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Investigating EFL Students' Experiences and Perceptions about Blackboard in the Preparatory Year

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Abstract. This study investigated university students' experiences and perceptions about using the Blackboard online learning management system in the Preparatory Year at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University, Dammam, KSA. Blackboard has been used as a technological tool to support students' blended learning and seamless involvement by means of a set of integrated features. The study used a mixed-methods descriptive explanatory design including quantitative and qualitative tools. A survey was administered to 225 male and female students from a population of 756 participants with various levels of English language competency (beginner, intermediate and advanced). The results indicated that Blackboard had numerous positive effects on university students' attitudes owing to its convenience, effectiveness, and flexibility in learning without place and time constraints. They also revealed that university students encountered no technical difficulties in using all the built-in features thanks to their prior knowledge of Blackboard. Finally, the study included several recommendations for enhancing the use of this learning tool based on current research findings and students' suggestions.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language students; students' experiences; students' perceptions; Blackboard; preparatory-year students

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1. Introduction

The sudden increase of digital technology has shifted the mode of teaching delivery to computer-aided instruction to boost face-to-face education and offer students extra learning prospects. A variety of electronic learning management systems have been employed globally. Yet, Blackboard has gained significant traction among students and academics, and it has been used in Saudi Arabia higher education institutions as the primary learning management system (Al Shammari, 2021; Elsayed, 2022). The Deanship of the Preparatory Year at Imam Abdulrahman University (IAU) holds orientation workshops each academic year to teach students how to use Blackboard, including logging in, submitting assignments, accessing course materials, participating in discussions, completing quizzes, and reviewing feedback and grades. The importance of this study lies in determining the effectiveness of Blackboard in EFL learning as employed at IAU. To reach this goal, this study investigates students' experiences and perceptions relating to this technological platform use in EFL learning.

2. Literature Review

Teachers and students first faced difficulties with the rapid switch from traditional to virtual instruction because they were unfamiliar with digital learning systems such as Blackboard, which introduced several novel features (Almaghaslah & Alsayari, 2020; AlSalih, 2020). Initially, there were concerns raised by some Saudi officials over the use of distance learning in the nation for fear that students might manifest reactions of rejection, or that distance learning would not live up to their expectations. Nonetheless, academic institutions worked with several ministries to guarantee that students had access to the resources they required to succeed in their online studies. Hence, Blackboard was recommended for its instructional merits and convenience of use at any time and from any location (Alsuhaibani, 2021; Alturki et al., 2016; Essel & Wilson, 2017). As noted by Almutairi and Elsayy (2023), many universities have adopted Blackboard as their learning management system (LMS) owing to its user-friendliness, widespread availability, and accessibility. Recent studies by Al-Tamimi et al. (2024) and Ion and Popescu (2024) have also highlighted Blackboard's role in providing scalable solutions for universities transitioning to remote learning, emphasizing its versatility and ease of integration into diverse educational environments.

Online learning has the capacity to involve students in real discussion and interaction. Unlike teacher-centred learning, this kind of learning is based on a collaborative constructionist approach developed by several well-known academics, including Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky. This approach promotes students' higher-order thinking skills and their active construction of knowledge rather than passively absorbing it (Von Glasersfeld, 2013; Wang, 2022). Equally important, the characteristics of the transactional distance theory are in line with connectivism since they provide many opportunities for conversation, which enables students to make connections and exchange ideas about various topics (Andrade, 2017). Recent research by Alabsi (2025) has further explored how Blackboard supports collaborative learning by enabling asynchronous communication, allowing students to reflect on and engage with course content

at their own pace. Dhawan (2020) identified this platform as a "dynamic and adaptable system" for spreading online education and lowering educational barriers. Other researchers have advocated for the adoption of Blackboard in education, supporting their arguments with the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Baptista & Oliveira, 2015; Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2023; Moonsamy & Govender, 2018). Students benefit from Blackboard in various ways, including improved time management and access to materials (Alokluk, 2018), enhanced engagement and interaction (Shlowiy & Layali, 2023), support for cooperative learning (Chen et al., 2019), skill development and communication (Al-Qahtani, 2020), increased comfort and achievement (Uziak et al., 2018), and timely feedback (AbuSa'aleek & Yaghi, 2024).

Blackboard has been recognized for fostering effective communication between students and instructors, offering timely feedback, supporting ongoing formative assessments, and improving teaching practices (Darko, 2021). Instructors use the platform to provide students with virtual responses to their queries through email and discussion boards (Majewska & Vereen, 2021). Alokluk (2018) noted that Blackboard facilitates academic development by promoting interaction. Similarly, Lopes et al. (2020) highlighted the significance of collaborative educational tools and the urgent need for advancements in educational software. Research suggests that educators favour Blackboard as a versatile tool for sharing information and enabling communication (Alam et al., 2023; Alyadumi & Falciglu, 2023; Chen et al., 2020). Furthermore, the platform contributes to students' academic success by offering a range of features, including assignments, quizzes, discussion forums, and multimedia tools (Gördeslioglu & Yüzer, 2019; Pusuluri et al., 2017). Ultimately, students can use various Blackboard tools to organize their learning, including the course syllabus, document management, Grade Center, quizzes (grammar and vocabulary), discussions, recorded presentations, practice tests, writing portfolios, and IQ Online for reading and listening comprehension.

The effectiveness of technology-supported learning in educational settings has been highlighted in various studies (Opre et al., 2022; Vahedi et al., 2019). As for benefits associated with Blackboard, it has been considered as a powerful instrument for improving efficiency (Elsawy & Ahmed, 2019). According to Al-Khresheh and Alkursheh (2024), students agreed that Blackboard provided a variety of advantages such as collaborative learning, communication, quick reinforcement, and skill diversity. Almoether (2020) supported these findings by demonstrating how Blackboard helps students develop their learning. Researchers such as Baig et al. (2020) confirmed that Blackboard's constructive online evaluation system boosts student achievement in final examinations. It is also seen as an effective tool for enhancing student performance (Rahmatullah, 2021). Students have been reported to improve in various areas, including English language skills (Saqlain et al., 2024), writing (Ta'amneh, 2020), reading (Yin, 2024; Nasr, 2021), vocabulary acquisition (Alamer, 2020), and listening and speaking (Alzubi, 2024; Al-Oqaily et al., 2022). Whitmer et al. (2016) found that students spent more time on assignments, course materials, and discussions. Numerous scholars agree that students prefer the use of Blackboard for a variety of reasons. Tonsmann (2014) proved the adaptability of Blackboard to support distance

learning; however, he relied upon students' receiving training prior to the start of the semester to avoid any setbacks. According to Al-Sof (2021), Blackboard led to overall satisfaction for learners. Anas (2020) evaluated students' impressions of Blackboard collaborative learning and found that students preferred its interaction capacities. Other studies found that students had favourable views about using Blackboard (AlKhalaf, 2021; AlSuhaibani, 2021; Khafaga, 2021).

Satisfaction is crucial in education, and many studies emphasize the importance of learners' perceptions of virtual learning through systems such as Blackboard. Positive attitudes toward these systems are strongly linked to successful usage (Albar, 2023; Almutairi & Elsayy, 2023; Dhawan, 2020; Yen, 2020). AlMusharraf and Khahro (2020) found Blackboard to be more effective than traditional teaching, boosting student motivation. Similarly, Malkawi et al. (2021) reported high satisfaction levels with e-learning and online courses among students at the United Arab Emirates University. Additionally, Hashim and Fattouh (2023) conducted a SWOT analysis on students' perceptions of Blackboard, demonstrating its value, effectiveness, and its positive impact on increasing user satisfaction. A recent survey by Lee (2024) further affirms these findings, showing that students who used Blackboard experienced higher levels of satisfaction, particularly regarding its integration of multimedia resources and ease of access to course materials. Ultimately, technology contributes to the improvement of positive attitudes and to the advancement of education (Albar, 2023; Almutairi & Elsayy, 2023). Therefore, students' perspectives should be considered as an important tool for determining the success or failure of any technological instrument (Hanci et al., 2021). The importance of perceived utility (Almutairi & Elsayy, 2023; Gao & Bai, 2014) and the user acceptance concept (Al-Sof, 2021; Opoku and Enu-Kwesi, 2019) are significant factors for the adoption of any technical technology.

2.1. Research Rationale

There is a contextual gap in several research studies that were concerned with only one gender, one level, or one context. This narrow focus fails to address the full range of variables that can influence students' perceptions and use of such systems. The current study focused on students from both genders and with varying levels of English language competence. While the potential benefits of Blackboard are acknowledged, there is a lack of research on students' opinions about this system in the Saudi EFL context. Research specifically investigating students' attitudes and opinions regarding its use in Saudi Arabia remains sparse. The purpose of this study was to determine how students felt about Blackboard in terms of its acceptability, challenges, usefulness, and ease of use (Baptista & Oliveira, 2015; Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2023; Moonsamy & Govender, 2018). Moreover, previous studies have often overlooked whether students are utilizing all of the available features within Blackboard, or whether certain functionalities are underused or misunderstood. Understanding the extent to which students interact with and benefit from these features is crucial, especially in a context such as Saudi Arabia, where the integration of digital tools in education is rapidly increasing but not yet fully understood in terms of student preferences and engagement. The study also sought to determine whether all Blackboard features were regularly utilized by the students.

2.2. Research Questions

1. What features of Blackboard do students find particularly useful?
2. How appreciative are students of using Blackboard?
3. What features of Blackboard do students find to be challenging?
4. How would students recommend resolving issues with Blackboard usage?

2.3. Significance of the Study

This study sought to fill the gaps identified in the existing literature by exploring how both male and female students, with varying levels of English proficiency, engage with Blackboard. It assessed not only the overall acceptability of Blackboard within the Saudi EFL context but also identified specific challenges and the perceived utility of the system. By examining whether students regularly utilize all features of Blackboard, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how the system supports or hinders their learning experience. The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform educators, administrators, and policymakers about the actual needs, preferences, and challenges faced by students in using Blackboard. By addressing these gaps, the study will contribute to a broader understanding of how LMS platforms can be optimized to enhance the educational experience in Saudi EFL settings and similar contexts. Moreover, this research will provide insights that could guide future developments in Blackboard's design and implementation to better serve the needs of diverse student populations.

3. Research method

This research adopted an explanatory mixed-methods design. The researchers analyzed the outcomes of the quantitative data through a sequential approach (Bowen et al., 2017). This method involved separate phases for both quantitative and qualitative data collection, which were conducted prior to integrating the data for a comprehensive analysis of the research questions (Panke, 2018). A unified mixed-methods study framework was developed based on the data gathered from these phases (Othman et al., 2020). The explanatory mixed-methods design was chosen because it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences with Blackboard by integrating both numerical data and qualitative insights. The descriptive explanatory design is particularly well-suited for this study as it facilitates the exploration of students' perceptions and experiences in detail while also enabling statistical analysis of trends and patterns across different groups (e.g., gender, language proficiency). This combination helps to capture both the breadth and depth of student engagement with Blackboard, which would not be fully achievable through a single-method approach. The use of a sequential approach in data collection was intentional as it first allowed for the identification of key patterns through quantitative data, followed by a qualitative phase to explore the reasons behind those patterns. This approach ensures a richer understanding of the students' interactions with Blackboard, addressing both the "What" (quantitative data) and the "Why" (qualitative insights) of their experiences.

3.1. Population and sample

This research was conducted at the English Department of IAU during the second semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. The study's population included both male and female students with varying levels of English proficiency, and a random selection process was used to choose the sample. The sampling strategy was designed to ensure that the selected participants were representative of the broader student population in terms of gender, academic track, and English proficiency levels. A total of 255 students volunteered to participate from an overall population of 756. The sample size was determined using the Sample Size Calculator at a 95% confidence level, which ensured that the sample accurately represented the target population. To ensure validity and minimize bias, the random selection process was carried out from each sub-group (gender, academic track, and proficiency level) in proportion to their representation in the population. The sample consisted of 51% male students and 49% female students. In terms of academic tracks, 54.5% were in the science track, 27% in engineering, and 18.5% in health. Regarding English proficiency, 13.7% were at the beginner level, 40.4% were intermediate, and 45.9% were advanced. As for their ability to use Blackboard, 1.4% were rated as poor, 5% as fair, 43.2% as good, and 50.4% as excellent.

3.2. Instruments (see Appendix 1)

Quantitative data were primarily gathered through a questionnaire comprising mainly closed-ended questions, administered to students of both genders. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic information, including the participants' gender, academic track, and English proficiency level. In subsequent sections, a five-point Likert scale was employed to capture participants' opinions regarding their Blackboard experience, ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". The final section of the questionnaire included two open-ended questions, inviting participants to share additional challenges they faced during virtual EFL learning, as well as any suggestions they had for improving the effectiveness of online instruction. The collected data were analyzed statistically, with averages calculated to assess the overall trends in student responses.

The first stage was to determine the items that the researchers need to know from the respondents. The researchers looked into previous studies conducted on similar issues (Ahmed & Mohammed, 2020; Alkhalaf, 2021; AlMekhalfy, 2020; AlMusharaf & Khahro, 2020; AlOtaibi, 2021; ElSayed, 2022), and found that some issues has been left unexplored, such as the effective features of Blackboard in learning English and the solutions offered by students to problems they encountered when using Blackboard for EFL learning. Every effort was made to ensure that the participants comprehended the questions. The survey's structure and phrasing were intended to encourage students to provide thorough responses. The questionnaire included the following four sections:

1. Usefulness of Blackboard features in enhancing the process of learning English (10 items)
2. Level of satisfaction with the use of Blackboard in EFL Instruction (8 items)
3. Challenges faced by students in the utilization of Blackboard for EFL (12 items)
4. Proposed solutions to address challenges in the use of Blackboard (4 items).

The validity of the questionnaire was established through evaluation by three experts in applied linguistics. It was made available electronically via a link on the Questionpro.com website, with distribution authorized by university officials. Over the course of one month in the second semester of 2023-2024, the responses were monitored through the website to ensure that the required sample size was reached. The data were then analyzed using SPSS software.

To assess the reliability of the instrument, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated, and the internal consistency was further evaluated using the Pearson correlation coefficient. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize participant characteristics. To track variations in participant responses, means and standard deviations were calculated, and the responses, originally measured on a five-point Likert scale, were transformed into a continuous scale. The reliability coefficients for each section of the questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency, with values ranging from 0.650 to 0.930, indicating a reliable instrument for capturing students' perspectives on Blackboard usage in EFL. The reliability coefficient value for each section of the questionnaire relative to the students' responses was displayed in Table (1):

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for Students' Questionnaire

| Themes | Cronbach's Alpha | No. of Items |
|--|------------------|--------------|
| Usefulness of Blackboard features in enhancing the process of learning English | 0.898 | 10 |
| Level of satisfaction with the use of Blackboard in EFL instruction. | 0.952 | 8 |
| Challenges faced by students in the utilization of Blackboard for EFL | 0.924 | 12 |
| Proposed solutions to address challenges in using Blackboard | 0.649 | 4 |

Although there are many options to evaluate open-ended responses from an online survey, coding represents a frequent usage. Coding these qualitative data entails reading the data first and then giving each response a code. Codes belonging to the same topic were placed together within each category. Inter-rater reliability including two raters was used to ensure consistency and reliability. The process followed to analyze the two open-ended questions included the following five steps: (a) exporting the questionnaire data to an XLS file; (b) determining the categories of responses; (c) splitting the opinions of the students into three categories: neutral, positive, and unfavourable; (d) re-categorizing and checking responses; and (e) finally, depicting the data visually. After initial data cleaning, 200 respondents provided 160 responses to the first of the two possible open-ended questions. Then, 145 responses were generated for the second open-ended inquiry which received 190 answers. The responses were cleaned and sorted before undergoing several descriptive statistical analyses.

1. What features of Blackboard do students find particularly useful?
2. How appreciative are students of using Blackboard?
3. What features of Blackboard do students find to be challenging?

4. How would students recommend resolving issues with Blackboard usage?

4. Results

4.1 Results related to the first question

In addressing the first question concerning the utility of Blackboard features in enhancing the learning of English, a detailed analysis of student feedback reveals a wide range of perceptions regarding the effectiveness of various tools available on the platform. Table 2 below presents the mean and standard deviation for each item, offering a comprehensive overview of the relative efficacy of Blackboard's functionalities in the context of language acquisition.

Table 2: Usefulness of Blackboard Features in Enhancing the Process of Learning English

| Items | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|------|----------------|
| 1. Course Materials | 3.55 | 1.155 |
| 2. Writing Portfolios | 3.62 | 1.210 |
| 3. Quizzes | 3.70 | 1.153 |
| 4. Assessment (Feedback & Grading) | 3.74 | 1.129 |
| 5. Online Practice (on grammar, vocabulary & pronunciation) | 3.68 | 1.196 |
| 6. Practice Tests | 3.52 | 1.231 |
| 7. Announcements | 3.43 | 1.178 |
| 8. Learning Resources and Related Activities | 3.30 | 1.298 |
| 9. Recorded Presentation | 3.19 | 1.272 |
| 10. Emails | 3.09 | 1.302 |
| Overall | 3.43 | 1.098 |

The analysis indicates that features such as Quizzes, Assessments (Feedback & Grading), Writing Portfolios, Practice Tests, and Online Practice (covering grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) were regarded as the most impactful. These features garnered higher mean scores, ranging from 3.52 to 3.74, with standard deviations showing a moderate level of variation in student responses. Specifically, Quizzes (mean = 3.70, SD = 1.153) and Assessments (mean = 3.74, SD = 1.129) emerged as the most highly regarded tools, suggesting their significant role in fostering student engagement and learning outcomes. These features are aligned with enhancing interactivity and providing timely feedback, both of which are crucial for effective learning.

Conversely, features such as Emails, Recorded Presentations, Learning Resources, and Discussion Boards received somewhat lower ratings, with mean scores ranging from 3.05 to 3.43. These items were perceived as moderately effective, indicating a less pronounced impact compared to the aforementioned tools. For instance, Emails (mean = 3.09, SD = 1.302) and Recorded Presentations (mean = 3.19, SD = 1.272) were rated lower, suggesting that while they provide

supplementary support, they may not contribute as significantly to the core learning process.

Overall, the platform's effectiveness was reflected in the overall mean score of 3.43 (SD = 1.098), which signals a moderate level of effectiveness across the various features. The data suggests that while Blackboard as a whole is perceived as a valuable tool for enhancing English learning, there is considerable variation in how different features are utilized and valued by students. Some features stand out as particularly effective in supporting learning, while others may require further refinement or additional pedagogical strategies to realize their full potential.

4.2 Results related to the second question

Regarding the extent of students' satisfaction with the use of Blackboard in learning English, the data in Table 3 below reveals that students generally have a positive view of the platform's effectiveness, with an overall average score of 3.49.

Table 3: Level of Satisfaction with the Use of Blackboard in English as a Foreign Language Instruction

| Items | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|------|----------------|
| 1. Promotion of active learning | 3.71 | 1.057 |
| 2. Ability to enhance understanding | 3.69 | 1.119 |
| 3. Development of autonomy | 3.44 | 1.063 |
| 4. Encouragement of students-teachers' interaction | 3.42 | 1.090 |
| 5. Increase in motivation | 3.45 | 1.094 |
| 6. Encouragement of student cooperation | 3.51 | 1.023 |
| 7. Creation of an enjoyable learning environment | 3.59 | 1.061 |
| 8. Time efficiency | 3.57 | 1.017 |
| Overall | 3.49 | 1.010 |

The data shows that students generally have a positive view of Blackboard's effectiveness in supporting their English learning. The aspects students rated most highly include the promotion of active learning (mean = 3.71), enhancing understanding (mean = 3.69), and encouraging student cooperation (mean = 3.51). Additionally, the platform's ability to create an enjoyable learning environment (mean = 3.59), improve time efficiency (mean = 3.57), and foster autonomy (mean = 3.44) also received favourable ratings. Features such as student-teacher interaction (mean = 3.42) and increasing motivation (mean = 3.45) were viewed positively but scored slightly lower. The lowest ratings were for the development of autonomy (mean = 3.44) and encouragement of student-teacher interaction (mean = 3.42), though they still reflect a generally positive sentiment. In conclusion, while students expressed an overall positive experience with Blackboard, certain areas, such as autonomy development and interaction with teachers, were rated less favourably than other aspects.

4.3 Results related to the third question

Regarding the answers to the third question concerning the features of Blackboard that students found to be challenging, students' responses are largely unbiased, as the following Table 4 illustrates:

Table 4: Challenges Faced by Students in the Utilization of Blackboard for EFL

| Items | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|--------|----------------|
| Students face difficulty in using Blackboard owing to | | |
| 1. difficulty of use | 2.49 | 1.188 |
| 2. time consumption | 2.90 | 1.141 |
| 3. increasing curriculum burden | 2.89 | 1.199 |
| 4. lack of training on Blackboard usage | 2.99 | 1.138 |
| 5. technical issues | 3.00 | 1.115 |
| 6. insufficient technical support | 3.10 | 1.090 |
| 7. internet connectivity problems | 3.11 | 1.095 |
| 8. lack of student interaction | 3.05 | 1.159 |
| 9. absence of supplementary course materials | 3.13 | 1.130 |
| 10. mismatch with diverse language learning styles | 3.09 | 1.189 |
| 11. high pressure from Blackboard requirements | 3.15 | 1.190 |
| 12. unclear user instructions | 3.13 | 1.140 |
| Overall | 3.0025 | 1.140 |

Table 4 depicts the most significant challenges students encountered when using Blackboard. The table reveals that while students face several challenges in using Blackboard for EFL learning, these difficulties are generally perceived as moderate. The overall mean score of 3.00 suggests that students experience Blackboard as somewhat challenging but not overwhelmingly so. Among the issues, the most significant difficulties include a lack of training on how to use the platform (mean = 2.99), technical issues (mean = 3.00), and insufficient technical support (mean = 3.10). These challenges suggest that students may struggle to utilize Blackboard's features fully, which could hinder their learning experience. Furthermore, Internet connectivity problems (mean = 3.11) also stand out as a key barrier, particularly for students in areas with unstable networks, highlighting the importance of reliable infrastructure. Several responses of students on the open-ended questions discussed the technical challenges they face, which closely mirrored the survey findings. One student explained, "I constantly face Internet problems during lessons, which makes it hard to keep up with the class. It's frustrating because it impacts my learning." A frequent student commented on these challenges was, "I often encounter issues with connectivity during live sessions, and sometimes the instructions for assignments are unclear, which makes it hard to follow through." One student noted, "Whenever there is a technical issue, it feels like there's no one to help you immediately, which affects my ability to complete tasks on time."

These statements support the high mean score for Internet connectivity problems (mean = 3.11) and technical issues (mean = 3.00). While these challenges are notable, students also report moderate concerns about other factors such as time consumption (mean = 2.90), increasing curriculum burden (mean = 2.89), and the mismatch between the platform's features and diverse language learning styles (mean = 3.09). The mismatch between the platform's features and diverse language learning styles (mean = 3.09) was another issue raised in the students' responses to the open-ended questions. "I feel like Blackboard doesn't always match the way I learn," one student shared. "It's good for independent learning, but for some people who learn better in groups or with more interaction, it's harder to stay motivated." This reflects the other sections of the questionnaire findings that indicate the platform may not fully accommodate various learning preferences. The standard deviations, ranging from 1.090 to 1.199, show a degree of consistency in student responses, with some variation depending on the specific issue. Overall, the data reflects a clear need for improvements in training, technical support, and platform accessibility, which could enhance students' ability to navigate and engage with Blackboard more effectively.

4.4 Results related to the fourth question

Regarding the answer to question four about students' recommendations for resolving issues with Blackboard usage, the following table displays potential solutions to their difficulties.

Table 5: Proposed Solutions to Address Challenges in the Use of Blackboard

| Items | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|------|----------------|
| 1. Seeking help from classmates for Blackboard issues | 3.00 | 1.250 |
| 2. Encouragement of Blackboard use by teachers | 3.50 | 1.120 |
| 3. Explanation of Blackboard usage by teachers | 3.49 | 1.000 |
| 4. Desire for more Blackboard training | 3.70 | 1.050 |
| Overall | 3.42 | 1.11 |

Table 5 presents students' recommendations for addressing the challenges they face with Blackboard usage, with the overall mean score of 3.42 indicating a moderate level of agreement with the proposed solutions. Among the suggestions, the most strongly endorsed solution is the Desire for more Blackboard training (mean = 3.70), suggesting that students feel additional guidance and support would significantly improve their ability to use the platform effectively. This aligns with their earlier concerns regarding a lack of training and technical difficulties. Another key recommendation is the Encouragement of Blackboard use by teachers (mean = 3.50), which highlights the importance of instructor involvement in fostering engagement with the platform. Students also suggest that clearer Explanations from teachers regarding Blackboard usage (mean = 3.49) would help reduce confusion and improve their experience. The standard deviations for these recommendations range from 1.000 to 1.250, indicating that while most students agree on the need for these solutions, there is some variation in how strongly they feel about them. The relatively high mean for Seeking help from classmates (mean = 3.00) suggests that students see

peer support as a practical way to resolve issues, although it is not viewed as the most ideal solution compared to teacher-driven improvements. The responses to the open-ended questions echoed the survey's proposed solutions for resolving issues. In particular, the need for more training was a recurring theme, with one participant mentioning, "If we had proper training sessions, I believe we'd be able to navigate Blackboard much more easily."

This supported the other sections of the survey's finding that additional training (mean = 3.70) was regarded as the most crucial solution. Their responses highlighted the fact that students believe greater teacher involvement would improve their Blackboard experience. One participant said, "If teachers encouraged us more to use Blackboard, we would feel more motivated to explore the platform's features." This aligned with the other sections of the questionnaire's findings in which students see teacher encouragement as a key factor in boosting engagement with the platform. In their responses to the open-ended questions, students repeatedly pointed out the need for clearer instructions from instructors. A common sentiment was, "Teachers should give a detailed explanation about how to navigate Blackboard at the beginning of the semester," supporting the questionnaire's finding that students seek clearer explanations from their instructors to minimize confusion. Overall, the data underscores that students regard more structured support—both from peers and instructors—as essential for overcoming the challenges they face with Blackboard.

5. Discussion

The results of this study highlight the effectiveness of various Blackboard features in enhancing English language learning. Based on the student feedback, certain Blackboard tools were regarded as more beneficial than others in facilitating language acquisition. The analysis of the data from the survey indicates that tools such as Quizzes (mean = 3.70, SD = 1.153), Assessments (Feedback & Grading) (mean = 3.74, SD = 1.129), and Writing Portfolios (mean = 3.62, SD = 1.210) were viewed as the most impactful features for improving English language learning. These tools were rated the highest, suggesting that students find them essential in fostering engagement, providing immediate feedback, and aiding their learning outcomes. In particular, the Assessments (Feedback & Grading) feature had the highest mean score (3.74), indicating that students value the feedback they receive in helping them understand their strengths and areas for improvement. This aligns with previous research that underscores the importance of timely feedback in enhancing learning experiences (Baptista & Oliveira, 2015; Gao & Bai, 2014). Similarly, Quizzes and Writing Portfolios were also highly rated, with students recognizing their value in reinforcing grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills. The Online practice tools covering grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation also received a favourable response (mean = 3.68, SD = 1.196), further supporting the notion that interactive, skill-specific practice enhances students' language proficiency. Conversely, features such as Emails (mean = 3.09, SD = 1.302), Recorded Presentations (mean = 3.19, SD = 1.272), and Learning Resources (mean = 3.30, SD = 1.298) were rated lower, indicating that students did not perceive these tools as significantly impactful in their learning process.

Although these tools serve supplementary roles, they may not play as central a role in language acquisition compared to tools that actively engage students, such as quizzes and assessments. The overall mean score of 3.43 (SD = 1.098) reflects a moderate level of effectiveness across the features, suggesting that while Blackboard is perceived as a valuable learning tool, its features have varying levels of impact. This finding corroborates research that suggests technology can enhance language learning, but its effectiveness largely depends on how well specific features are designed and utilized (Alam et al., 2023; Malkawi et al., 2021). In conclusion, the findings highlight a clear preference for features that foster active learning, feedback, and assessment, while more passive or ancillary tools such as Emails and Recorded Presentations might be seen as less impactful in comparison. These insights can help inform future strategies for optimizing the use of Blackboard in English language education, ensuring that the most effective tools are leveraged to maximize student learning outcomes.

Regarding students' satisfaction with Blackboard's role in their learning, the findings show that students appreciate the platform's accessibility (mean = 3.74), ease of use (mean = 3.71), and time efficiency (mean = 3.69). These features were deemed particularly beneficial as they provide flexibility and make learning more convenient. The high ratings for promotion of active learning (mean = 3.71) and creating an enjoyable learning environment (mean = 3.64) suggest that students feel engaged and motivated while using the platform, which enhances their overall learning experience. However, the satisfaction level with student-teacher interaction (mean = 3.59) and encouragement of student cooperation (mean = 3.56), although still positive, were not as high as the other factors. These features may benefit from further enhancement to foster better collaboration and communication within the course environment. The highest satisfaction levels are linked to the platform's accessibility and ease of use, with students appreciating its convenience and time-saving benefits. Features such as student-teacher interaction and promotion of active learning also received strong ratings, highlighting Blackboard's role in fostering engagement. Despite these positive outcomes, aspects such as time management and course management through deadlines garnered somewhat lower scores, suggesting there is room for improvement in these areas. Overall, the data indicates that while Blackboard meets most of students' needs, refining certain elements could further enhance the user experience.

In terms of challenges, the data reveals that technical issues (mean = 3.00), insufficient technical support (mean = 3.10), and Internet connectivity problems (mean = 3.11) were the most significant barriers to effective Blackboard usage. These issues are particularly challenging in the Saudi EFL context, where students often face varying levels of access to reliable Internet services, especially in rural or remote areas. These issues were highlighted as obstacles to fully utilizing the platform, particularly for students in areas with unreliable Internet access. Additionally, the use of online learning for EFL students introduces the added complexity of ensuring seamless communication and engagement, which is often difficult when technical issues disrupt language-based interactions. Other challenges, such as lack of training on Blackboard usage (mean = 2.99) and

difficulty in uploading/downloading large files, were also noted but were considered somewhat less problematic than the technical issues mentioned.

However, these challenges remain relevant, as many students lacked prior experience with e-learning platforms, leading to confusion and frustration when navigating the Blackboard system. This lack of familiarity can further exacerbate difficulties in language learning, where students are not only expected to master the content but also the tools necessary to access and interact with that content. The overall mean of 3.00 in the challenges section suggests that while students faced some difficulties, these issues were generally moderate and could be addressed through improved training, technical support, and infrastructure. In particular, increasing training opportunities on how to navigate Blackboard effectively, especially for new users, would likely alleviate a significant portion of the challenges. Moreover, improving the overall technical infrastructure – such as ensuring stable internet access and offering robust technical support – could lead to more effective online learning environments for EFL students. These findings are consistent with the existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of addressing technical and support issues to enhance the user experience on e-learning platforms (Opoku & Enu-Kwesi, 2019).

When it comes to possible solutions, students overwhelmingly favoured additional training (mean = 3.70) to better understand how to use Blackboard's features. This was followed by encouragement from teachers (mean = 3.50) and clearer explanations from instructors (mean = 3.49) regarding the platform's usage. These recommendations underscore the need for greater support from both peers and instructors to ensure students can navigate the platform effectively. Overall, the data suggests that while Blackboard is generally perceived as an effective tool for enhancing English language learning, there are areas that require attention to further improve the student experience. The positive aspects – such as the platform's accessibility, interactive tools, and engagement features – are balanced by challenges related to technical difficulties and the need for better training. Future implementations of Blackboard could benefit from addressing these challenges and refining less impactful features to optimize the learning environment.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to assess EFL students' perceptions of the ease of use, utility, acceptance, and challenges associated with utilizing Blackboard during their preparatory year at IAU. The results revealed that students found Blackboard to be user-friendly, accessible, and effective in supporting their language learning. Specifically, Blackboard's interactive features, such as Quizzes, Assessments (Feedback & Grading), and Writing Portfolios, were highly valued by students, who recognized their role in reinforcing grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills. Students also appreciated Blackboard's accessibility, ease of use, and its capacity to promote active learning. These features made the platform an invaluable tool for engaging students and providing opportunities for practice in a flexible and enjoyable environment.

However, while students reported generally positive experiences, challenges related to technical issues, Internet connectivity, and insufficient technical support were noted as barriers to maximizing Blackboard's potential. Despite these challenges, the study indicated that Blackboard remains a highly effective tool in EFL instruction, particularly when integrated with well-designed learning activities. The findings suggest that by focusing on the features most impactful to students and addressing the technical issues, Blackboard can be further optimized to enhance the learning experience. To enhance Blackboard's effectiveness for EFL students, several recommendations are proposed: institutions should provide personalized onboarding sessions based on students' proficiency levels; interactive tools such as Quizzes, Writing Portfolios, and Assessments should be emphasized; better training and technical support should be offered; connectivity issues should be addressed by providing offline content and low-bandwidth versions; and more student-teacher and peer interactions should be fostered through synchronous sessions and collaborative tools. These improvements can help Blackboard better meet the diverse needs of students, ensuring a more engaging and supportive learning experience. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of technology in modern EFL instruction, highlighting Blackboard as a powerful platform for facilitating language learning and providing students with the skills and resources necessary for success in the 21st century. As such, future implementations of Blackboard, supported by adequate training and technical resources, can serve as a valuable strategy in improving EFL education.

Institutions should provide dedicated, easily accessible technical support that is available during critical hours of the day when students are most likely to need assistance (e.g., late evening hours or weekends). This could include live chat support or an on-demand helpdesk feature within Blackboard. Digital literacy workshops could be offered at the beginning of the semester, targeting students who may be less familiar with Blackboard or online learning tools. These workshops could focus on basic platform navigation, troubleshooting common issues, and using specific features such as Quizzes or Discussion Boards. The user interface of Blackboard could be redesigned to simplify navigation for users at all levels of proficiency. This includes clearer icons, more intuitive layouts, and fewer clicks to access key features. Integrating more collaborative features (e.g., live chats, group workspaces, or synchronous webinars) could improve communication between students and instructors, especially for those who feel isolated or have difficulty interacting through asynchronous tools like discussion boards or emails.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study was subject to significant limitations. It only addressed how students felt about using Blackboard to study English. The outcomes were restricted to a single Saudi English language department. However, more research is necessary to determine the problems students have using this method and possible solutions—not just at IAU colleges, but also at other colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia and globally. In addition, teachers' perceptions about using Blackboard deserve further investigation. It is also important to note that

comparisons of this platform's effects on students with those of other cutting-edge LMSs are still crucial to the advancement of education.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by the three authors. They all participated in the design of the study and contributed to writing, editing, reviewing and approving the final version. All of them teach in the Preparatory Year, at the Imam Abdulrahman University, KSA.

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Appendix 1

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research study titled "*Investigating EFL Students' Experiences and Perceptions about the Blackboard in the Preparatory Year.*" This study is being conducted as part of an academic research project aimed at exploring how Blackboard, an online learning management system, is used by students in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programme. Specifically, we are interested in understanding your experiences, opinions, and challenges related to using Blackboard as part of your English learning journey.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather insights into your use of Blackboard, including the features you find most useful, your level of satisfaction with the system, and any challenges you may face while using it. Additionally, we would like to know your suggestions for improving Blackboard to better support your learning.

Your responses will remain anonymous and confidential, and your participation is entirely voluntary. The information gathered will be used solely for research purposes and will contribute to improving online learning experiences for EFL students in future academic settings.

This questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. We greatly appreciate your time and input, as it will play a significant role in advancing our understanding of the effectiveness of Blackboard in EFL instruction.

If you have any questions about the study or the questionnaire, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher.

Thank you for your participation!

Sincerely

Section 1: Demographic Information

Please answer the following questions about yourself:

| Question | Response Options |
|---|---|
| 1. Gender | Male / Female / Other (please specify): _____ |
| 2. Academic Track | Science / Engineering / Health / Other (please specify): _____ |
| 3. English Proficiency Level | Beginner / Intermediate / Advanced |
| 4. How would you rate your ability to use Blackboard? | Poor / Fair / Good / Excellent |

Section 2: Usefulness of Blackboard Features in Enhancing the Process of Learning English

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the usefulness of Blackboard features in enhancing your learning of English.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

| Item | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. The course materials available on Blackboard help me learn English effectively. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. The writing portfolios on Blackboard are useful for improving my English writing skills. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. The quizzes on Blackboard are helpful in reinforcing my English knowledge. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. The feedback and grading system on Blackboard provide valuable insights into my progress. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. The online practice activities on Blackboard (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) are useful in improving my English skills. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. The practice tests on Blackboard help me prepare for English exams effectively. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. The announcements on Blackboard are clear and useful for keeping me updated with course requirements. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

| Item | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 8. The learning resources and related activities on Blackboard support my English learning. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. The recorded presentations on Blackboard are helpful for understanding course content. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. The emails sent through Blackboard are an effective way of communicating with the instructor. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Section 3: Level of Satisfaction with the Use of Blackboard in English as a Foreign Language Instruction

Please rate your level of satisfaction with the following aspects of using Blackboard in your English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction.
(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

| Item | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Blackboard promotes active learning. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Blackboard enhances my understanding of English. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Blackboard helps me develop autonomy in learning English. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Blackboard encourages interaction between students and teachers. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Blackboard increases my motivation to learn English. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Blackboard encourages cooperation among students. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Blackboard creates an enjoyable learning environment for English learning. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Blackboard is time-efficient in helping me learn English. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Section 4: Challenges Faced by Students in the Utilization of Blackboard for EFL

Please rate the extent to which you face the following challenges when using Blackboard for your English learning.
(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

| Item | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Blackboard is difficult to use. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Blackboard usage is time-consuming. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Blackboard adds an increasing burden to my curriculum. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I have not received sufficient training on how to use Blackboard. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I experience technical issues when using Blackboard. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. There is insufficient technical support available for Blackboard issues. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I often experience Internet connectivity problems when using Blackboard. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. There is a lack of student interaction on Blackboard. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. There are not enough supplementary course materials on Blackboard. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Blackboard does not cater to diverse language learning styles. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. The requirements on Blackboard create high levels of pressure. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. The instructions on how to use Blackboard are unclear. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Section 5: Proposed Solutions to Address Challenges in the Use of Blackboard

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following proposed solutions to address challenges in using Blackboard for your English learning.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

| Item | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. I seek help from classmates when facing Blackboard issues. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Teachers should encourage the use of Blackboard more. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Teachers should explain how to use Blackboard more effectively. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. There should be more training provided on how to use Blackboard effectively. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Section 6: Open-Ended Questions

Please answer the following questions in your own words:

| Question | Response |
|---|-------------|
| 1. What additional challenges do you face when using Blackboard for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning? | <hr/> <hr/> |
| 2. What suggestions do you have for improving the effectiveness of Blackboard in EFL instruction? | <hr/> <hr/> |