 13).

Time Management

Time management is a key factor in online courses. Taking online courses might help students manage their times. Some of them might prefer taking online courses while they have their own jobs or businesses. However, students may still have some
troubles managing their times when they take fully online courses. Therefore, they should pay a lot of attention when they deal with some online activities, such as posting assignments or doing quizzes. Managing the students’ time with online courses can be effective in different ways, such as submitting assignments, being available during video meetings, or finishing quizzes and tests on time. Not only NES students suffer from this issue, but also ESL students may also have the same problems. A study about international ESL graduate students showed that three participants of that study conveyed some difficulties with effective time management (Tan et al., 2010, p. 12). Tan et al., (2010, p. 13), also emphasized that “Syllabi should be detailed to include … suggestions and other information to help with time management.” That means the more organization the courses have the more comfort the students feel with these courses. Courses should have flexibility.

Assignments

Assignments are important components in either face-to-face or online courses. However, students who take fully online courses might have more difficulties, especially in the absence of visual interaction with instructors. The importance comes from the possible effects on their grades. There are some factors that might cause these effects, such as having a course that has a lot of students. Nittaya Campbell (2007, p. 39) showed in her study that “with 45 students, the instructor did not have time to respond adequately”.

ESL students may also have some difficulties dealing with their online assignments. Dr. Fujuan Tan, a doctoral candidate in Adult Learning and Post-Secondary Education at the University of Wyoming, talked about her own reflections on online
learning. She described when she first took an online course, and said that she was worried about submitting assignments electronically. She continued and described how she felt about it and said “feeling I was submitting them to ‘nowhere’, I asked several other students about the online submission process, submitted most assignments twice, and e-mailed the instructor to make sure assignments were received” (Tan, 2009, p. 39). This experience gives a clear image of possible problems that students could have when they deal with their online assignments.

Assessment

Online assessment may present difficulties that are different from traditional face-to-face experiences that ESL students have had. Similar to the possible difficulties of how and when students submit their assignments and also how they manage their time, it could also be difficult for them to manage their online tests or quizzes. Similarly, previously discussed difficulties could cause this possible impact on student assessment. Students usually do not have choices of how they are assessed. It is the instructor’s choice. The components of the courses should be “flexible enough to allow the students and instructors to choose their own learning and teaching styles as the course progresses.” (Liu, Lin, Lee, & Magjuka, 2010, p. 178). However, the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission requires the Saudi ESL students to earn higher grades in order to maintain their scholarships. This might put them under pressure, because they would be struggling to get higher grades. They can do their best and consult their peers, roommates, or friends on how to solve some of these assessment problems.

Another assessment issue could be related to how the instructor deals with the course and his/her students. The instructor needs to be innovative and “use different
teaching strategies and to develop alternative assessments, such as portfolios, projects, and problem-solving activities” (Choi & Park, 2006, p. 321). When the instructor assesses the students, he/she should be as clear as possible. However, it might not be easy for instructors to administer an online exam because they do their work outside the classroom and answer the questions when they are at home (Choi & Park, 2006, p. 320). It might not be easy for instructors to accurately assess students since they can easily access course materials and textbooks at home. In addition, cultural styles might play an important role in how ESL students are assessed. For example, many Asian students reported that they are familiar with an “exam-oriented culture”, which has a final exam, more than the American “process-oriented” one (Liu et al., 2010, p. 185).

**Achievement**

The general meaning of achievement is very broad. There are many definitions for achievement depending on the field in which it is used. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2012, para. 1) has many definitions of achievement; the Merriam-Webster defined it as “a result gained by effort,” “a great or heroic deed,” or “the quality and quantity of a student's work”. It could be also defined as “learning effects” (Wang, Wang, Wang & Huang, 2006, p. 211) that are measured after taking exit tests. These tests would help “determine whether or not [students] have achieved the learning outcome” (Anderson, 2008, p. 21).

In online learning, there are some research studies that state that there is not a noticeable difference in achievement between classroom-based courses and online learning (Thirunarayanan, & Perez-Prado, 2001, p. 131) (Shimazu, 2005, p. 31). A quantitative study done on by Thirunarayanan and Perez-Prado (2001, p. 135) concludes
that students in online courses “learned slightly but not significantly more than students in the classroom-based section of the course.” This study was done on English speakers taking online and classroom-based courses. In addition, some research studies have, hypothesized that the addition of images, graphics, audio, video or some combination [into online learning] would enhance student learning and positively affect achievement. However, the majority of studies to date have found that these media features do not affect learning outcomes significantly. (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 39)

These research studies were mainly discussing English speakers’ achievement when taking online courses. However, there might be a need for more studies of ESL learners taking online courses to see the differences in their achievement.

Cultural Differences

Cultural differences play an important role in ESL students’ educational lives. There would be a number of difficulties related to culture. Many researchers have dealt with this issue and explained how cultural differences could impact ESL students. For example, some ESL learners were discouraged to participate in online interaction (Murugaiah & Thang, 2010, p. 34). They had some “fear of facing an unknown audience” (Murugaiah & Thang, 2010, p. 36). This fear could happen because of the lack of online practice. For example, online courses in Saudi Arabia are not as widely used as in the U.S.; therefore, some Saudi students, when they first enroll in American universities, might have a similar cultural problem.

In a study examining International ESL Graduate Student Perceptions of Online Learning, Tan, Nabb, Aagard, and Kim (2010, p. 11) reported that “all [participants] agreed that both language and culture differences presented formidable challenges in online learning situations and all [of them] avoided taking more than one
online course at a time (or per semester) because of these challenges.” These cultural
differences could become a scary obsession for ESL students. Moreover, these
participants believe that the challenges come from cultural traditions of “striving for
perfection to avoid shame” (Tan et al., 2010, p. 12). In addition, some teachers judged
ESL students to have “fewer acting-out, and more shy/anxious and learning problems
than non-ESL ones” (Spomer & Cowen, 2001, p. 71). Therefore, these difficulties of
being shy or less active in the classrooms may point out the importance of having more
“flexibility” to incorporate culture when designing online courses (Liu et al., 2010, p.
177).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Investigation

Since the Literature Review revealed seven components of online learning that ESL/EFL students might face when taking fully online courses, this research study continues the work to see to what extent these components might help or hinder Saudi ESL students when they take fully online courses. It also investigates whether these components influence Saudi ESL students. The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions: What are Saudi Arabian students’ perceptions of online learning, specifically regarding seven generally used components (communication, course organization and design, time management, assignment, assessment, achievement, and cultural differences)? To what extent do Saudi ESL students perceive these components to help or hinder them in their fully online courses at university level? Finally, to what extent do Saudi students believe online learning can be successfully applied in Saudi Arabia?

Population

The population under investigation is Saudi students, who are taking/have taken fully online courses. The number of participants who clicked on the link and started the survey is 1,971. Of that number, 1,887 of them declared that they agreed to do the
survey. However, not all of these 1,887 finished the survey; only 709 participants completed the whole survey. The reason for selecting this population is that they represent the future aim of this study, which is finding possible ways for improving and expanding the use of online learning in Saudi universities.

The demographic information in pages 2 and 3 of the survey represents all of those who started the survey ($n=1,887$). These Saudi students are not only studying/ have studied in the United States, but there were also many other Saudi participants in this study, who are studying/have studied in many different countries. These countries are United States of America, England, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Saudi Arabia. There was an option for those who studied/ are studying in other countries. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of participants are studying/have studied in the United States of America. The average age of the participants was 23-27 years old (Figure 2). Most of them were male students (Figure 3). The majority of them have a high level of education; most of them were seniors and master’s students (Figure 4). Therefore, about 94% of them mentioned that they have either intermediate or advanced language abilities (Figure 5). In addition, about two thirds of them have a GPA higher than 3.0 (Figure 6). In terms of the number of online courses being taken/ have been taken, these students mentioned that they are taking/have taken between 1-2 online courses (Figure 7).

Treatment

The Instrument

Surveys are considered to be an appropriate tool to collect data for large populations. They have many advantages, such as producing “data based on real-world
observation”, producing “large amounts of data in a short time”, and having a broad coverage (Kelley, Clark, Brown, & Sitzia, 2003, p. 262). Surveys provide researchers with very efficient means to collect data in a “short time with little cost” (Dornyei, 2003, as cited in MacKay, 2006, p. 38). Therefore, I chose to use a survey because it would help me collect data. It would be very hard to collect data from variable samples of Saudi students who are studying in many different countries. Moreover, using surveys would be faster than interviews, because interviews require more time to collect enough data, and also require arranging conducive times for both the interviewer and participants. In addition, it is easier to conduct and analyze surveys, especially with survey websites, like SurveyMonkey, that provide the researchers with many advanced methods of electronic analysis. On the other hand, providing “unreliable information” (MacKay, 2006, p. 37) would be a disadvantage of using the surveys. Mackay pointed out the participants might report what they think they should report (2006, p. 38).

The survey was designed with only closed-ended questions. The main items of the survey were designed in likert-scale, which is “one of the most popular formats of closed-ended questions” (MacKay, 2006, p. 38). The participants were asked to rate the items according to their preferences and interests. In each item there were five choices. They were Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), I Don’t Know (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5).

The survey consisted of 30 questions regarding the seven components of online learning (communication, course organization and design, time management, assignment, assessment, achievement, cultural differences). For each component, a minimum of three questions to a maximum of six questions was designed.
Demographic information about participants’ age, gender, education level, English proficiency, and their GPA were asked at the beginning of the survey. Participants were also asked about educational information, such as the number of online courses they had taken, their grade points for these courses, or countries in which these courses had been taken. The questions following represented the main body of the survey that included questions about online learning. There were 30 questions that were carefully designed to investigate the participants’ points of view regarding online learning, specifically their perceptions of the seven components discussed in the literature review.

There were five final questions that asked about online learning in Saudi universities. It consisted of five statements asking the participants about their perceptions and expectations for the uses of and the values of applying online learning in Saudi universities. For example, items in the survey said, “I would like to have more OL (online learning) courses offered in Saudi Universities,” “Online learning in Saudi Universities can be offered in both Arabic and English,” and “I feel it would be very difficult to offer online learning in Saudi Universities.”

Procedure

In order to explore the Saudi students’ perceptions towards online learning and to collect the data for this study, the survey was administered online and was designed using SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey is an advanced website that provides researchers with web-based survey solutions. There were two places in which the survey was posted. The first one was posted on Facebook groups for Saudi students’ associations for those who are studying in the United States. The second place, where the survey was
posted, was my personal Twitter account and also some of my friends’ Twitter accounts. I decided to use various means of social networking to post the survey in order to reach
the target number. Most of the target students use either Facebook or Twitter, or both.

An informed consent was obtained before posting this survey. At the start of
the survey the participants were asked to agree or disagree to participate in the survey
with the knowledge that it was anonymous. Additionally, the consent informed them that
the information was being used in a study, but the survey would not identify individuals.
If the participant agreed, he/she was able to see the rest of the survey. If a participant did
not agree, he/she would be automatically moved to the end of the survey.

Testing and Piloting Survey

Before posting the survey on Facebook and Twitter, I tested and piloted it. Piloting the survey was done using the Cognitive Interviews, which are “one-on-one
interviews that explore the way in which individuals mentally process information as they
respond to questionnaires” (Garcia, 2011, p. 445).

According to Garcia (2011, p. 445), the Cognitive Interviews are
recommended for use “to identify potential difficulties in surveys.” In addition, using the
interviews can help identify “problems in item interpretation, memory retrieval, decision
processes, and response selection”. Moreover, Cognitive Interviews also “afford the
opportunity to detect other problems in questionnaire instructions, design, and
organization,” (Willis, 2005, as cited in Garcia, 2011, p. 445). In this survey, using
Cognitive Interviews was essential to discover potential problems, because it was my first
attempt to create and use such big surveys.
These interviews helped me see the weaknesses and any possible mistakes, and also “ensure that they work with all respondents” (Priede, Ruuskanen, Jokinen, & Farrall, 2010, p. 2). In these interviews, I arranged a meeting with a group of Saudi students, who are taking/have taken online courses through Chico State. These students were also very similar to those whom I recruited for my survey. I sat down with them and went over the whole survey. We discussed the questions one by one. For each question, I asked them about their choices to discover why they selected them in order to ensure that the survey items were valid. I also asked them about the construction of the survey, whether it was appropriate for diverse participants, keeping in mind that there would be different levels of language ability among the participants. In addition, I asked them about the simplicity and validity of the questions. I wanted to make sure that the questions would be clear for everybody.

In fact, I received much valuable feedback from these interviews, which helped me in editing and reconstructing the survey. For example, during the Cognitive Interviews, we read a question that asked about the English ‘proficiency’. Some of them complained that the word ‘proficiency’ might be ambiguous for beginners; they might not understand what I mean by this word, and it might lead to wrong answers. Therefore, I changed the question and made it very simple; I asked how well they speak, read, and write in English. Moreover, together we fixed the construction of many questions; for example, a question that asked “I feel that I cannot take OL because of the slow Internet connection” was changed to “I feel that the Internet access ability would affect taking OL courses”. The question was changed because the word ‘Internet access ability’ describes the problem better than the ‘slow Internet connection.’
Data Analysis Procedures

Posting the survey and collecting the data were done over the beginning of fall semester 2012. The survey was posted for three weeks. When the survey was closed, the data was downloaded for analysis. The data information was compiled in tables to identify the mean and the mode. I used two formats to review the results; they are Excel spreadsheet and PDF format. The question results for each component were collected. For example, perception results for Communication were collected through four questions. Two means were calculated to arrive at a response that indicated that the participant had a positive perception of the component or a negative perception toward the component. The positive perception mean was calculated by adding up the percentages for Strongly Agree and Agree together. The negative response was calculated by averaging the percentages for Strongly Disagree and Disagree.

I read all the responses and looked across the average of these responses to see what the highest and lowest rates were, and also to reach the highest accuracy. To compile the results, all of the survey questions were divided according to the seven components that are mentioned previously in the Literature Review. In the analysis, I first combined the “agree” responses together (Agree and Strongly Agree), and also combined the “disagree” ones together (Disagree and Strongly Disagree). (I did not calculate the ‘I Don’t Know’ items). After that, I calculated the sum of each these two categories of response options, followed by the percentage. The mode was then identified, indicating the most frequently marked response.

In the data analysis, I decided to use the terms “obstacle” or “not obstacle” instead of “agree” and “disagree.” As I mentioned before, the body of the survey
consisted of 30 questions. I used the Likert-scale, which uses the terms of “strongly disagree and disagree” and also “strongly agree and agree.” When I started analyzing the data, I combined and interpreted them as “agree” and “disagree”, but I decided to use “obstacle” and “not obstacle.” The reason of this choice is because the “agree” and “disagree” terms could interchangeably have different explanations in the survey questions. In the interpretation, I was only looking at one side, the online learning aspect. The negative statements towards online learning were described as “obstacles.” The positive statements towards online learning were described as “not obstacles.” To illustrate, the choices ‘agree’ could be positive in some statements and also negative in others. This depends on how the statements were designed. For example, in statement number 15 ‘agree’ could be interpreted as negative, which meant it was an obstacle. On the other hand, in statement number 18 ‘agree’ could be interpreted as positive, which meant it was not an obstacle. Therefore, if the participants chose negative responses towards online learning, whether these responses were “agreed” or “disagreed,” they were interpreted as “obstacles,” and vice versa.

This analysis of the data of this survey would be an attempt to answer the research questions, and also offer some solutions to help Saudi students improve themselves and learn better. Some recommendations could be provided for wider use of online courses in Saudi Arabian universities or to improve the current usage.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to answer the following questions: What are Saudi Arabian students’ perceptions of online learning, specifically regarding seven generally used components (communication, course organization and design, time management, assignment, assessment, achievement, cultural differences)? To what extent do Saudi ESL students perceive these components to help or hinder them in their fully online courses at university level? Finally, to what extent do Saudi students believe online learning can be successfully applied in Saudi Arabia? In this chapter, the demographic information on the students (n=709), the results of the questions related to the 7 components, and the results of the five general questions regarding online learning in Saudi Arabia are discussed.

Demographic Information

The beginning of the survey, questions 2-12, contained demographic questions. These questions give an image of who was interested more in online learning (OL), and who took more online courses. The following statistics and figures reveal some interesting results.

The largest percentage of the participants, with 42.1%, were studying or had studied in the United States (see Figure 1)
Figure 1. The countries where the participants study.

In Figures 2, 3, and 4 that discussed the educational level, language ability, and GPA, we could see how mature, proficient, and serious the participants were. It is noticeable that the majority of students, who were taking/had taken fully online courses, were at a high educational level. There were 40.6% of Masters students and 21% were seniors. Also, only 6% of the participants had low language abilities. They described themselves as beginners; the majority was advanced and intermediate. In addition, two thirds of the participants had high GPAs; they were 3.0 or above.

Figure 2. The participants’ educational level.
Results of the Seven Components

The results of the questions regarding the seven components (communication, course organization and design, time management, assignments, assessment,
achievement, cultural differences) are presented here. The analysis of these questions, numbers 13-42, is divided according these seven components.

Communication

In the survey, there were four questions (16, 19, 25, and 41) that addressed communication. Participants were asked whether communication would be an obstacle or not. The average of these four questions showed that 63.7% thought that there would be some difficulties with communication. Twenty-six percent of the participants thought that there would not be any difficulties regarding communication (see Figure 5). For example, one of these four questions, question number 16, asked the participants if personal interaction with the instructor and classmates in classroom-based courses makes them feel more comfortable than in OL. There were 68.8% of the participants who agreed with this question while 24.8% disagreed. Another question, number 19, asked the participants if they could communicate and interact with the instructor and classmates in classroom-based courses more than in OL. Sixty-five point nine percent of them agreed with this statement while 26% disagreed. These two examples show that the participants feel more comfortable and could better interact in classroom-based courses than online ones. In addition, the cultural backgrounds of these Saudi students might impact their choices in this survey, because almost two thirds of them stated that communication is an obstacle.

Course Organization and Design

In this category, there were three questions (18, 27, and 33) that asked whether the design and organization of the courses would be a problem for students. The average of these questions showed that this category would not be a big problem. Thirty-five point seven percent think it would be an obstacle, while 50.7% stated that it would
not be (see Figure 6). For example, the question number 33 gave the participants this statement “I prefer classroom-based courses more because the website design in OL confuses me.” Twenty-nine point six percent agreed that the website design in OL was confusing. In contrast, 57% showed that the design would not be confusing.

**Figure 5.** The average of Communication’s questions.

**Figure 6.** The average of Course Organization and Design’s questions.
**Time Management**

This component was measured by six questions. Interestingly, the average of these questions got a high percentage. Sixty-five point eighty-three percent showed that time management would not be an obstacle. Only 20.15% felt that it would be a minor problem (see Figure 7). As examples of being not obstacles, questions number 23 and 36 stated that OL gives more chances to take classes and also works well with their schedules. In these two questions, 62.8% and 79.6% of the participants agreed, while 19.8% and 13.1% disagreed.

![Time Management Chart](chart.png)

*Figure 7.* The average of Time Management’s questions.

**Assignments**

The results of this component did not show a big difference between the two choices of agree or disagree. The average of the results had a close percentage for the two choices. However, the average of those who announced assignments as an obstacle was 43.37% while 39.42% stated that online assignments would have some problems (see
Figure 8). For example, when question 22 asked the participants if they get more feedback on their assignments in classroom-based courses than OL, 45.4% agreed and showed that they did not get more feedback in OL. That would affect them and hinder their progress. On the other hand, 41.5% thought that they got more feedback in OL assignments, which would encourage them to have more online courses. In a question asking the participants about the online submission of their assignments, 47.5% mentioned that they prefer online submission rather than handing them in classroom-based courses.

![Figure 8. The average of Assignment’s questions.](image)

**Assessments**

The average of this component showed that participants chose it as “not obstacle” with 55.76%, while 32.5% chose it as an “obstacle” (see Figure 9). For example, 53.4% of the participants in question number 17 chose that online courses are less serious than the classroom-based ones while 37.3% thought the opposite. The
seriousness could be a result of the difficulty of classroom-based tests and quizzes. Besides, having more flexibility in OL tests and quizzes could give the feeling of being less serious. However, those students who took online courses mentioned in question number 20 that they could do better in their tests and quizzes in OL than classroom-based courses. More than half, 55.6% participants thought in this case it would not be an obstacle and 26.4% stated that they have more problems with classroom-based courses than online ones.

**Achievement**

This component had six questions. They are 14, 26, 28, 32, 34, and 42. Unlike most of the previous components, 51.8% of participants thought that achievement would be an obstacle in online learning. However, 31% stated that they were able to achieve more through online courses (see Figure 10). Some questions revealed how this category

*Figure 9. The average of Assessment’s questions.*
Figure 10. The average of Achievement’s questions.

would be an obstacle for Saudi students. For example, in question number 14 there was a statement saying that classroom-based courses were easier than Online Learning (OL) courses. In this question, 44.3% agreed, while 39.7% disagreed, which means that many of these students could achieve more in classroom-based courses than OL courses. In addition, in question number 26, that had this statement, “I believe that I learn more through OL than through classroom-based courses,” 54.9% of the participants stated that they disagreed with it. Only 28.2% believed that they could learn more through OL courses.

Cultural Differences:

Within four questions (21, 31, 37, and 38), the average of the participants stated that this component was “not obstacle” with a percentage 46.8%, while 38.7%
chose it as an obstacle (see Figure 11). Some questions dealt with different cultural issues. For example, question number 21 gave this statement “I feel that the cultural differences affected my performance and achievement in OL.” In this question, 40.2% disagreed and stated that there were not any cultural problems with OL courses and 35.6% felt that the cultural differences affected their performance in OL courses. In addition, question number 37 focused on the shyness and the ability to ask questions during the classroom-based courses. While 51.8% stated that they felt more comfortable asking questions in the OL course than in classroom-based courses, 36.1% stated that did not feel shy and were more confident to ask questions in classroom-based courses.

By looking at the average of the responses in Table 1, we can see which components were chosen as obstacles for Saudi students when taking fully online courses. Five of the seven components were chosen as not obstacles. Interestingly, we

Figure 11. The average of Cultural Differences’ questions.
Table 1

*The Percentages of the Result of the Survey Components*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Obstacle (%)</th>
<th>Not Obstacle (%)</th>
<th>Obstacle (%)</th>
<th>Not Obstacle (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Communication</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td><strong>63.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>26</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Course Design and Organization</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Time Management</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>20.15</td>
<td>65.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>62.8</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>56.4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>79.6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Assignments</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>39.42</td>
<td>43.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>44.3</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>47.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>40.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>5- Assessment</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>55.76</td>
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<tr>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>55.6</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6- Achievement</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td><strong>51.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>31</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>28.2</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>35.4</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>16.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7- Cultural Difference</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>37</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>51.8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>36.3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
can also notice that the participants chose communication and achievement as obstacles. I think the cultural and educational background had affected the choice of these two categories. How Saudi students used to communicate and interact with the instructor and classmates in Saudi schools, and also how they are used to receiving and gaining knowledge could have impacted them.

**Online Learning in Saudi Universities**

The last part of the survey contained specific questions about the current and future use of OL in Saudi universities. It consisted of five questions, numbers 43-47. In a statement asking about the desire to have more OL offered in Saudi universities, 69.9% agreed. As mentioned before, OL is offered in Saudi Arabia for a limited number of courses. Therefore, 64.7% of the participants stated that they agreed to the statement that all majors in Saudi universities should have OL. However, there were some close opinions regarding the difficulty of applying OL in Saudi universities. In the statement that said “I feel that it would be very difficult to offer OL in Saudi universities,” 44.3% of the participants disagreed to it, while 37.8% felt that it would really be very difficult to offer OL in Saudi universities. Moreover, 69.3% stated that they agreed to the idea that offering OL in Saudi universities would make it easier and more popular and 80.9% stated that OL could be offered in both Arabic and English.

**Discussion of the Findings**

After presenting the statistics and findings, it is important to discuss them. There will be a discussion for the demographic results, the seven components, and then the use of OL in Saudi universities.
In the demographic information, there were some interesting results. For example, having 42.1% of the participants in the United States would be reasonable, because there are currently about 70,000 students studying in the United States (Alkhalaf, October 10, 2012). In addition, having 11.6% of the participants from Saudi Arabia would show the increase of using online learning there, and also could interpret the strong desire of having more OL offered in Saudi Universities. Moreover, the statistics that showed the educational level, language ability, and GPA could tell how mature, proficient, and serious the participants were.

Interestingly, two of the seven components were chosen as “obstacles” for Saudi students in fully online courses. These two were communication and achievement. The questions about communication asked about personal interaction and the comfort level they feel, and the amount of opportunities for face-to-face communication. Achievement meant “the quality and quantity of a student's work” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2012, para. 1). The questions about achievement (14, 26, 28, 32, 34, and 42) asked about the difficulty of learning, the ability to learning more, getting higher grades, increasing the practical expertise, and the role of competition in increasing knowledge. These questions were designed to measure how these components could affect the perception of Saudi students toward online learning.

Saudi students are used to having specific ways of communication and interaction with their teachers, and also how they achieve knowledge and receive information from their teachers. First, Saudi students in their educational system and also their learning culture are generally used to having one-way interactions with their teachers. For example, in the classroom, the Saudi instructor speaks and lectures and the
students are expected to just listen and take notes; they do not argue or have debates with the teachers. There are not noticeable negotiations in the classrooms (Mirza, 2007, p. 5).

Also, Saudi students depend on their teachers as a main source for getting information (Alsaggaf, 2004, p. 10).

Second, Saudi students are used to having educational methods that depend on memorizing (Alkhalifah, 2010, p. 763); they memorize many different pieces of knowledge in many fields, such as verses of the Quran, poems, and even some mathematical rules. In addition, unlike Asian ESL students, who had problems with face-to-face communication (Campbell, 2007, p. 37) and (Shattuck, 2005) as cited in Liu, Liu, Lee, & Magjuka (2010, p. 177), Saudi Arabian students did not have such problems. Saudi Arabian students, with their high-context culture, prefer to communicate face-to-face, live together, and interact a lot. Therefore, it is reasonable why these two components, communication and achievement, were addressed as “obstacles.” The loss of face-to-face interaction with the teacher and also classmates in online learning led these Saudi students to feel uncomfortable with online learning. There are some differences between Saudi and American students. The American students, as mentioned in the literature review, are used to asking questions, challenging their ideas, and being more independent (Al-Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p. 294).

Although these two components were addressed as obstacles, they might not be described as permanent problems. Applying some of the recommendations in chapter 5 would help eliminate the effects of these two components.

On the other hand, there were five components that were addressed as “not obstacles.” These five components were Time Management, Course Design and
Organization, Assignments, Assessment, and Cultural Differences. The general reasons of why these five components were addressed as “not obstacles” for Saudi students could be related to being familiar with the use of technology. Saudi students have enough money and the resources to have computers or any technological devices needed for their study. Moreover, Saudi students are very familiar with new technological practices and devices. Most of Saudi families have computers; they are familiar with the use of the Internet (Ali, Sait, Altawil & Khan, 2003, p. 393). In addition, Saudi schools have started using and applying many technological programs that train the teachers and students how to use computers for educational purposes (Solution.org, 2011). Also, students, who do not have enough money to buy computers, still can use the free computer labs on university campuses. Therefore, it was very logical why the participants addressed these components as being “not obstacles.” However, more specific discussions will be provided for each component.

In Course Design and Organization, some questions had higher percentages for being “not obstacle.” I think this shows great improvements that universities’ websites have had. It also shows the hard work that the Information Technology staff has done to make these websites clear and easy to use. As shown in the literature review, the educational culture of using technology among Saudi students (Ali, Sait, Altawil & Khan, 2003, p. 393) might help them deal with the websites and computers.

In time management, only one fifth chose this component as an obstacle. I think that Saudi students chose so because they have scholarships and are supposed to finish their study within a specific time. Besides, some of these students have families; therefore, they have to accurately manage their times. For example, when a question
asked if online learning gives the students more time to take care of family and themselves, 77.4% of them agreed with this statement. Moreover, some statements telling that OL gives more opportunities to take classes and also works well with the schedules got high percentage for not being an obstacle. These results would show the big pressure that these students have in terms of time.

Assignments were not obviously addressed as obstacles. There was not a large difference in the percentages of being obstacles or not. I think these results also show how Saudi students are familiar with the online activities. In addition, getting more feedback from the instructors in online courses could show how these instructors seriously deal with these online courses.

In assessments, the participants addressed this component as a not obstacle. I think the reason of choosing it as not obstacle could be because some students, not only ESL ones, might have more chance to cheat in online quizzes and tests. Although this interpretation could be negative, it is assumed that some students are sharing the answers of some online tests and quizzes.

In the cultural differences component, participants chose to address it as not an obstacle. There could be some interpretations for the reasons, but I think the most possible reason could be the feeling of shyness (Spomer & Cowen, 2001, p. 71). Having low language abilities might lead to this shyness. However, some participants showed that they were confident enough to interact and ask questions in classroom-based courses.

In the part of offering OL in Saudi universities, there were high percentages that agree with the possibility of it. As mentioned before in the literature review, OL is already offered in Saudi Arabia but only for a limited numbers of courses. That would
explain the high percentage of choosing OL to be offered in all majors in Saudi universities. In addition, the language ability and also cultural dignity could be a factor in preferring OL offered in the Arabic language in Saudi universities. However, those who agreed with the statement of offering OL in Arabic also agreed to the next one that said, “OL in Saudi universities can be offered in both Arabic and English.” I think they agreed to the idea of offering OL in both languages in Saudi universities because the majority of the participants had high language abilities, as shown in the demographic results, and also because they had tried OL outside Saudi Arabia in a different language.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The demand for using and applying more educational and technological services is increasing. Online Learning is more likely to becoming the dominant educational means in the near future. The research in this study shows that the use of online learning has been increasing (Moloney & Oakley, 2010, page 63; Young, 2005). Thousands of universities and also millions of students are using online learning all over the world. However, there is still a big need for more online learning in some parts of the world, and some countries have not started yet using online learning. Other countries are only using specific types of online learning, like distance learning.

This study was an attempt to reveal the need of applying more online services in Saudi Arabian universities and colleges. In Saudi universities, there are some types of online learning, but some improvements and wide usages of online learning are still in demand.

In this study, the following research questions were investigated: What are Saudi Arabian students’ perceptions of online learning, specifically regarding seven generally used components (communication, course organization and design, time management, assignment, assessment, achievement, cultural differences)? To what extent
do Saudi ESL students perceive these components to help or hinder them in their fully online courses at the university level? Finally, to what extent do Saudi students believe online learning can be successfully applied in Saudi Arabia?

This study first showed the cultural and educational background that Saudi students have, and then showed the seven components of online learning and how Saudi students perceive them. To fulfill the goal of this study, a survey was carefully created by using SurveyMonkey. It was piloted by using the Cognitive Interviews (Garcia, 2011, p. 445), and then posted on social media websites. The data was collected and carefully analyzed. The results were used for providing some recommendations for more usage and improvement of online learning in Saudi universities.

Conclusions

During posting the survey and collecting the data, I discovered that these Saudi students had a strong desire to have more online learning offered in Saudi universities. Many Saudi students, who are studying/have studied outside Saudi Arabia, were very interested in applying this technological means in Saudi universities. I also discovered that some students thought that online learning could be less serious than classroom-based courses. This point of view could be a stereotypical image that needs to be treated.

Generally, the Saudi educational system used traditional teaching methods, especially in grade schools. Recently, there have been some new changes and improvements in higher education with the trend of applying distance learning. However, it is still limited. I think it is the time for a technological explosion. As mentioned in the
literature review, there is a large use of many new technological devices, especially among the younger generations. These younger students should be educated by using a new technological system that is suitable for them. It is their future.

Recommendations

The stages of designing, creating, and analyzing the content of this study provided me with a lot of experience regarding online learning. Based on the findings of this study, and also on my personal previous and new experiences as an ESL Saudi student, I would have some recommendations that could be used by both the Ministry of Education and the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, and also by their faculty members. These recommendations could be categorized within four themes. These themes are university infrastructure, program quality, faculty development, and students’ support.

University Infrastructure

Some recommendations would be very important to build university infrastructures. These recommendations would be mainly towards improving the online learning project. I recommend that universities buy or create professional programs to be used in the university’s portal. These programs would be the structure of online learning in university websites. In addition, I recommend that universities establish some supporting departments. Saudi universities already have Information Technology (IT) offices that take care of all the technological problems in the university, such as computer operating systems, telephones, wireless network, and any electronic and technological devices. However, universities should adopt a Technology Learning Program (TLP), or
any similar program, that takes care of the learning management programs, such as Blackboard. TLP is also responsible for the training of faculty and students, arranging teaching workshops, facilitating faculty development, or creating programs.

Program Quality

In program quality, I would recommend that online learning be accredited in the same way that the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) accredited the traditional classroom-based learning. In addition, I would recommend that new improvements be inserted into the curriculum to make it compatible with applying online learning. To avoid any potential problems, universities should begin a gradual applying of online learning in elective courses in higher education and high schools, and then increase its use. Online learning should be first applied to a sample population before applying it to the whole institution. It would be very important to use online learning as an alternative, not as a replacement for traditional classroom instruction. Besides, universities should increase the research in the online learning field with experimental studies. After applying online learning, the experiment of using online learning should be evaluated regularly in terms of inserting new improvements and updates, if needed.

Faculty Development

There are some recommendations that would be under faculty development. I recommend that faculty have some advanced preparation programs and continuous workshops about online learning. It is very important to encourage the faculty members to start using online learning, and provide rewards for those who effectively apply it. In addition, I recommend that faculty members take some English courses if the courses
would be given in English. Also, faculty should be encouraged to keep up with new updates in the field of educational technology. Most importantly, faculty members should be aware of some religious and cultural issues when contacting female students by using e-mail or a course page, during the online courses.

Students’ Support

Students are the main target in the whole process. Therefore, I recommend that students should be provided with high quality training programs to enable them to take online courses without any problems. In addition, students should be given some English courses to be proficient enough to deal with online learning if the courses would be provided in English. Students should be also encouraged to enroll in online courses, but they also should be informed that these courses are alternatives; they should be informed that they could take a limited number of online courses in each semester. Limiting the number of online courses would be very important to balance the classroom-based courses and online ones.
REFERENCES


doi: 10.1142/S1084946710001634


APPENDIX A
THE INFORMED CONSENT FORM

SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT COVER LETTER
School of Education
California State University, Chico

My name is Adulmohsin Altawil, and I am a graduate student at California State University, Chico in the School of Education. As part of my master’s level research, I am conducting a study on the impact of fully online courses on the learning of non-native speakers of English. The California State University, Chico, School of Education has given approval for me to conduct this research.

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you are a non-native speaker of English who has taken or is taking a fully online course. If you wish to participate in this study, you will be asked to take a survey and you may be asked to participate in an interview.

No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. Study information will be kept in locked files at all times. Only I will have access to this data and information. Individual results will not be shared with California State University, Chico.

There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study, nor will you be reimbursed for your participation in this study.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. The School of Education is aware of this study but does not require that you participate in this research and your decision as to whether or not to participate will have no influence on your status as a student.

Thank you very much,

Abdulmoshin Altawil
THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

This survey is a part of a research study. Participation in this survey is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to be in this study. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publication resulting from the study.

1. After reading the previous statement, do you agree and want to participate in this study?
   - Yes, I agree to participate
   - No, I do not want to participate.

2. Age
   - 18 - 22
   - 23 - 27
   - 28 - 35
   - 36 - 45
   - over 46

3. Gender
   - Male
   - Female

4. Education level
   - Freshman
   - Sophomore
   - Junior
   - Senior
   - Masters Student
   - Doctoral Student

5. How well do you speak, read, and write in English?
   - beginner
   - intermediate
   - advanced
6. What is your current Grade Point Average (GPA)?

- 1.00 - 1.99
- 2.00 - 2.50
- 2.51 - 2.99
- 3.00 - 3.50
- 3.51 - 4.00

7. Have you ever taken any fully online courses (no classroom attendance)?

- Yes, I have.
- No, I haven’t taken any fully online courses.

8. Are you willing to take any online courses in future?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

9. I have taken online courses in:

- Saudi Arabia
- United States of America
- Britain
- Australia
- Canada
- New Zealand
- Other
- I have not taken any online courses.

10. How many FULLY online courses (no classroom attendance) have you taken?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more
11. How long have you been using fully online learning (no classroom attendance)?
- I am now taking my first online course.
- 6 months-1 year
- 2-3 years
- 4 years or more

12. What letter grade do you often receive in fully online courses? (no classroom attendance)
- A
- B
- C
- D
- F

13. Online Learning (OL) courses are more flexible than classroom-based courses.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

14. Classroom-based courses are easier than Online Learning (OL) courses.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

15. Online Learning (OL) gives me more time to take care of family and myself.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>16. Personal interaction with the instructor and classmates in classroom-based courses makes me feel more comfortable than in OL.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>17. I feel that classroom-based courses are more serious than OL.</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18. I feel that classroom-based courses are more planned and organized than OL.</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>19. I can communicate and interact with the instructor and the classmates in classroom-based courses more than in OL.</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I don’t know</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>20. I can do better in my tests and quizzes in OL than classroom-based courses.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
21. I feel that the cultural differences affected my performance and achievement in OL.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - I don't know
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

22. I get more feedback on my assignments in classroom-based courses than OL.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - I don't know
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

23. OL gives me more chance to take classes than traditional classroom-based courses.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - I don't know
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

24. OL enables me to do my assignments better than classroom-based courses.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - I don't know
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

25. I feel that the Internet access ability would affect taking OL courses.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - I don't know
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree
26. I believe that I learn more through OL than through classroom-based courses.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

27. I can understand the course syllabus in classroom-based courses more than OL.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

28. I believe I can make better grades in classroom-based courses than in online ones.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

29. I believe that taking tests and quizzes at home is easier.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

30. I usually get higher grades in OL assignments more than classroom-based courses.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
31. I feel more comfortable when I hand in my assignments rather than online submission.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

32. I feel that I can gain more knowledge in OL.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

33. I prefer classroom-based courses more because the website design in OL confuses me.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

34. I feel that classroom-based courses increase my practical and educational expertise.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

35. I would like to have more OL courses offered.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
36. OL works well with my schedule and saves me time.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

37. I felt more comfortable asking questions in the OL course than in classroom-based courses.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

38. My first OL course was hard for me because of the differences in the educational systems.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

39. I feel that OL assignments are easier than classroom-based courses.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

40. I prefer OL because I can find more courses offered than the classroom-based ones.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
41. I participate in discussions in classroom-based courses more than in OL courses.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

42. The competition in classroom-based courses encourages me to learn more.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

43. I would like to have more OL courses offered in Saudi Universities.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

44. I feel that all majors should have OL in Saudi universities.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

45. I feel that it would be very difficult to offer OL in Saudi universities.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
46. I feel that offering OL in Arabic language will make it easier and more popular in Saudi universities.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

47. OL in Saudi universities can be offered in both Arabic and English.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- I don’t know
- Agree
- Strongly Agree