

## **CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS OF VIRTUAL E-LEARNING PLATFORM IN EFL CONTEXT: PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The research paper focuses on the challenges and implications of virtual e-learning platform in EFL teaching-learning contexts. Considering technological innovations and their impact on classroom instruction, this paper provides an overview of the effectiveness of e-learning platforms from the pedagogical point of view. The study was conducted in Jouf University, Saudi Arabia. The university has embarked upon the utilization of the Blackboard Collaborate software, an additional e-learning platform to improve the quality of education at all levels. The study was conducted using a questionnaire and captured the insights and perceptions of 20 EFL teachers. The study reveals that the e-learning platform is a potential tool that can facilitate the learners to feel at ease and create a stress-free environment.*

**KEYWORDS:** teachers, technology, e-learning platform, Blackboard Collaborate

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### **RATIONALE**

The impact of technological innovations on teaching methodologies has always been a subject of debate due to its sophistication to substitute face-to-face teaching-learning contexts with a virtual learning environment. The current developments in the field can be traced to the audio-lingual method based on Skinner's behavioural approach that triggered a phenomenal interest among researchers to explore more ways of utilizing technology for language teaching classrooms. Technology integration, initially limited to pronunciation drills, has begun to encompass all areas and aspects of language and opened up a wide range of creative techniques for classroom instruction. Blackboard Collaborate software program, a component of Learning Management System (LMS), is one of the latest technology platforms that is being widely adopted by many institutions across the world either as an additional resource for classroom instruction or as an instruction tool for distance education programs. It is increasingly utilized across the universities in Saudi Arabia to enhance the knowledge of undergraduates in different fields of study. The instructional tools incorporated in Blackboard Collaborate makes it viable to implement varied styles and strategies of teaching and learning and thereby foster, among other things, effective interaction between the learners and the instructors. Moreover, the platform puts the teaching-learning situation

beyond the physical limits imposed by the regular mainstream education by way of allowing for the accessibility of the virtual learning round the clock, making it easier for learning to take place at a convenient time and save travelling long distances which could lead to physical discomfort.

Many studies have focused on the resourceful use of Blackboard Collaborate in English as a Second and Foreign Language learning context. However, not many studies were conducted on the role of teachers on the adoption of the Blackboard Collaborate for enhancing the teaching-learning atmosphere. Therefore, the present study is being taken up to examine the teachers' perceptions of the utilization of Blackboard Collaborate in EFL contexts. The results of the study, it is hoped, could offer insights into strategies for effective use of features of the Blackboard collaborate in enhancing teaching-learning environment. The study could also be beneficial for planning the teacher training programs in technology-mediated classroom instruction.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most of the research studies in technology-mediated language instruction focused on the effectiveness of technological aids in second/foreign language classrooms. The use of computers as instructional aids facilitates language input because of their ability to integrate multimedia material such as videos, images, and text simultaneously into one single screen (Ali Mohsen & Shafeeq 2014). With a variety of opportunities offered by the internet, the educationalists and researchers are exploring theoretical and practical pathways in pedagogy and curriculum designs (Almalki, 2011, P.5). Moreover, the effectiveness of computer technology to present information in visual formats made it possible for the language teachers to use multimedia in the classroom and present linguistic and theoretical items that were otherwise difficult to comprehend in EFL contexts. The ease and effectiveness of incorporating linguistic materials in language teaching-learning contexts paved the way for many software companies across the world to innovate new technologies for educational purposes. Many software programs used LAN interfaces to create user-friendly web tools that it made it possible for teaching-learning processes to take place during the off-campus periods. Universities have realized the usefulness of technological applications for educational purposes and introduced Learning Management Systems (LMS) to give online access to course materials, communicate with students and track their progress (Zumora et al. 2013: 95). Introducing the Learning Management System (LMS) in educational institutions reduced the physical burden of teachers carrying loads of assignment work written in hard pages and made it easier to access students' work electronically. Taking advantage of computer technologies, software, communications and information, e-learning platforms overcame the obstacles of space and time, thus becoming a modern teaching method to support the educational process and improve the quality (Hussein 2011, P. 43). However, from a pedagogical and content perspective, e-learning requires considerable support as well as a holistic and well-planned approach to be effectively integrated across the teaching and learning transactions within higher education institutes (Gamdi, & Samarji, 2016, P.23). Many institutions are adopting hybrid approaches to foreign language learning, which blends face-to-face instruction with online activities and computer-based practice (Comas-Quinn, 2011; Compton, 2009). However, the questions and concerns regarding instructors' preparation have been raised by some researchers (Hauck & Stickler, 2006). A paradigmatic shift from chalk and talk to the use of computer keyboard and other related devices requires not only literacy in the use of new technology but

also the ways to use it productively to fulfil the learning outcomes. Language instructors who fail to fine-tune themselves with the technology-mediated instruction could not live up to the demands of digital learning environments. Many language teachers experience challenging situations in a technology integrated classroom because during their certification and degree programs they had little or nothing in the way of formal training in the use of technology for the teaching-learning contexts (Hubbard, 2008). Due to these inadequacies, there is a growing need for teacher education and learner training (Levy, 2009). In the 21st century, it is quite challenging to meet the demands of a digital and knowledge-driven society as well as provide cost-effective and high-quality learning experiences to the diverse student population (Torrissi-Steele, G., & Drew, 2013). The future of CALL is closely tied to the future of language teacher education because language teachers are the pivotal players (Ali Mohsen & Shafeeq 2014).

Mosquera, L.H (2017:481) points out that virtual learning environment (VLE) is a platform wherein teachers and students interact and share resources. He reports that most teachers who used virtual platforms for pedagogical benefit have found it useful and productive. The findings of a study conducted by Al Harbi (2015:110) indicate that instructors believe that VLE is an effective teaching tool to deliver their coursework online. However, for future adoption of VLE, it is necessary to motivate and create technology awareness among the faculty and the learners Al Harbi (2015:110). The use of technology has increased the quality of teaching and learning in traditional classrooms (Ozkan, B 2017:34). Due to insufficient time during the face to face classroom sessions, e-learning platform could be used as a useful tool to enhance English language skills in EFL contexts (Soliman, 2014:752). A disadvantage of e-learning platform is that teachers may not be able to supervise students' learning and so the success of a virtual classroom session depends on students' motivation levels (Soong, 2012:91). On the positive side, Virtual Learning Environments provide a learning atmosphere wherein the teachers and students can interact during the off-campus period (Kalayci, 2015:72). In his findings, Mosquera (2016) observed that the implementation of VLE in the EFL courses is highly desirable for L2 learning processes and so recommends it for many other similar educational contexts. In a virtual learning context, teachers are expected to go beyond being their traditional approach to imparting knowledge to regulate and influence cognitive, motivational and effective processes (Ferne, & Castañeda, 2012:80). E-learning environments make individuals to equip with technological devices and software as well as paves the way for instructional innovations for the new generations, offering a wide range of learning environments (Ceylan, & Elitok Kesici, 2017, P.309). In order to use educational technology effectively, more research has to be carried out to investigate and examine the effect of education technology in relation to curricular activities that utilize the educational technology and derive a more scientific basis for its use (GÖMLEKSİZ 2004:76).

### **Virtual Learning Environments: Use of Blackboard Collaborate**

Virtual learning classroom is an integrative application of Blackboard Collaborate, a web-based Learning Management System that could retain the multi-dimensional aspects of traditional classroom teaching-learning process such as teacher talk-time, student talk- time, teacher-student interaction, communicative activities and assessment. Squillante, Wise, & Hartey (2014, P.7) point out that introduction of Learning Management System added variety to the instructors' mode of teaching and

also changed how instructors work because there has been an increase in their overall work level. Course management systems such as the Blackboard Learning System is beneficial for students and faculty because of its increased availability, skill building, improved communication, tracking and the facility to provide quick feedback (Bradford et al., 2007:303). The virtual classroom or Blackboard Collaborate is a web-conferencing platform intended for teachers and students to perform multiple tasks. (Pusuluri, Mahasneh & Alsayer 2017:107). A progression from classroom-centred teaching using audio-visual aids to a technologically oriented Blackboard-based virtual classroom environment requires innovative instructional techniques to make the teaching-learning process more productive. Hussain and Hussain (2016, P. 63) point out that the Blackboard-based instruction makes it possible for the participants to experience more learning varieties which include live interactive virtual classes, electronic discussion groups, interactive tutorials, downloadable recorded course materials, bulletin boards and informatics. In Saudi Arabia, with the support and encouragement from the Ministry of Higher Education, the current trend when developing new educational processes for teaching-learning in higher educational institutions is towards blending face to face and online instruction (Kashghari, B., & Asseel, D. (n.d.). Introducing Blackboard Collaborate as an additional resource at the undergraduate levels made the teachers and the students to use technological devices to connect on a common platform during off-campus periods. As most of the teachers and students were already literate in the use of computer and mobile applications, the web tools of Blackboard Collaborate did not pose much difficulty at the operational level. However, those teachers and students who were not familiar with the technological devices and software programs either underwent training or learnt the intricacies through trial and error methods. The challenges for EFL teachers include their competence to function in their roles as facilitators on a virtual space, connected on a shared web platform with their students, while on the other hand, they need to find suitable materials and appropriate methods to make productive use of the virtual space for learning to take place. Complexity in the online teaching environment is due to the diversity of the student population with varied motivation levels, engagement and learning capabilities (Bodey, Ravaga, Sloan 2016: 49).

Tonsmann (2014:58) in his study on the effectiveness of Blackboard Collaborate observed that the use of web cameras for the virtual classroom, though an essential aspect of visual communication may impede the instructional process because students are self-conscious of the video stream. He points out that non-usage of web-camera did not hamper the communication and instruction.

The findings of a study conducted by Al-Maqtri (2014: 665) on teacher attitudes to e-learning reveals that male and female teachers are of the opinion that only motivated learners find e-learning mode useful while those unmotivated students are not keen about learning through this platform. Mohsen & Shafeeq (2014:109) points out that though there are technological advancements in the digital age, the progress in instructional practices has been rather slow because many teachers view technology as a supplementary teaching tool rather than an as an essential component for successful teaching-learning process. There are also studies which highlighted the positive aspects of e-learning platforms. The findings of a study conducted by Heirds eld et al. (2011, P.9) on Blackboard as an online learning environment with specific focus on the perceptions of teacher education students and staff indicates that the teachers perceived discussion forums, AV chat, blogs and announcements enhanced learning experience due to its to potential to create human interaction, social learning and a means for keeping in

touch with students. Heirds eld et al. also report that students viewed Blackboard positively because they could access learning resources twenty-four hours a day from a centralized location and found it valuable in terms of efficient use of time and as a useful resource for revision and examination preparation. The results of a study conducted on EFL instructors' perceptions of Blackboard Learning Management System at Taif university by Tawalbeh (2018, P.6) reveals that the majority of the instructors believe that the Blackboard has an impact on learning. Tawalbeh considers this positive attitude of instructors as a starting point for organizing professional development programs that familiarize them with the system's features and functionalities.

### **Blended Approach: Reflections**

Blended learning has reduced the monotony of traditional methods of teaching as well as the disadvantages of absolute online teaching. In a blended-learning course, students attend their classes in the campus as well as complete online components of the course during the off-campus period (Hamad, 2017, P.7). This approach poses challenging situations to the EFL teachers because they have to make conscious decisions and segregate materials for on-campus classroom sessions as well as for off-campus virtual classroom sessions. During the process of designing a course, teachers now have to consider various factors like place, proximity and technology and decide upon what is suitable for learning within the given constraints (Bath & Bourke 2011, P.133). Depending on the subject area and the skills of the teacher in pedagogical knowledge related to the use of blended forms of learning, the application of blended teaching differs from course to course at higher education institutions (Donnelly, R. & McAvinia, 2012, P.4). Instructors who teach blended language courses perceive training as the most critical aspect of teaching because the very technology that made the online classes possible also complicated their lives with technical problems (Aguilar 2012:171). It is recommended that the educators need to consider the skills being taught, learning resources, practicality, learners' qualifications, suitable learning theories, as well as time and cost during the process of choosing blended learning environments (Ceylan, & Elitok Kesici, 2017, P. 311). The results of a study on *EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences of blended learning in a Vietnamese University*, conducted by Hoang 2015 (P.246) indicate that teachers made no remarkable changes in face-to-face teaching and did not explore the potentials of blended learning to promote students' active and collaborative learning of EFL. However, the findings of another study conducted by Balci, 2017 (P. 10) reveal that the teachers expressed relatively positive views about the idea of introducing blended instruction for intensive English programs. However, the findings of a study conducted by Phillips, Schumacher and Arif (2016) reveal that the considerations and barriers that faculty members perceived with regard to blended learning environments include an increased faculty workload when creating online lectures as well as allotment of more time to achieve higher levels of learning in the classroom. Kistow (2011) points out that the teachers have to consider the best pedagogical techniques of face-to-face and online learning to achieve success in a blended approach.

### **Research Questions**

The current study is carried out to address the following research questions:

- 1) Are the EFL teachers academically prepared to integrate Blackboard Collaborate to the teaching-learning process?
- 2) Do EFL teachers recognize the benefits of e-learning platform?
- 3) What problems do EFL teachers experience with the students' homework and discussion boards?
- 4) Do EFL teachers find Virtual Learning Platform conducive for imparting English language skills to their students?
- 5) While using Blackboard Collaborate, what strategies do EFL teachers use to overcome challenges?

### **Field Study**

The web-tools of Blackboard Collaborate platform are primarily controlled by the moderator who often happens to be the teacher. Since the teachers control and decide the kind of materials and methods to be used for an e-learning module and virtual sessions, our research focused on their perceptions.

### **Teachers**

The subjects of the current study are 20 EFL teachers, who are working in different colleges at Jouf University, Saudi Arabia. Since the undergraduate courses at Jouf University are integrated with Blackboard Collaborate, it is mandatory for all these EFL teachers to use it either for blended learning courses or as an additional resource for the teaching-learning process. Additionally, they are expected to assign periodical tasks and activities in the form of assignments, homework, discussion boards, and tests in the Blackboard Collaborate e-learning platform. Further, these teachers are required to have basic literacy in the use of computer technology to connect with their students and conduct virtual sessions and also provide them with the necessary resources, post instructions/updates, whenever a need arises during the semester. All the EFL teachers who participated in the study were informed that their responses to the items in the questionnaire are confidential and meant for research purposes only.

### **Quantitative and Qualitative Data**

A 16-item questionnaire that constituted of closed and open-ended questions was administered to gain insights of teacher perceptions on various aspects related to the resourcefulness of e-learning platform in an EFL context. Of the 16-items, nine were closed-ended questions, and seven items were open-ended questions. Qualitative data was elicited through the open-ended questions. Since EFL teachers are facilitators in assigning language learning tasks, Blackboard Collaborate is an e-learning platform wherein teachers assign different language learning as well as course-related tasks and activities we felt the need to elicit their perceptions on different issues related to the teaching-learning of English in relation to the Blackboard Collaborate

### **Limitations of the study**

The study covers the following aspects only:

1. The study presents insights of EFL teachers perceptions in an academic environment at the undergraduate level.

2. The findings of the current study are based on the data collected from teachers and do not cover the students' perceptions.
3. The items in the questionnaire are constructed based on the researchers' observations of various aspects that are interlinked to the e-learning platform.
4. The data analysis and findings are based on the responses of 20 EFL teachers only.

### Data Analysis

The teacher questionnaire administered had a mixture of the closed-ended and open-ended questionnaire. The following analysis of the closed-ended questionnaire in graphical format presents an overview of teacher training, course curriculum, and teacher workload.

Q.1 Have you attended any specific training course in using the computer-related technology for English language class?

Sl.No	Questions posed to EFL teachers	The response of EFL Teachers			
		Attended	Percentage	Not Attended	Percentage
1.	Attended training courses in using the computer-related technology	14	70%	6	30%

The data from the table above indicates that 70% of EFL teachers attended training courses in using the computer-related technology while 30% of the teachers do not have exposure in the use of computer-related technology in teaching-learning contexts.

Q.2 Does the prescribed coursebook fulfil the requirements for a virtual classroom session?

Sl.No	Course Syllabi	The response of EFL Teachers			
		Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
2.	Basic/Advanced course book/s fulfil the requirements for a virtual classroom session	12	60%	8	40%

The data from the table above indicates that 60% of EFL teachers agree that the prescribed (Basic/Advanced) course books fulfil the requirements for a virtual classroom session. However, 40% of them are of the opinion that the prescribed English language coursebooks do not fulfill the requirements for a virtual classroom session.

Q 3 How many English language courses do you teach in a semester?

Sl.No	English Language Courses Assigned in a Semester	Total
3.	Number of English language courses that a teacher is assigned in a semester at the undergraduate level	3 to 5

The data from the table above indicates that EFL teachers are assigned a minimum of three varied English language courses (Basic or Advanced) and a maximum of five courses during a semester.

**Q 4. Are credit hours specified for virtual classroom sessions?**

Sl.No	Credit Hours	The response of EFL Teachers			
		Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
4.	Inclusion of credit hours for virtual sessions	8	40%	12	60%

The data from the table above indicates a variation in the allotment of credit hours for virtual sessions.

**Q 5. Is it necessary to take virtual sessions for EFL students?**

Sl.No	The necessity of virtual sessions	The response of EFL Teachers					
		Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage	Some times	Percentage
5	Need for virtual sessions	14	70%	3	15%	3	15%

The data from the table above indicates an overwhelming majority of 70% of teachers perceive that it is necessary to take virtual sessions for EFL students.

**Q 6. How can the EFL students benefit by using the Blackboard Learn Virtual Platform?**

Sl.No	Perceptions of EFL Teachers
1.	It gives a stress-free environment.
2.	Students can be in a relaxed mood.
3.	Ease and convenience with regard to the lecture times.
4.	Blackboard works well as a noticeboard.
5.	It is good for the students to explore the new technology which is available free of cost
6.	A flexible time where teaching-learning can happen at a convenient time.
7.	Convenience to interact with students during the off-campus period.
8.	Technology-mediated instruction
9.	Provision of variety in the teaching-learning process
10.	The grade center can be used for the students' sessional marks and protects the student's right to know his/her marks and his/her privacy
11.	No benefits
12.	The interactive mode is good, but it only works where the language barrier is low

The data from the above table indicates EFL teachers are of the opinion that the new technology (Blackboard Learn Software) provides opportunities for teacher-learner interaction during off-campus



periods as well as a platform where students can access their test-scores. EFL teachers do find lots of benefits in the use of technology-mediated instruction. However, there are also EFL teachers who do not find any benefits in the use of the virtual platform.

**Q 7. List any common or specific problem/s related to students' homework.**

Sl.No	Perceptions of EFL Teachers
1.	Lack of English language fluency is a major barrier.
2.	Lack of motivation to learn English.
3.	Time constraints as some students have a number of subjects to study.
4.	Many students submit the same answer, a <i>turn-it-in program</i> for plagiarism is needed.
5.	Non-participation in an assigned writing activity.
6.	Less percentage of students do their homework.

EFL teachers are of the opinion that students lack the motivation to learn English as well as participate in writing activities and also do not have adequate fluency to contribute to a given homework. Other constraints that teachers opine include time considerations due to students' decision to pursue more number of credit hours in a given semester and poor response to a given writing related homework.

**Q 8. List any common or specific problem/s related to the discussion threads**

Sl.No	Perceptions of EFL Teachers
1.	Students do lack the skills to participate in the discussion threads.
2.	Students attitude is a major concern.
3.	Many students do not engage in discussion threads because they have problems with writing.
4.	No active participation from the majority of students.
5.	Students present sentences with too many quotations but do not give reference
6.	Students do not show any interest or even to give a try.

The data from the table above indicates that the attitude and lack of interest in students to contribute to an ongoing discussion in the virtual platform are constraints that hinder students participation in discussion threads.

**Q 9. Problems the EFL teachers experience while using a virtual platform (Blackboard)**

Sl.No	Perceptions of EFL Teachers
1.	Technology is very new for both students and the teachers
2.	Some students do not join the class actively - they just join the session and leave the device.
3.	Students do not participate in the communicative process during virtual platform sessions
4.	Students are reluctant to use the technology.
5.	Not all content can be taught through the virtual platform.
6.	Students do not show any interest even to give a try.

The data from the table above reveals the Blackboard Platform is very new to the teachers as well as to the students. Teachers also point out that students are passive during the communicative process and are reluctant to use the technology. Teachers observe that students log in to their devices, but their icons indicate that they do not continue to be part of the virtual session after a period. They also point out that there are topics in the syllabi which cannot be taught through a virtual platform.

**Q 10. Ways to overcome obstacles while using a virtual platform (Blackboard)**

Sl.No	Perceptions of EFL Teachers
1.	Familiarity may make it ease and comfortable.
2.	The success of delivery depends on access and communicative potential of material posted.
3.	Blackboard works well when there is a scope of more interaction.

The data from the table above indicates that frequent use of the Blackboard virtual platform for teaching-learning purposes can lead to comfort levels in navigating various features embedded in the software. EFL teachers point out that the success of a virtual classroom session depends on the communicative potential of material posted. They are of the opinion that the feature of the virtual platform in Blackboard Learn software is productive when there is a scope of more interaction between the teacher and the students.

**Q 11. Suggestions for improvements while using virtual platform needed in EFL contexts**

Sl.No	Perceptions of EFL Teachers
1.	The virtual platform should be used as a supportive instrument in teaching.
2.	We should have a specific textbook to teach our students.
3.	The teacher should be ready to work to improve the level of the students.
4.	The teacher should get support from his supervisors or administrators.
5.	The textbooks used must be suitable for virtual platforms. Otherwise, the platform will worsen the learning process.
6.	Make participation mandatory for the students.
7.	Awareness programs on the benefits of the platform should be conducted at regular intervals.
8.	Technical support should be provided to both the teacher and the students
9.	Faculty members need to be given regular training.
10.	The virtual platform requires students with a lot of interest and eagerness to learn.
11.	A blended approach is relevant in EFL context – use the virtual platform as well as face-to-face classroom teaching-learning environment.

The data presents different suggestions for improving the effectiveness of a virtual platform in EFL teaching. The teachers suggest that a coursebook should be prescribed for teaching virtual sessions. They also suggest that faculty members need to be given regular training in the features of the virtual platform and also technical support needed to be provided for both the teachers as well as the students. Making student participation mandatory, motivated learners and institutional support are other suggestions that teachers believe can improve virtual teaching-learning process.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS*****Preparedness of EFL teachers to integrate Blackboard Collaborate to the teaching-learning process:***

The findings of the study reveal that the majority of the EFL teachers have undergone training courses in computer-related technology. Their preparedness to navigate with technicalities of a computer-aided software is a supporting factor to function in the technology-driven curriculum at the undergraduate level. These faculty members who gained some experience with computer-related technology can guide the small percentage of EFL teachers who are not familiar with using technology. However, the perceptions of faculty members varied on the availability of the prescribed course materials which may

have an impact on the preparedness of course delivery in a virtual classroom context. In a traditional classroom context, EFL teachers often rely on prescribed course textbooks to deliver their classroom lectures and so similar expectations can crop up when they are introduced to e-learning platforms such as Blackboard Learn. Their competence in navigating with computer technology, though an impressive factor, remains unproductive due to their over-dependence on prescribed course materials. EFL instructors, while engaging students with a virtual platform require technical literacy at the operational level as well as the competence to design materials for functioning effectively in the virtual classroom. Training programs aimed at enhancing their expertise in designing relevant student-centred materials can make the virtual learning sessions more lively and resourceful. Lack of expertise to manipulate the artificial virtual situation into a real classroom-like situation may be quite challenging for the EFL practitioners. The methods and materials that were successful in face-to-face situations may sometimes may not be conducive in a virtual classroom situation. These failures should not be read as a lack of expertise of the EFL teacher but rather as feedback to provide the required training to progress with unfamiliar situations in a virtual classroom. The findings of our study coincide with the opinion of Gamdi & Smarji (2016) that an e-learning platform requires considerable support and a well-planned approach for effective integration of teaching-learning contexts within higher education institutes. Considering the technological efficiency of higher educational institutions across Saudi Arabia, more efforts need to be focused on introducing teacher training programs for English language educators to cope up with the challenges of the virtual classroom environment.

### ***Do EFL teachers recognise the benefits of e-learning platform?***

Most EFL teachers understand that e-learning platforms such as Blackboard Learn could offer a host of benefits. The findings of our study reveal that the Blackboard Learn is a potential tool that can facilitate the learners to feel at ease and create a stress-free environment in a virtual teaching-learning situation. Since the university funds the Blackboard e-learning platform, it is an added advantage for the students to use this resource free of cost. Teachers find it as a learning resource where students have the opportunity to explore the new technology and unravel the educational outcomes embedded in it. Further, the teachers find it convenient to connect with their students because of the flexibility to access the e-learning platform at any time during on-campus or off-campus hours. Our findings are similar to Al Harbi (2015) wherein he reported that most of the teachers found virtual platforms useful for delivering their online courses and found it as an effective teaching tool. The perception among some faculty members that the Blackboard Learn virtual platform does not have any benefits is quite alarming in the wake of the latest trends in the use of technology for instructional purposes. Failures and frustrations with technology-mediated instruction due to lack self-motivation could lead EFL teachers to arrive at negative conclusions. Approaching the virtual platform with pre-conceived notions often acts as a hindrance in the use of teaching tools embedded in it. Conscious efforts in the creative use of e-learning platform through initial trial and error, though not an encouraging method, can motivate the EFL teachers during their initial transition period to progress from their dependence on chalk and talk to a more appealing and advanced teaching tools available in the virtual e-learning platform.

***What problems do EFL teachers experience with the students' homework and discussion boards?***

It is observed that EFL teachers expressed many concerns with the teaching-learning process integrated with the e-learning platform. In the past, teachers followed the traditional mode of assigning homework and instructing them to submit it in hard copies. It resulted in teachers' chambers piling up with heaps of homework/assignment submissions in the form of hard copies - files, books or A4 handwritten/printed sheets. However, introducing e-learning platform such as Blackboard Learn in the educational system paved the way for electronic submission of homework/assignments. Also, an additional feature such as Discussion Board wherein a teacher can post a topic for discussion and the students respond on the web-platform by posting their views in a series of discussion threads on the given topic during on-campus or off-campus periods gave scope for the students who tend to be passive or shy to contribute their ideas in the form of written communication. However, it is observed that many EFL teachers express concern about the students' response to an assigned activity on the e-learning web platform. Teachers expressed that non-participation, lack of motivation to learn English and low English language proficiency levels of EFL students are major barriers which hinder discussion skills on the web platform. These obstacles, when analyzed at the micro level, provide feedback on weak assessment procedures wherein teachers role as passive evaluators result in negative learning outcomes. Many EFL teachers point out that due to inadequate proficiency to generate grammatically accurate sentences and complete an assigned writing activity, students tend to access the available web resources and present the content in the same form on the discussion board or submit it to fulfil the obligation of homework submission. These submissions posted on the web platform are evaluated and graded by EFL teachers. EFL teachers perceive students' work as 'plagiarism' when they evaluate the uploaded assignments and trace them to the web resources in its original form. Despite the beneficial features of Blackboard Platform and its potential to connect the teachers and students on a common platform by overcoming barriers of time and distance, the findings of our study indicate that there are gaps in the utilization of web platform. Depending solely on e-platform to evaluate students' performance and grading them based on the uploaded assignments or discussion threads may not provide accurate results of students' 'contribution to an assigned task. Considering the constraints of Blackboard Learn as a virtual platform, EFL teachers have the flexibility of adopting a blended approach in which an activity given on the Blackboard Learn is extended for further discussion in the classroom. A communicative classroom activity which is linked to the Blackboard Learn platform can provide factual information about a student's contribution to an assigned task.

**Do EFL teachers find virtual learning platform conducive for imparting English language skills to their students?**

As a part of academic work, EFL teachers are assigned to teach General English as well as advanced English language (linguistics) and literature courses. A graduate student pursuing bachelor course in the department of English have the opportunity to study General English and advanced courses in the area of specialization. General English courses are aimed at improving students' proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and vocabulary skills during their first and second year of graduation while specialized courses in linguistics and English literature are introduced during the later stages of their graduate education. All the courses are linked to the Blackboard Learn platform, wherein teachers and students

are registered active users and can access it any time during the semester. As students progress from their school to college education, they are expected to further their knowledge in the English language spoken, written and vocabulary skills for a better understanding of concepts related to linguistics and literature courses during the second, third and fourth year of undergraduate studies. Considering their future English language needs, the syllabus at the first and second level of undgraduation outlines the topic areas to be covered through the Blackboard Learn platform. EFL students are expected to complete the assigned modules in listening, speaking, reading, writing and vocabulary skills posted in the Blackboard platform. The instructional materials posted in the Blackboard platform are expected to improve the English language proficiency so as to make them function in different communicative situations they face in their academic and social contexts. The virtual platform is found to be quite conducive for teaching linguistics and literature courses as well. The platform provides ample opportunities for the EFL teachers to conduct virtual sessions and support the students with the needed theoretical foundation in linguistics and literature. However, the findings of our study indicate that EFL teachers rely on syllabi to plan their teaching sessions. Also, the lack of awareness of a compatible teaching methodology for the virtual classroom might lead to a failure in fulfilling the intended learning outcome. Overcoming pedagogical challenges during the transition process through self-motivation and academic workshops can be rewarding to the teaching-learning process at the macro level EFL contexts.

### **While using Blackboard Collaborate, what strategies do EFL teachers use to overcome challenges?**

The findings of our study reveal that EFL teachers are in the initial stages of uncovering strategies to deal with the situations that they are not familiar in their past teaching experience. It is observed that teachers transfer the traditional methodology of lecturing to the virtual classroom while students log in to their user accounts to attend the virtual classroom sessions and continue to be passive receivers of information. In order to engage the students in the learning process, teachers instruct their students to read aloud the portions of course materials that they are currently discussing. During the progress of virtual classroom session, teachers rely on the strategy of instructing students to read aloud the lines of the material that is being discussed. It is an imitation of the traditional face-to-face classroom situation wherein teachers engage the students in the classroom teaching-learning process. The flexibility to schedule virtual classes on the Blackboard Learn during the off-campus period, though an encouraging factor, is often meant to teach the topics from the prescribed syllabi. In spite of the availability of a variety of web tools for student-centred interaction and assessment on the Blackboard platform, lack of familiarity to navigate with the features is an obstacle to a creative virtual classroom session.

### **CONCLUSION**

Optimizing virtual learning environment is a challenging task for EFL teachers. However, teacher training programs aimed at reorienting the teachers in the creative use of e-learning platforms could lead to productive teaching-learning environment in a technology mediated classroom. Our study notes that a blended approach – the virtual platform as well as face-to-face classroom teaching-learning environment- is relevant in the EFL context.

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