The Challenges of Functionalizing Online Learning in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language from the Viewpoints of the Instructors

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ABSTRACT:

The present research aimed at investigating the experience of administering online learning taking into account the technical difficulties encountered by the instructors and students at the Department of Languages and Translation, and PYP Women Division, Northern Border University. The research made use of the mixed-method (explanatory sequential design) to fulfil its purposes. The research participants comprised two main categories totaling 24 English instructors from the Department of Languages and Translation and the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at Northern Border University. The research data were collected through two instruments, namely an inventory (quantitative aspect) and a semi-structured interview (qualitative aspect). The results of the research revealed that there were a number of challenges encountered by instructors when delivering their courses; furthermore, there are also a plethora of problems among students related to the adoption of online learning without having sufficient experiences or background to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The research concluded with a number of recommendations and suggestions for further research.

Keywords: Online learning, Challenges, Staff Members, Experience.

تحديات تفعيل التعلم عن بعد في تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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قسم المناهج وتقنيات التعليم، التخصص العام: المناهج وطرق التدريس ، التخصص الـدقيق: منـاهج وطـرق تـدريس لغـة إنجليزيـة ، كليـة التربيـة والآداب بجامعـة الحـدود الشمالية، المملكة العربية السعودية.

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المستخلص:

هدف البحث الحالي إلى استقصاء الصعوبات التي يواجهها المحاضرون خلال فترة الاعتماد على التعليم عن بعد، مع إلقاء الضوء على الصعوبات التقنية لدى المحاضرين والطلاب بقسم اللغات والترجمة ، والطلاب بالسنة التحضيرية ، بجامعة الحدود الشمالية، ولقد استخدم الباحث المنهج المختلط (التصميم التفسيري المتتابع) لتحقيق أهداف البحث، وتألف المشاركون في البحث من 24 محاضرًا للغة الإنجليزية من قسم اللغات والترجمة وبرنامج السنة التحضيرية بجامعة الحدود الشمالية، وتمثلت أدوات البحث الحالية في استبانة لقياس الجانب الكمي، ومقابلة شبه مقيدة تناولت الجانب الكيفي، ولقد أظهرت نتائج البحث وجود عددًا من التحديات التي يواجهها المحاضرون عند تقديم المقررات التعليمية؛ علاوة على ذلك، هناك العديد من المشكلات التي تواجه الطلاب والتي تتعلق بتفعيل التعليم عن بعد دون امتلاك البينة المعرفية اللازمة، أو الخبرات الكافية لتحقيق الفائدة المرجوة من البرامج الإلكترونية، ولقد اختتم البحث بتقديم بعض التوصيات التي تهدف إلى تفعيل التعليم عن بعد، وتحسين سبل الاستفادة منه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم عن بعد، التحديات، أعضاء هيئة التدريس، الخبرة.

Dr. Maryumah Hejji Alanazi

The Challenges of Functionalizing Online Learning in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language from the Viewpoints of the Instructors

I. INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, information technology has been playing an important role in the teaching and learning process. The rapid development in information technology has made a great change in the strategies and concepts of teaching and learning. The current situation altered the teaching and learning processes to online meetings. Moreover, the interference of information technology minimized the traditional teaching-learning process by implementing blended learning. Added to that, more than three semesters have changed into full online teaching and learning process. Many instructors are practicing online learning for more than a decade and are recognizing the differences between online teaching and traditional classrooms. Also, they identified the need for new teaching strategies and changes in the instructors' profile attributes.

The instructors who are competent in teaching traditional classrooms suddenly get into online teaching. Thus, they face lots of obstacles and struggles. It is easy to claim that the instructors can manage the radical shift in teaching. Desperately, the traditional classroom instructors need to seek training to understand the differences between online teaching and traditional teaching. This new normal situation expects all the language instructors to change their teaching attributes by identifying and learning new strategies and technological skills. If the instructors do not know how to integrate technology into their teaching by using suitable instructional skills, this indicates that instructors' technological skills are insufficient (Mpungose, 2021).

According to the instructors' point of view, online teaching requires complex skills. Kyewski and Krämer (2018) defined online learning as a learning activity conducted via computers and sharing the teaching-learning information. Alshammari (2020) argued that, in online learning, the learners are exposed to the learning materials through digital technologies and platforms. Another item of interest, Hampel and Stickler (2005, P.317) discussed the pedagogical aspects of online language teaching and identified seven important competencies required for successful online language teaching.

1. Basic ICT competence
2. Specific technical competence for the software
3. Dealing with the constraints and possibilities of the medium
4. Online socialization
5. Facilitating communicative competence
6. Creativity and choice
7. Own style

As illustrated above, the basic competencies are related mainly to the technical aspects. Online socialization can be considered as an instructional strategy since the online classroom comparatively requires different skills than regular face-to-face instructions. According to the updated skill taxonomy by (Hampel & Stickler, 2005), the online language instructors must have some basic technical skills that facilitate the learning process by effectively interacting during the online class. The online language instructors should focus on materials and activities related to their students and the course they are teaching. This will include the individual instructor's professional and personal teaching styles.

Compton (2009) proposed another different model, which is in contrast with Hampel & Stickler's model (2005). This model is considered an alternative model for online teaching. According to Compton's model, the online teaching platform consists of the following aspects:

1. Technology

2. Pedagogy

3. Evaluation skills

According to Easton (2003), Wood (2003), and Davis and Rose (2007) online language instructors need to perceive the real paradigm shift and understand the instructional ways and online classroom management techniques along with effective communication skills. Moreover, Mahyoob (2020) discussed the students' perception of online teaching and learning. In this research, he argued that the students were not satisfied with online teaching and learning. However, the results showed that WhatsApp was heavily used more than blackboard. The instructors and students used WhatsApp as an operating system. As revealed from this study, only the least percentage of students said that there were no problems with using online lectures.

As revealed from reviewing the related literature, it is confirmed that from the ideas and reports; there are many drawbacks to online English learning. Nowadays, students are facing technical problems. Some students cannot afford to buy a new laptop or a smartphone to use in online learning. Other students are struggling with poor connectivity throughout their online sessions. Furthermore, the instructors need to adapt the design and content of the learning tasks from time to time, especially in classes with a large number of students (Loh Epri, 2016).

Dr. Maryumah Hejji Alanazi

The Challenges of Functionalizing Online Learning in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language from the Viewpoints of the Instructors

As illustrated above, online language teaching is a daunting task. Namely, from the instructor's point of view, these online lectures and evaluations changed the students' attitudes towards language learning. The majority of the students are keen on their grades only. Therefore, the researcher in this study focuses on the challenges that students faced and encountered during the online language lectures (Garrett□Rucks, 2013).

Despite having several previous research that have examined the problems only from the side of the instructor and the connectivity of the internet in the field of EFL language learning and teaching, none of them "if any" to the best of the researcher's knowledge have discussed the factors related to the students' perceptions and online language teaching (Cunningham, 2001; Hsu, & Kuan, 2013; Oz, 2014).

This current study reviews only the related resources. It concentrates on the challenges faced by the instructors and students in online language teaching and learning processes in the context of Northern Border University (Choi, and Chung, 2021; Lestiyanawati, 2020; Sari, 2020). The previous research focused on the problems that faced learners during online sessions. The research related to students' perception of online teaching indicated that some students are not interested in online teaching due to many reasons. At the same time, other students with different perceptions are interested in online lectures and evaluations (Karkar-Esperat, 2018).Presenting formal lectures and facilitating learning activities is so hard. There are many constraints such as internet connectivity, blackboard breakdowns, and individual students' issues. In this new normal online teaching, these are the real issues that cannot be ignored totally, even when the instructor manages to complete the lecture and conduct the evaluation for the previous three semesters (Cunningham, 2001; Hsu, & Kuan, 2013).

2. Context of the Problem

Due to the consequences of COVID-19, instructors were required to teach the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) using the online channels at Northern Border University. Language courses are fully delivered online via blackboard system including the four language skills for the last three semesters (2019-2020-Term-II, 2020-2021 & Term I & II). Each semester consists of 16 weeks including their regular assessments, midterm, and final exams. This radical change happened without considering the practical teaching difficulties. All was a sudden shock for the students and instructors, in the beginning, to turn traditional face-to-face

teaching into online teaching. With this in mind, the present study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges encountered by EFL instructors while teaching English for the students at the Languages and Translation, and PYP Women Division, Northern Border University from the viewpoints of the instructors?
2. What are the suggested strategies for tackling the challenges encountered by the EFL instructors while teaching English for the students at the Languages and Translation, and PYP Women Division, Northern Border University from the viewpoints of the instructors?
3. What are the difficulties encountered by the students studying at the departments of Languages and Translation, and PYP Women Division, Northern Border University from the viewpoints of the instructors?

Purpose of the Research

The current research aimed to explore the factors and challenges that are encountered by students when using online learning. Moreover, this research will add to the knowledge of overcoming the challenges of the use of online learning challenges. In other words, the current students are regarded as digital-age students. Namely, they may know all the aspects of technology. Since the blackboard is controlled by the university and students are expected to approach the technical support whenever they encounter a problem. The research also inquired whether the students are comfortably receiving learning or not. In addition, the research explores the learners' perceptions of online blackboard teaching and learning. In addition, this technological shift impacts the learners' attitudes, besides the challenges that faced the instructors in adapting their instructional strategies. With this mind, the current research aimed at finding out:

1. The major problems facing the instructors throughout lecturing.
2. The students' difficulties and their changing profile attributes.
3. Suggestions and recommendations to design an online language learning program.

3. Method

The research employed the mixed-method research design to explore, identify and integrate results from both qualitative and quantitative data to achieve the aims of the study. According to Creswell's (2014) classifications of mixed methods research designs, this study is considered an explanatory sequential mixed method. In the first phase, quantitative data were used to identify the learners'

Dr. Maryumah Hejji Alanazi

The Challenges of Functionalizing Online Learning in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language from the Viewpoints of the Instructors

perceptions of online blackboard teaching and learning at Northern Border University. In the second phase, a semi-structured interview was utilized to collect qualitative data about the instructor's challenges and perceptions toward online learning (time, technical issues, and materials for online class) and the easiness and difficulties of conducting online teaching and learning. The design of the study is outlined in the following Figure 1.1.
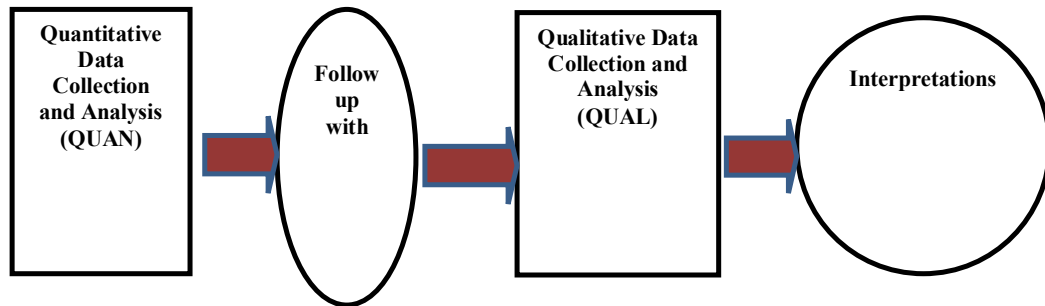

Figure 1.1. Research Design: Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods (Creswell, 2014, p. 270)

4. Participants

The population of the current research included all the instructors teaching English as a foreign language in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabi. The participants were the 12 EFL instructors teaching the departments of Languages and Translation and the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at Northern Border University. Within this target participants group, data was collected to answer the research questions.

Instruments of the Study

Precisely, two instruments were used to fulfill the purposes of the research: an inventory and a semi-structured interview. These research instruments were used to elicit valid and reliable data related to instructors' views of online teaching and learning at Northern Border University. Moreover, they qualitatively explore the factors and challenges that encountered by students when using online learning. The quantitative inventory consisted of 14 close-ended items made online using Google form. The inventory was sent out using an online platform to the participants. The data of the inventory has been filled out by the both categories and sent to the researcher's email based on that data of the inventory, which was followed by an interview to collect qualitative data from the research participants. The interview was conducted through online meetings by the researcher and the two

groups of participants. In the first part of both instruments, the respondents were asked to fill in personal data such as: experience, academic rank, type of college, and the courses attended by the respondent in the field of online learning.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments:

Firstly, to ensure the validity of the instruments, they were initially presented to the jury members and they were asked to give their feedback on the extent to which each item belongs to the field to which it belongs, the integrity of the language, and clarity of meaning. In light of the jury's suggestions, the researchers deleted some items and made modifications to some items until the instruments were read to be administered in their final form. The researchers made the necessary changes in light of the opinions of the jury members and their amendments, which is an indication of sufficient validity for the purposes of the study. To ensure the reliability of the study instruments, the reliability coefficient was calculated by the internal consistency method using Cronbach's alpha technique, and the reliability values ranged between .078 and 0.91 and the total reliability score for the inventory was (0.86).

Data Collection Process

The researcher contacted the target participants of the research and explained its purpose and the necessity of information to provide the participants with the needed information and hence add to the credibility of the study. The inventory was divided into three sections with three themes. The first theme focused on the difference between face to face instruction and the online one. The second theme focused on challenges faced by the instructors and students. The last section focused on instructors' experience and perception of teaching all these questions referring to the PYP and language department instructors' perceptions concerning the challenges faced by them as well as students, advantages, and recommendations for improving online teaching and learning skills in the PYP and Department of Languages and Translation at the Northern Border University.

Results of the Research

This drastic shift is the root of the internal effective factors in terms of students' self-motivation, attitude, and follow-up tasks of students' academic abilities as well as the technological difficulties. The effective factors in terms of the instructors are instructional strategies, materials and designing activities, and technological difficulties. It is observed that the students lack self-motivation due to internet connectivity issues and accessing the blackboard. The previously reviewed research, the point of motivation is related to the

Dr. Maryumah Hejji Alanazi

The Challenges of Functionalizing Online Learning in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language from the Viewpoints of the Instructors

situation and the student's comfort zone in learning. A more comfortable learning zone could be the motivation of the students. It is recommended providing less task-dealing, a good internet connection, and a flexible learning environment.

Similarly, another important main factor is the course materials, and the students do not want to hear the explanation from the instructors. They believe that hearing online lecturing is a boring task and a waste of time. That is, students do not consider the online lectures are not authentic form to write the exam. This unpreparedness is the main reason behind the students' attitude changes.

When the instructors were asked to adopt online teaching, the first issue was the materials; the face to face materials were transformed to digital one suitable for the classroom teaching, using PowerPoint presentations and visuals suitable to the courses. How to transform all these materials to be suitable for the online classroom is the first issue we all encountered? Just using the blackboard and sharing the screen is not enough to teach any courses, particularly some skills are expected from the instructors and students to develop the language. The following lines are illustrating the challenges encountered:

Challenge (1): Material Preparation

Inappropriate teaching materials for online teaching, in traditional regular face-to-face teaching, using textbooks are the usual norms. Converting the textbook content into a PowerPoint presentation is a little bit complex process. Many language instructors are good at preparing and using experiential teaching tools, but it is limited in online teaching. This is the first challenge in the online teaching and learning process. The online blackboard teaching required the latest electronic materials, audio and video materials for lectures and conducting activities. Fully online lectures expect a lot from the instructors as well as the students.

In the beginning, it was hard to adopt and use the blackboard testing and assessment tools. setting questions and preparing online exercises is time-consuming since the number and pattern of questions are too comprehensive and require many pictures, images, audio and video files, and text. Attaching all relevant information in the test item is a complex task.

The students also find it very difficult to submit their homework, and assignments and do their tests. They were not able to upload their papers on time. The most difficult task is developing students' oral abilities, especially at level-1 and level-2. The instructors who are

teaching listening and speaking courses are always facing problems with the students since they are very reluctant to speak and show a very relaxed attitude. Dragging the attention of all students in the class is a challenging task for the instructors.

There is an interesting notable point; students always expect to score good grades. It is so dissatisfied, at the end of the semester or at the time of examination; they exhibit their inferior performance in all courses. Even the talented students, who already performed well in the face-to-face teaching on campus, performed badly in the online assessment. Their reading, writing, and speaking skills abilities became very poor. Comparing traditional face-to-face instruction with online teaching, we considered traditional classrooms for granted and extended the timing, but online lectures are confined to the scheduled sessions.

Suggested Instructional Strategy

If the online classroom experience is suggested to be like face-to-face teaching traditional classroom, the teaching attributes out to be changed. It is important to identify the suitable activities which will create a quality interaction in the teaching-learning process, and it will create a great impact on course learning outcomes. Distance education is a form of indirect education, where a teacher and a student are physically or even for a time distance apart. The teacher or the tutor constantly controls learning success of the student. The learning material is interposed on distance learning using various media either in written or in electronic form. In this way, distance education is the form of indirect education that allows students to learn in their domestic environment. This makes the distance education as a modern form of education, a user friendly and adaptive educational process.

Challenge (2): Passive students

Most of the language teaching instructors teach many different language skills in classrooms, from traditional weekly in-class sessions to skill courses that met for 10 hours per week. In online teaching, lectures are completely different from face-to-face. If the instructor does not focus on the materials, the inappropriate instructional materials and designs will produce passive learners. Since the materials and instructional strategies will not be attractive; the students will not understand the course and turn to passive listeners. To bring out the active learners, the instructors need to have good interactions and innovative quality materials which will give depth to their learning process.

Dr. Maryumah Hejji
Alanazi

**The Challenges of Functionalizing Online Learning
in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign
Language from the Viewpoints of the Instructors**

Suggested Instructional Strategy

Since online teaching is considered remote learning, the language instructors are responsible for quality teaching, so suitable course materials must be defined in order to engage and motivate the students to learn. Moreover, many opportunities must be given to students to understand the necessary concepts. The follow-up activities or lectures must ensure that students understood the concept and are ready for both formative and summative assessment tests.

There is different quality authentic digital courseware. Suitable materials must be identified to create customizable engaging materials to enhance active learning. Moreover, several comprehensive interactive questions of the text ought to be prepared in order to introduce the concepts and do the follow-up as well as assess the students' understanding.

Challenge (3): Staying connected with students

The instructor's attention is all the time mutually connected with the students, which is a difficult task. Staying with students is not an easy task, yet it gives a chance for the instructor to understand the students and assess their understanding of the course content as well as to know whether they are following, and participating in a lecture class or not.

Suggested Instructional Strategy

At the beginning and the end of each online lecture class, the instructor needs to create a positive interaction and try to get feedback related to the course content and the depth of understanding from the students. Moreover, it will help the instructors to fine-tune the materials and instructional strategies according to their expectations and to achieve the course learning outcomes. In the same way, instructors also offer effective feedback about individual students' performance and give suggestions to improve their weaknesses. This kind of interaction will motivate the students to participate and interact with the instructors; this will create an opportunity for the instructors to find out about individual students and assess their real performance in the class as well as during the assessment tests.

Feed-forward Mechanism

A "feed-forward" is an external operator controlling a signal from a source in its external environment to a load elsewhere in its external environment. This feed-forward framework is future-focused and embeds ideas about what the student and instructors can do differently. Instructors can share the assessment procedures at the start of the course and also inform the students about what is required and

what the course is expected. This input will give an idea to the students to perform better and also do the self-assessment. To ensure the expected course learning outcomes in online instruction, the feed-forward mechanism will help the instructors to achieve the goal of the content.

Challenge (4): Encouraging collaboration and cooperation

Cooperation and collaboration are considered the essential elements to be considered in online lecturing. This is a widely accepted and motivating approach in the teaching-learning process. In real online lecturing, the instructors are struggling to collaborate with the students; it is very unfortunate to say, many of the students are not physically and mentally involved in the online lecture. To motivate the students to present and actively participate in the online class there are participation scores, though this point is reinforced by the students in each lecture, yet collaborating is a challenging task for the instructors.

Suggested Instructional strategy

Collaboration is a challenging task in online lecturing to motivate the students to participate in the discussion, interactions, and activities. The instructors must consider giving suitable tasks depending on their levels and reinforce them to submit the task immediately. Also, the instructors can employ problem-based learning strategies to give authentic examples for individual and group activities. Forgetting the time constraint and devoting extra time to conduct activities will enhance the students' analytical and critical thinking skills.

Students' choice

Students' choice is also an important component to be considered when planning the lectures and activities. In traditional lecture classes, instructors will take control of everything but in online lecture classes, they can enhance learner motivation, interest, and involvement by allowing them to choose 'how to learn'. The choice of activities can range according to the students' interests and technology. Depending upon the course nature and skills that need to be taught or reinforced the students could be asked to choose and collaborate on completing the assignment.

Ensuring whether the students are engaged and receiving valuable course content or not is an important task for the instructors. The language instructors must focus on restructuring the instructional strategies, and also consider the course content and course learning outcomes when preparing the activities. They should adapt or create suitable materials for active learning. A good teaching strategy will

Dr. Maryumah Hejji Alanazi

The Challenges of Functionalizing Online Learning in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language from the Viewpoints of the Instructors

help the learners to learn effectively. The focused interventions during the materials preparation and customizing materials help to fill the learning gaps.

Challenges faced by the students

A number of obstacles encountered by students to get the fruitful results of online learning were reported which are summarized in the following points: Lack of internet facilities, lack of gadgets, the difficulty of studying at home because of the family members and the situation, the negative attitude towards the learning process due to unpreparedness, the lack of interest in learning online more as well as listening to lectures online, the lack of self-motivation, the difficulties in exploring blackboard technology.

It is expected that this study can help other researchers understand the different challenges and improve their use of online materials and instructional strategies to overcome the challenges. As a full-time language teaching instructor.

Conclusions of the Research

This research tried to illustrate and explore the impact of online language teaching on student learning at the Northern Border University and compare it with face-to-face traditional teaching. As shown in the above results. It can be concluded that the impact of online English language lecturing classes needs to be enhanced. Meanwhile, instructors' professional skills and students' attitudes need to be supported. This study welcomes further suggestions and the following research to investigate the online teaching-learning process and offer suitable solutions to the challenges. In other words, the current research aimed to identify the challenges and difficulties encountered by online learning among the staff members and the students themselves. The results of the study revealed that there are many challenges of online learning . One of the difficulties encountered by the students and staff members is the lack of technical training for students, and the fact that some students are not serious concerning scientific work. In addition to the low knowledge of students in the basic skills of using the internet and its tools. Another item of interest, among the difficulties faced by faculty members is the lack of sufficient time among the faculty member to train in the techniques needed by online learning , and the lack of material and moral incentives to spend more time working in online learning programs, in addition to the lack of training courses for faculty members regarding online learning programs. The study concluded that there is a dire need for providing continuous training programs at the beginning of each semester for students to be trained on how to use

the online learning tools by specialists in such a field, with the aim of educating them about the importance of such tools in communicating between them and instructors or colleagues.

Recommendations of the Research:

The results of the study inspired a number of recommendations, which ought to be taken into consideration by those responsible for university education and public education institutions when applying online learning.

- The necessity of identifying the difficulties that face faculty members and students in online learning programs; as well as identifying appropriate solutions for such problems to maintain the quality of the educational output.

- The necessity of working hard to develop the capabilities of universities and higher education institutions to turn from mere knowledge-transmitting institutions to productive institutions.

- The necessity for Saudi universities and public education institutions to possess modern technologies and means of communication, and the ability of using them effectively, especially in the field of online learning.

- Providing short and renewable training programs at the beginning of each semester to qualify students to use online learning tools by specialists in this field.

- Encouraging faculty members wishing to work at the university in online learning programs to be trained in using the tools of this type of education.

- The need to provide technical support to faculty members as well as students by the deanships of online learning in universities and public education institutions on an ongoing basis.

Suggestions for Further Research:

As for future research, the researcher suggests researching the following topics:

- Conducting a study to identify the difficulties related to the content of online learning programs.

- Conducting a study to identify the difficulties related to the online learning environment.

- Conducting an evaluative study of the experiences of some Saudi universities that offer educational programs through

online learning to identify the points of strengths and make use of them.

- Conducting an evaluative study of the experiences of some Saudi universities that offer educational programs through online learning to identify the points of weakness to overcome them.

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Dr. Maryumah Hejji Alanazi

The Challenges of Functionalizing Online Learning in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language from the Viewpoints of the Instructors

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