

Practices, challenges, and prospects of e-learning at a Saudi university: English teachers' perspectives

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Abstract. This research aims to examine the practices of university English Language (EL) teachers in e-learning and to explore perspectives on the challenges and prospects of e-learning. It is an exploratory study which adopts a pragmatic paradigm and a mixed method approach to inquiry. A survey design and a phenomenological design are used in this research to investigate the use of technology by the teachers of EL at Umm AlQura University (UQU) in Saudi Arabia (SA) and to explore their lived experiences as well as their views in relation to the challenges and prospects of e-learning implementation. It uses both quantitative data taken from a closed-ended survey (N=43) and qualitative data taken from a Focus Group (FG) with ten university EL teachers who teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP, i.e. medical purposes) in a country where English is used as a foreign language. The research seeks to examine the university EL teachers' practices of e-learning in their teaching and to explore their perspectives on the challenges and prospects of the implementation of e-learning.

Keywords: e-learning, English language teachers, practices, challenges, prospects.

1. Introduction

With the revolution of technology in the last century, technology is now incorporated in many aspects of our life. The educational field is one of the areas which benefits from the proliferated use of digital technologies. Language teaching and learning is not an exception as technology can be used by teachers and learners for different purposes, e.g. finding information online about language, online interaction, and online consumption of target language via

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technological media (Stanley, 2013). In the last decade, e-learning in higher education has seen dramatic development not only in the developed, but also in the developing countries (Mbatl & Minnaar, 2015). Policy makers in SA have established the *e-Learning Strategic Plan* and have set the protocols for e-learning use (Alshahrani & Alshehri, 2012). However, the implementation of e-learning in the Saudi universities seems to be not very effective as compared to the massive funds provided to technology by the Ministry of Education (Quadri et al., 2017).

This paper reports on an exploratory study investigating the practices of university EL teachers in e-learning and exploring their perspectives on the challenges and prospects of e-learning in their institution and in SA. Therefore, the study asks three research questions:

- To what extent do university EL teachers *practise* e-learning? And what are their practices?
- What are the teachers' perspectives on the *challenges* for implementing e-learning in their institution and country?
- What are the teachers' perspectives on the *prospects* of implementing e-learning in their institution and country?

2. Method

2.1. Study design

This is an exploratory study which exploits a mixed method approach to inquiry and a pragmatic paradigm with survey and phenomenological designs to investigate the practices of e-learning by the teachers of EL at UQU in SA and to explore their views on the use of e-learning. The population is the university EL teachers who teach ESP. The sample in the survey design consists of 43 university EL teachers and the one used in the phenomenological design encompasses ten teachers.

2.2. Data collection

Two methods are used to answer the research questions. This mixed-method study uses quantitative data. A closed-ended survey (23 items about frequency of

technology use) was administered to forty-three volunteering university language teachers to examine their practices of e-learning using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'always'. The response rate was a hundred percent. This quantitative data is integrated with qualitative data from a focus group discussion with ten volunteering teachers to further explore their perspectives regarding their practices, challenges, and the prospects of technology implementation in teaching.

3. Results and discussion

SPSS was used to carry out descriptive statistics on teachers' responses in the survey about their practices in e-learning. The findings from the two types of data regarding teachers' practices of e-learning were integrated to ensure the validity of the findings in each type. Findings are extracted from the qualitative data in the FG to explore teachers' perspectives on the challenges and prospects of e-learning.

3.1. Practice

3.1.1. Quantitative data

It was found that the mean for the university English teachers' technology use in teaching is 3.095, $SD=0.489$. This mean indicates a medium frequency of technology use as demonstrated in the calculated length of the scale cells (2.60 to less than 3.40) (see supplementary materials²). The mean for teachers' use of search engines (e.g. Google) is 4.1860 in the range (3.40 to less than 4.20) suggesting that they are often used for teaching. Moreover, the mean for teachers' use of emails is 4.0698, in the range (3.40 to less than 4.20), showing that email is often used.

Nonetheless, the mean for teachers' use of virtual classrooms is 1.814, in the range (1.80 to less than 2.60), indicating a rare use of virtual environments in teaching English. Similarly, the mean for the use of online learning environments (e.g. Jusr, Moodle, Blackboard, D2L) is 1.937, in the range (1.80 to less than 2.60), suggesting a rare use. These findings are not surprising as online learning environments have only recently been adopted by the university and virtual classrooms are being trialled with a small number of teachers.

2. <https://www.dropbox.com/s/iqsuz13c4xqnlca/EUOCALL2018%20proceedings-%20Appendix.docx?dl=0>

3.1.2. *Qualitative data*

Asking teachers in the FG about their role in e-learning, no one goes with the option ‘decision makers’, but six chose ‘users’, and three have gone with ‘other’ which indicates that three of them do not use technology in teaching. The responses about the progress of their institution in e-learning varied: three were positive (e.g. “progressing very fast”), whereas only one negative response suggests low progress (e.g. “baby steps”). Additionally, four positive responses were given about the progress in e-learning in their country (e.g. “advancing”). More of the teachers identified as users than non-users; and most teachers have reported a progress in e-learning in their institution and country. These findings go in line with medium frequency of practice as demonstrated in the mean of teachers’ technology use.

3.2. **Challenges**

Teachers’ responses in the FG about the challenges they face for e-learning varied. Eight responses fall into four categories: equipment (“machines are not provided”), training (“and training of course”), lack of knowledge about how to use technology (“we have to learn how to use it”), and lack of time (e.g. “not enough time”), and one uncategorised response (e.g. “they are all challenges”). The two responses about the expected challenges for e-learning were related to learners: motivating learners (“to motivate students to actually use technology on their own”) and controlling independent learners (“it will be difficult [...] to step in and control the independent students”).

3.3. **Prospects**

Teachers have given one positive response about the prospects of e-learning in their institution (“a time will come when e-learning will be the only solution”) and one ambitious response (“we have to make technology a strength”). However, the responses about e-learning future in SA were more varied: nine positive, four neutral, and two negative responses. Positive responses are like “it is the future” and “technology is taking over”. Examples of the neutral responses are “we need to try to make technology useful for learning” and “the university provided technology and it is up to the teacher if she wants to use it”. A teacher with a negative attitude and low knowledge of technology use had two negative responses, e.g. “be realistic ladies”. Knowing the existing excessive efforts of the deanship of e-learning and distance education and the huge investments in technology made by the university and the Ministry of Education, it was expected to get positive responses about e-learning prospects.

The question about what is needed to facilitate the implementation of e-learning yielded seven different responses about time, practice, staff members, positive attitudes, technical resources, and training. The authorities in the university are recommended to consider these elements in their ongoing plans.

4. Conclusions

The findings identified the medium frequency of the university EL teachers' e-learning practice. Teachers often use search engines and emails, but they rarely use virtual classrooms and online learning environments in teaching English. Teachers' roles in technology use is either as user or non-user with a greater number of participants (double) reporting being users than those being non-users. Most teachers' responses are positive about e-learning progress and e-learning prospects in their university and country. Potential challenges are reported to the implementation of e-learning; and teachers are aware of what can facilitate it. These findings can be considered in the university's ongoing plans for successful implementation of e-learning.

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