Effectiveness of Blended Learning for Teaching of English: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Teaching of English has always been an issue of pedagogic debate. The academicians and language masters have been divided into two groups on account of the usability of the specific methods/approaches in an EFL/ESL classrooms. In today's educational environment, a pedagogic compromise has been suggested in the name of 'blended learning: a nice combination of the two or more than two approaches. However, a blended learning approach incorporated e-learning scenario in a traditional but flexible setting. E- learning as a mode of education that may go along with the traditional mode. The teaching/learning activities are nicely blended to deliberately create a room for hybrid learning. It is felt that such electronic modes/resources are more effective and efficient in the process of yielding better and focused results. While ascertaining the effectiveness of blended learning, the following aspects were also taken into account: relevance of e-learning/blended learning, feasibilities, types, availability, development etc. English language teaching for the preparatory year students is going to be in focus for the simple reason that all the specialties and other subjects are taught and evaluated through English.

Keywords: Blended learning, e-learning, e-resource, hybrid learning, self learning, online learning.

Introduction

E-learning has become an integral component of modern education system. As a result, different e-learning strategies have been evolved with a view to foster teaching-learning process thus making it more effective and result oriented. In a modern cyber society like ours, updates of knowledge are in full swing. As a solution to these new education types and modes, it is proposed to employ a novel E-learning mode, i.e. web-based self-learning, hybrid or blended learning in the existing educational system of all the modern colleges in Saudi Arabia where the infrastructural and other resources are accessible. In this research, the paper is going to assess the relevance e-learning programs/courses in the department of preparatory year of KAU- Community College. While exploring the need as well as importance of e-learning resources/tools, the following aspects will also be taken into account: relevance of e-learning, feasibilities, types, availability, development etc. English language is going to be in focus for the simple reason that the electronic resources are developed mostly in English and it is the medium of the instruction/examination.

It has been generally found that the modern learners are not much attracted towards the traditional mode of learning. Instead they would like to choose a learning mode as a fun (such as gaming) which is practiced without any burden and binding. In this case, distance learning or blended learning mode will be quite useful. Moreover, Saudi young generation is quite friendly with computers, net and sophisticated mode of communication. Therefore, e-leaning is expected to de-burden the 21st century Saudi learners, in addition to the fact that it is quite easy to access anywhere at any time.

Variety of ideas have so far been proposed to conceive and understand the concept of 'E-learning' which can operationally be put as the utilisation, delivery and achievement of learning, teaching, training, instruction or education by all electronic means. The practice of 'E-learning' may involve the use of a computer or similar electronic device in some way to provide educational training or learning resource. The relative importance of non-formal modes of learning has led the author into conceiving the present topic of research. Recently King Abdulaziz university, Jeddah-KSA has successfully implemented Electronic management education system (EMES), and uploaded all the courses online, in order to pave the way for its face to face learners at present, and in future for the students who are likely to get enrolled under the distance education program. It is expected that such web based material, mass media and high tech programs of education are going to exert some major impact on the attitude and motivation of the formal as well as non-formal students (learning through distance mode).

The most important features of the e-learning unfold as following: interesting, open access: any time-anywhere, varied information, self learning mode etc.

Relevance of Blended learning: There are various concepts within e-learning. Blended learning is one of them which can be used as a strategy of teaching. It emerges out of the blend of the

two methods: old and new. It involves the use of the Web based resources with traditional classroom-based learning. Usually in a blended learning classroom setting, students learn via online resources, utilise sophisticated electronic tools simultaneously with face-to-face classes. In general, blended learning activities usually include: i. a nice blend of web-based resources with a traditional classroom teaching/learning; ii. development and implementation of web pages for a target student group; and iii. use of online facilities/tool such as forums, discussions, chatting, online assignment, quizzes etc.

Electronic Management Education System (EMES): EMES is a local online learning platform developed by King Abdulaziz University (KAU), Jeddah –KSA..KAU-community college is the premier college that successfully created, developed materials, uploaded, implemented and assessed the utilization and effectiveness of the EMES. As face to face universities grow day by day due to the expansion of student-population, the need of online/distance learning mode also increase. Moreover, there is always a demand to start hybrid learning as a new strategy of teaching-learning.

The Case of KAU-Community College, Jeddah-KSA: Jeddah community college is visibly regarded one of the pioneer colleges of the kingdom which got accredited by COE, USA. Recently, it implemented the Electronic Management Education System (EMES) - The preferred Electronic System of the King Abdulaziz university, Jeddah, KSA. The college gave training to the concerned staff of the Jeddah community college. Later, the courses (approximately 120) were put online to facilitate the matter for the enrolled students as well as the future distance learning students. The college has been ready for such sophisticated change the time accredited started. As with the infrastructural facilities, the following are considered the main achievements: i. computer based classroom teaching, ii. internet facility in each classroom, iii. modern language lab, iv. expansion of computer labs, v. computers installation for the students, vi. provision of the supervisor to look after the development.

Regarding the online material related to English curriculum, the entire material was put on the website. The focus was on the learning/assessment activities such as CYU (Check your understanding), Crossword puzzle, power-points etc. It is anticipated that such web based material, mass media and high tech programs of education are going to exert some major impact on the attitude and motivation of the formal as well as non-formal students (learning through distance mode).

Research Objectives: The main objectives of the present study are: i. to find out the relevance of web/e- learning resource, ii. to find out the available e-learning resources useful for JCC courses and English language, iii. to ascertain the teachers' preparedness for e-learning mode of education, iv. to study the possible effect of the blended learning approach.

Hypotheses: The following directional hypotheses were formulated: i. E-learning is very important in the learning in general especially in learning of English, ii. The exiting e-resource is novel and latest type, iii. The EMES as electronic tool is useful, iv. Teachers/ students are effectively using the blended learning mode.

Limitation: The study is limited to Jeddah Community College (JCC), King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, KSA. However, the implementations of the findings will be open to any such college in the Kingdom or even outside.

Research Design: As this research was basically of qualitative nature, the research design of the study was accordingly determined. The primary source of data collection included: an assessment of the need and importance of e-learning for all the subjects including English. The investigators developed questionnaires for the students and teachers to ascertain the indicators of the blended learning effectiveness. In addition, performance of the two groups of students were also compared using simple statistical measures.

Questionnaires: In order to collect required primary data, questionnaires for the concerned instructors and the target learner group were used to assess relevance and effect of blended learning apart from observation and assessment of the e-learning resource and its availability at the sample college. The data gathered through the questionnaires was cross examined by the evaluation of the availability and implementation issues pertaining to e-learning.

The experiment of Blended Learning: Though the study is of qualitative type, a class of 25 students was taught by routine method and then through blended learning mode for 4 weeks each. The results were qualitatively analysed.

Literature Review

Many studies revealed the ineffective results of educational practices in different countries. Saudi Arabia is no exception. It is felt that even if the teachers are well equipped, they are seldom able to utilize the e-resources available in an institution. It is felt as the focal point to consider the relevance and specific need of e-learning in a place like Saudi Arabia where the achievement of education is not at an optimum level despite the availability of almost all the e-resources. E-resource includes a variety of items: infrastructure, equipped classroom, computers, net, web access, language labs and similar facilities/resources that can be used for teaching and learning. The present study is a modest attempt in this direction.

There are many forms of e-learning. Blended learning is one type of e-learning which is becoming popular. Those who took "blended" courses, a combination of online learning and face-to-face instruction elements, appeared to do best of all [1]. Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, it was also

suggested that students learn more in blended courses than they do in comparable traditional class sections[2]. The nature of learning environment requires the regular interest with the topic and interactive study so the result is high level of learning[3]. More flexible learning environment created by introducing technology in the classroom changes the role of the teacher, where they become more of a "facilitator of learning"[4]. In addition, it was noted by yet another researcher that there is an imperative need for the teachers to acknowledge that Web 2.0 changes the key aspects of the nature of knowledge and the way students access it[5]. An intensive literature review on computer assisted learning in relation to literacy and numeracy identified that little has been done to calculate the efficiency of technology and programmes against the gains (of increased student achievement)[6]. Regarding technology mediated learning environment, it was felt that while there is an increasing body of literature which suggests that may facilitate student achievement, they caution that these environments are successful only insofar as students are comfortable with and have the confidence to engage with the technology itself [7].

The importance of e-learning can't be overlooked; as it has emerged as a worldwide phenomenon in the field of pedagogy. Therefore, the teachers are supposed to ably use and utilize the e-resources available in an institution. Moreover, the provision of latest e-resources, tools and training of those who would utilize the e-resources are deemed important tasks of management[8].

The evidence for effective and efficient e-Learning: The term 'effectiveness' is itself subjective, however, it can be conceived in accordance in the attainment of the objectives of the course or curriculum in an academic setting. The effectiveness of e-learning has been evidenced primarily by studies of higher education, government, corporate and military environments[9]. Often, they have failed to define the content quality, technological characteristics, and type of specific e-learning intervention being analyzed. Moreover, most studies have included several different instructional and \delivery methodologies, which complicate the analysis in question[10]. Moreover, most of these studies drew a comparison between e-learning and the traditional instructor-led approaches[11].

Availability of E-Learning Resources: Thanks to the growth of educational technologies and the Internet, the number of e-learning resources available to educators has dramatically increased. The following tools are accessible at the Jeddah Community College, Saudi Arabia: Computers (in the classes, labs, library, offices, language labs etc), Internet facility, Language labs (with modern software), Online learning facility within the classes and the Electronic Management Education System (EMES): the local web portal.

The main goal of EMES is to provide an integrated Web based training environment for students/trainees, teachers/trainers and authors. There are several ways wherein EMES can be exploited as learning and training tool: i. It can be used as a substitute for traditional and teacher centred instruction, ii. It can be used as a tool for blended learning, iii. It can be used for new modes of learning such as for just-in-time learning.

Tools within Electronic Management Education System (EMES): With the help of different tools, user's interactions with course contents within several rooms are enabled. Tools are displayed in an add-on window. The same tools can occur in multiple rooms. Tools exist for the following categories: Online course section, syllabus (video recorded), discussion forum, glossary, online quizzes, assignment, syllabus outline , Exam schedules and marks distribution etc. Moreover, the instructors must e well trained in the area of sophisticated e-tools and utilisation.

EMES: The concept, program and development

Figure-1
The EMES System

Evaluating E-Learning Processes and Outcomes: It is generally agreed that the concept and scope of the word 'effectiveness' has been defined in many ways. E-resources assist teachers in achieving pedagogic aims. Therefore, in order to achieve this, there must be usage of technology for teaching and skills in using technology and electronic resources. In this paper, the direct object of our evaluation is e-learning resources at a community college (Jeddah), and the integration of these for creation of blended learning environment. To this end some of the items measured for effectiveness of E-learning resource (ELR) at KAU-Community College (Jeddah) included the following: Technology type, technology in teaching and learning, tools, training etc.

The questions used in the teachers' questionnaire gave a mention to the aforesaid criteria; for the sake of measuring the effectiveness of e–learning resources used at KAU-Community college. The case study research methods are a bit different from other descriptive researches, therefore, the criteria were kept in mind while evaluating the data doing observation and interpretation of the results. This methodology basically follows the main steps in undertaking case studies, drawn mainly on case study research[12].

Collecting and Analyzing Evidence: Multiple sources of evidence have been found as 'key characteristics of case study research'[13]. 'Data collection and analysis are 'developed together in an iterative process,' which can be a powerful way; due to the fact that it allows for theory development which is based on empirical evidence[14]. Furthermore, a careful description of the

data and the development of categories, where behaviors or process reside, have proven to be productive steps in the data analysis process.

Indicators of effectiveness of e-resource and Blended learning: On the basis of the observations, literature reviews, reports personal feedback, it can be concluded that the students took much interest in dealing with the computers and online learning/e-learning mode of education. The teachers also noticed that most students were positive towards the utilization of e-resources. The teachers' preparedness further proves the effectiveness of e-learning as learning/teaching strategy.

Analysis of the teachers' questionnaires: The teachers' questionnaires were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The data gleaned and analysis may prove it. Furthermore, all the necessary measures were taken into consideration while analyzing the research tool. Content analysis involves categorization of themes present in the interview data. It works by drawing out the themes inductively rather than by imposing them upon the data. It is more likely that the first stage of the design of the questionnaires is brought once again into the forefront at the time of data analysis.

Technology in Teaching: The following sub-aspects were studied:

Access: Questions on the aspect of Access (from the teacher's questionnaires: appendix-C) show the following trend:
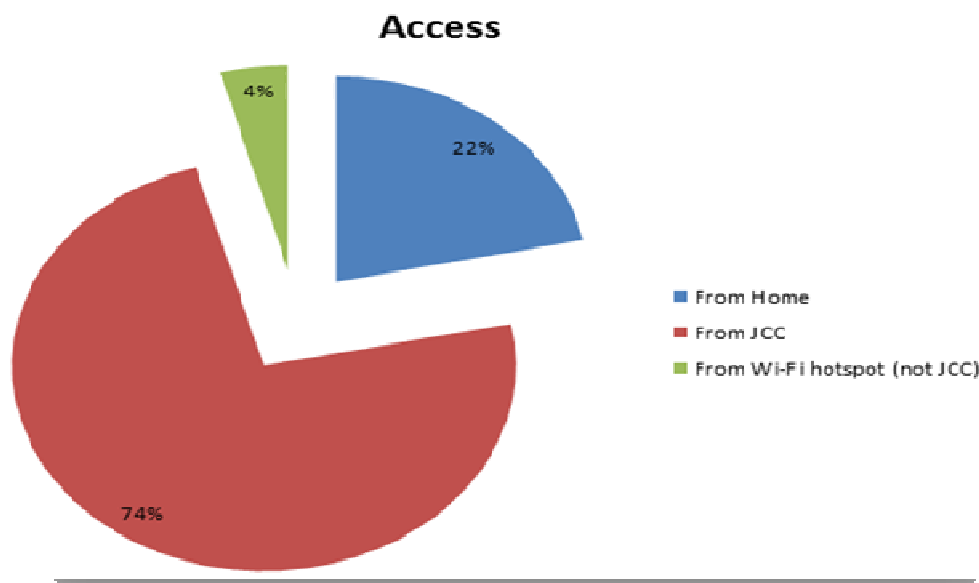

Figure-2
The Access location

Most of the JCC staff use internet from JCC itself. There is a genuine reason for it. JCC has provided internet facilities almost everywhere in the college campus. The teachers can gain access to internet from the classrooms, computer labs, language labs to their offices wherever the need be.

Technology Mediated Learning: Based on the questions on technology mediated learning, the study reveals the following interesting trend:

Technology integration: The following is the graphical presentation of the trend of technology integration at JCC. Most of the JCC staff integrate technology with teaching for better communication. The teachers have their preferred electronic tool, and they mostly focus on the local platform that is none other than EMES.
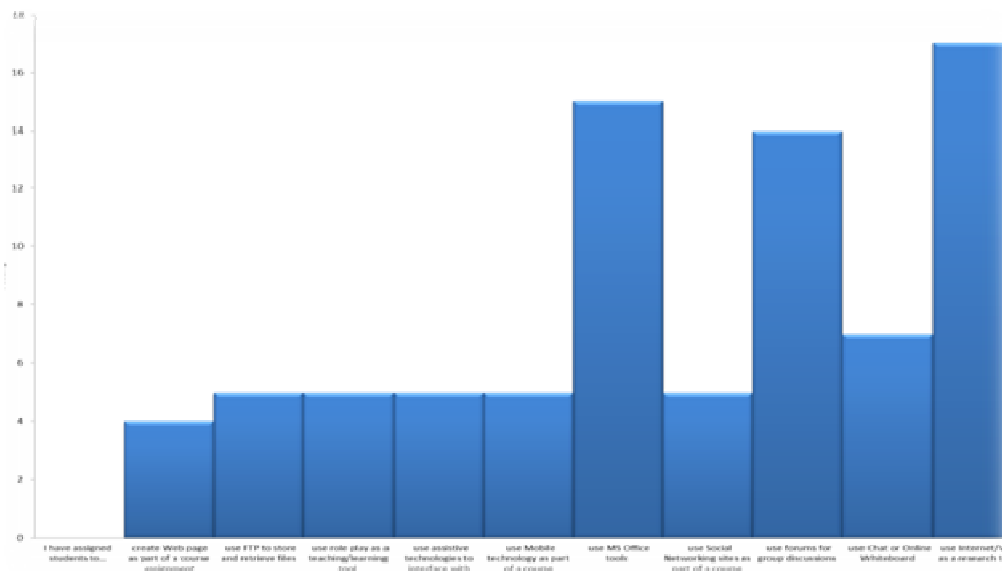

Figure-3
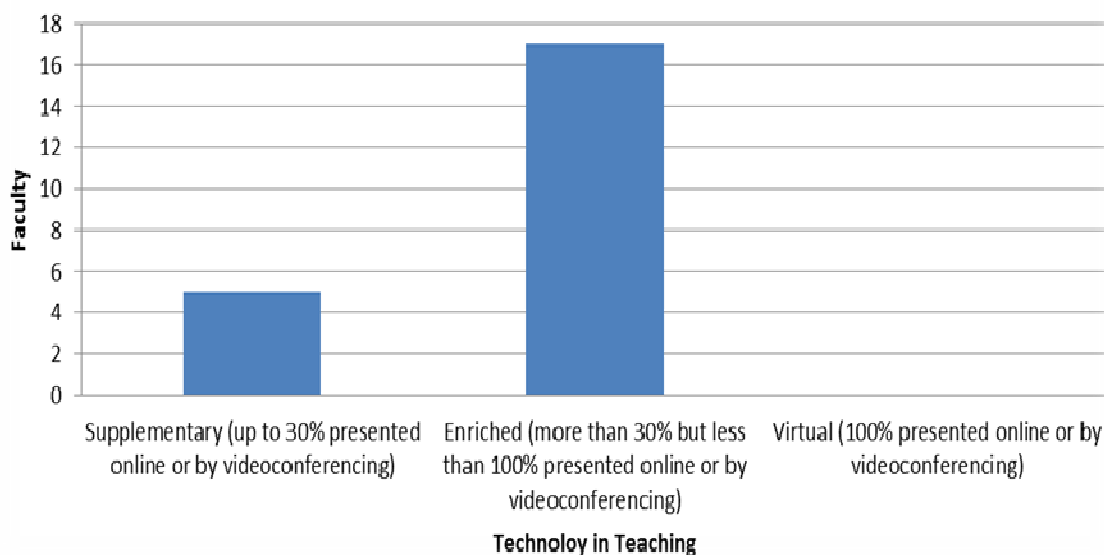**The initiatives taken by the JCC intructors for technology mediated learning**

Figure-4
Teaching/learning tools preferred by the instructors

The effect of Blended learning approach

Table-1
Effectiveness of the Blended learning Approach

| SN	Statements	Agreed	Undecided	Disagree
1-	Routine methods are not very useful these days.	13	-	1
2-	There is a need to combine both the traditional and e-learning strategies.	12	-	2
3-	The teachers should utilize both offline and online learning.	13	1	-
4-	Online learning is very useful for practsing the skills.	11	1	2
5-	The drilling of sound can easily be done through web based material on English.	10	1	3
6-	The EFL teachers are required to prepare them for effective integration of technology.	11	1	2
7-	The performance of the target language learners can be easily enhanced by the online material.	10	1	3
8-	There is a need for e-training sessions for the concerned teachers of English.	11	1	2
9-	Blended learning can facilitate in self -learning mode of English.	10	2	2
10-	Technology can be an effective tool of learning in general.	11	1	2
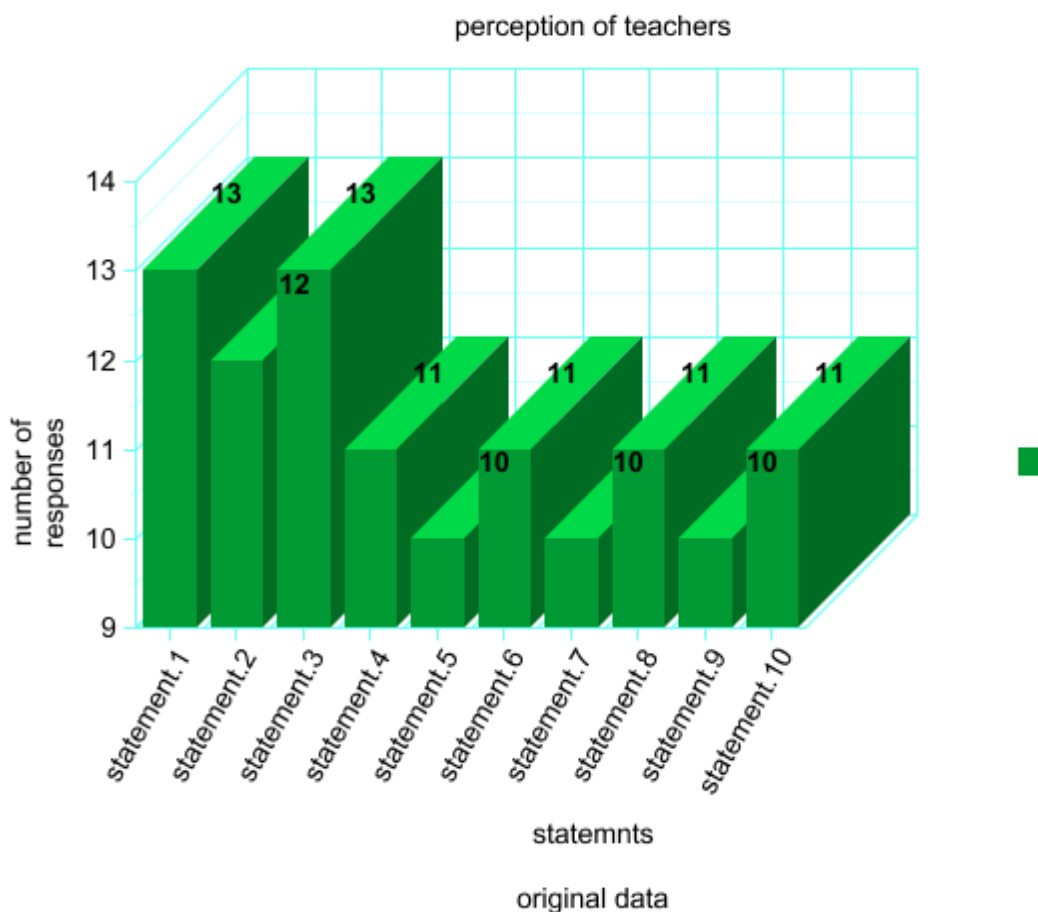
Figure-5
Perception of teachers based on part E of the questionnaires

Measuring the difference between the two groups: Two groups of students were compared on account of their achievements in the test. Their marks were put in the class intervals, and the achievement of the two groups of students (treated and non-treated) were compared and the findings were as under: The mean value of control (non treated) group is 3.47 whereas the mean value of experimental (treated) group is 4.29 which shows: there is a difference in mean values.

Table-2
Statistics of two groups compared

Groups	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Controlled	3.47	17	2.035	.493
Experimental	4.29	17	2.201	.534

Table-3
Correlations of the two groups: controlled and experimental

Groups	N	Correlation	Sig.
Controlled and experimental	17	.972	.000

Table-4
Difference between the two groups

groups		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
	controlled & experimental	-.824	.529	.128	-1.095	-.552	-6.424	16	.000

(p value =.000 which means: there is a significant difference between the sample groups: treated and non treated)

Interpretation of Results

In consideration of the responses of the students, it is found that there are two groups of teachers: On the first hand, the first group is good teachers according to their stand points. Such teachers possessed a lot of ideal characteristics of an ideal teacher. On the other hand, the second group of teachers those who aren't up to the standard of a good teacher; because there are certain features that must be removed from their personalities.

It can further be said that the teachers who lack certain teaching attributes and a humble personality, must pass through in-service training phase; in order to improvise the required aspects of teaching effectiveness. Those who are good teachers should continue to develop personally through the developmental activities, even if they had gone through such programs quite recently.

Findings: It was found through different tools and techniques that blended learning technique was effective and both the teachers and learners enjoyed the novel technique. Analysis of the data indicates that the learners enjoyed the e-resources and their implications in the class. On the other hands, the teachers also utilized most of the e-resources; in order to make their teaching more effective.

Conclusion

This research has investigated e-learning can be effective and useful in the whole educational set up. In this regards, students in general and distance learners in particular, can be benefitted from e-resources/e-learning/online learning or more appropriately blended learning mode of education. It also explores how e-learning can be related to the teachers, and how teachers can take support from the e-learning platform, by examining the research questions that were conceived for the present research.

It can be concluded that e-learning is imperative in most modern institutions across the globe. Furthermore, KAU-CC is no exception; due to the fact that it is one of the pioneering community colleges that had set many trends in the recent past. It organized professional development programs within and outside the institution even in London. The training for electronic learning was also imparted to all the teaching faculty. The classrooms, offices, labs, language labs are well equipped with the e-resources. The literature reviews and the survey reports clearly indicate and verify the effectiveness of e-resources/ e-learning mode of education in general and language learning in particular.

Utilization: The result is going to be utilized not only in the community college, Jeddah or other community colleges in the kingdom, but also by those technical colleges that are more or less like community colleges where other subjects in general and Intensive English in particular, are taught in the foundation year. Thus, modern and sophisticated mode of imparting education in general is always a crucial issue. There has always been a debate over the issues like traditional teaching/learning and innovative strategies. In this connection, e- learning will prove to be a landmark technique to facilitate the learners in a strategic manner and achieve the targets of teaching in general and language teaching/learning in particular.

Implications: The findings from this research have had an impact on learning process and the e-learning facilitators. Many of the key considerations have become part of pedagogic process in general. This research may also be of great value to all those who are associated with the educational planning, curriculum design, teaching, evaluation and professional development as a teacher and e-learning facilitator.

Further research opportunities: As mentioned already, it is beyond the scope of any such project to consider that any change in any aspect of educational system/institution, as an effect of any activity such as e-learning or availability of e-resource. However, it can be safely assumed that despite the limitation of a piece of research, there is a desperate need of a follow up work in the form of a longitudinal study over several years; in order that reliable and prolonged data can be gleaned to unpack such facts.

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