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# THE POTENTIAL OF E-LEARNING IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

**Abdallah Alasraj[1]† --- Hael Alharbi[2]**

*[1,2]Naif Arab University for Security Sciences, Saudi Arabia*

## ABSTRACT

*Migrants have a better quality of life if they can speak the language of their new country. Much emphasis has been placed on the acquisition of English language skills, but there are other countries such as Saudi Arabia, where Arabic is needed as a second language. The Saudi government has been investing heavily in e-technology and this paper shows that online learning can effectively be used for foreign language learning. A small component of face to face learning can add further value. This is significant if providing language learning access to migrant communities, as they may not always be able to attend classes on a regular basis, and there are economic reasons on the part of local governments or employers to find viable options for reducing costs. Findings from this study indicate that language learners also appreciated the bonus features that came with the online courses, including an improvement in computer skills and ready access to translation through online dictionaries.*

**Keywords:** Online language learning, Arabic, Saudi migrant, International communities.

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## Contribution/ Originality

This paper is one of the few studies which have investigated the use of technology for Arabic language learning.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents one of the main issues confronting contemporary migrants, the issue of language learning. As more people are moving countries, it becomes a global problem. English may be an international language, but that language is not yet universal and there are many countries where English is not widely spoken. Those moving to Saudi Arabia, for example, are confronted with learning the Arabic language in order to integrate. In a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia, it is not always possible for everyone to access language learning classes; this



† Corresponding author

could be because of the timings, the location, or the make-up of the classes. However, one of the ways in which they can engage in Arabic language learning is now through using online services and Saudi Arabia has been developing its e-learning programmes to allow more students to access learning. This particularly applies to the large numbers of international students now coming to the country to study in universities and tertiary institutes.

## 2. ONLINE LEARNING

The integration and implementation of information and communication technologies within the Saudi Arabian tertiary education system has recently received significant royal attention and support. The Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia has already established technology-based centres for the integration and implementation of e-learning platforms (Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), 2008). An example of these centres is the 'National Centre for e-Learning and Distance Learning', which is concerned with the utilisation of technologies to implement e-learning and distance learning facilities and applications within the Saudi higher education system. The centre also provides 20 training programs in the area of e-learning and distance learning through nine Saudi universities for all stakeholders in the Saudi education industry (King Saud University (KSU), 2008).

The Saudi Ministry of Higher Education aims to provide high quality and economical Internet-based degree and non-degree programs to domestic and international learners. This technology integration within the Saudi tertiary education system seeks to provide and enable educational and training opportunities to busy professionals, women, adults, the visually impaired or blind people, and the less privileged segments of Saudi society. Recently, both the 'National Centre for e-Learning and Distance Learning' and the 'e-Learning Centre in the Riyadh Techno Valley' have merged to form an effective facility within the education system of King Saud University and to initiate and enable new King Saud University educational horizons (King Saud University (KSU), 2008). With this technological transformation across the Saudi education industry, there is an increased demand from higher education institutes to implement proper Internet-based platforms and innovations. Despite the large proportion of international students enrolled in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, to date there has not been adequate acknowledgement or exploration of the nature of Internet-based learning environments from the perspective of the international students in Saudi Arabia. There has also been little attention paid to the cultural issues that must be addressed for this approach to become successful. Language and culture have been identified as key elements to those who go to live in another country (McDermott and Odhiambo, 2010).

The Islamic University in Madinah is one of the universities committed to achieving the anticipated educational objectives of the Ministry of Higher Education's program, and is considered an ambitious university which focuses on providing solutions for learning Arabic language. As part of the national e-learning plan and expansion of distance education, Arabic as a second language courses have begun to adopt Internet technology to support students' learning.

All students enrolled in the Arabic Language Lessons course at the Islamic University in Madinah are international students. Through consideration of the performance and attitudes of students at the Islamic University in Madinah when comparing a traditional, wholly face to face learning experience with learning supported by technology, the value of technology within an environment such as this was assessed in this study.

## 3. AIMS AND METHODS

The aim of this paper was to investigate if online learning could provide an economic and viable solution for migrant communities. The international students in Saudi Arabia represent an important economic contribution to the universities; however, they are in the country to study various subjects at degree level. This means that they must be able to attend lectures and communicate in Arabic. The provision of Arabic lessons is seen as an extra cost to the universities and they would benefit from investigating other solutions whereby they might support the language learning but in a more cost effective way.

The students who participated in this study were enrolled in the Arabic Language Lessons course at the Islamic University in Madinah in Saudi Arabia. The Islamic University in Madinah was founded by the government of Saudi Arabia in 1961 by a royal decree. It is a modern university specialising in Islamic subjects. Approximately 80% of the 6,000 enrolled students are international students. The university is culturally diverse and boasts enrolments from almost all nationalities across the globe.

The majority of the 62 students who participated in this research were aged 20-25 years. Approximately 42% of participants spoke English as a first language. The second most common native language for participants was Russian (9.69%), followed by Urdu, Indonesian and Vietnamese (4.84% each). The self-rated computer literacy of participants ranged broadly. 51.6% of participants rated their computer literacy as 'Expert' or 'Fair – Good', while the remainder of participants rated their computer literacy as 'Poor' or 'Very poor'. Over half of the participants (53.2%) recorded that they did not use the Internet for academic purposes. However, 25.8% of participants used the Internet 'Often (once a week)' or 'Constantly (once or more a day)'. Just as with computer literacy, these results show that participants' engagement with the technology was varied.

Participants were asked to indicate how many years they had been learning the Arabic language, and how long they had lived in an Arabic speaking country. Only 11.3% of the participants had studied the Arabic language for 2-5 years, with none of the participants undertaking Arabic language education for longer than 5 years. The vast majority of the participants (88.7%) had studied Arabic for less than one year. The longest that any participant had lived in an Arabic speaking country was 10 months. 93.6% of participants had lived in an Arabic speaking country for 4 months or less.

For the study an online website was developed for the purposes of language learning and the content of the Arabic course was adapted for online learning. Students were given access to this

website and then a number of tests were given to compare their level of language and progress made over the course of the study.

Language teaching is one field that shows the impact of the Internet on education in general. Pedagogically, the Internet caused some changes in education – the expansion of the scope of teaching materials, a shift in the teaching paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered, an increase in communication channels, and greater autonomy in learning. Authentic cultural interactions, the involvement of more learning strategies, and the productivity of students' language performance were also increased as a result of learning language with the support of the Internet (Green and Oxford, 1995; Osuna and Meskill, 1998; Watson, 1999; Kongrith and Maddux, 2005; Yeh and Lo, 2005).

In particular, the use of multimedia content has been discussed in the area of language learning, with a focus on vocabulary acquisition (Chun and Plass, 1996). It is clear that Internet tools have facilitated techniques to enable language learning through new educational and pedagogical means. Ganderton (1999) studied the use of interactivity in second language learning and showed that a good level of interactivity and attractiveness can be effective for language acquisition. The use of Internet-based interactive utilities can reduce the barriers to the learning and teaching processes, and empower the comprehension of students, particularly for students with special needs (Castellani, 2000).

There is already a significant amount of literature on e-learning, its associated benefits and challenges, and issues surrounding its implementation. For this reason, this paper does not seek to develop a deeper understanding of e-learning per se. Rather, it applies existing knowledge to a new area: whether e-learning can provide an improved and more effective learning experience for students studying Arabic as a second language in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, a quantitative approach is used in this study. Case study and participant selection was conducted in a purposeful manner (i.e. not random). This is common practice in quantitative studies (Mertens, 1998). It was necessary to select participants who were able to provide meaningful and accurate information about the issue being researched, with the goal of receiving repeated, similar feedback from participants (Yin, 2003). Literal or theoretical replication in results indicates that the findings would be similar if the study was repeated with a different participant sample. Consequently, participant selection impacts directly on the repeatability of the findings, and therefore on the value of the conclusions drawn (Mertens, 1998).

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Aldadh website (http://www.aldadh.com) was developed by the researcher for use as the e-learning website in this study. It was created using Moodle. The website was concerned with teaching Arabic as a second language. Findings confirm that an e-learning website can be employed by students studying Arabic as a second language at the Islamic University in Madinah to achieve the learning and teaching objectives of the Arabic Language Lessons course. They also confirm that Blended learning (incorporating an e-learning website) is more effective at achieving

these outcomes than the Traditional learning approach typically used in this Arabic course (see Tables 1 & 2).

As shown by these tables, in both the week 2-3 learning strategy implementation, and the week 4-5 learning strategy implementation, the performance of the Blended learning group was *lower* in the Pre-test and *higher* in the Post-test Arabic language quiz, indicating that Blended learning was more effective than Traditional learning at improving the participants' language ability.

**Table-1.** Descriptive statistics: Arabic language quiz scores - week 2 pre-test and week 3 post-test

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation | Variance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group A Blended Pretest | 31 | 8 | 31 | 20.03 | 6.760 | 45.699 |
| Group A Blended Posttest | 31 | 20 | 32 | 26.45 | 3.223 | 10.389 |
| Group B Traditional Pretest | 31 | 10 | 32 | 20.06 | 7.380 | 54.462 |
| Group B Traditional Posttest | 31 | 18 | 32 | 24.77 | 4.303 | 18.514 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 31 | | | | | |

**Table-2.**Descriptive statistics: Arabic language quiz scores - week 4 pre-test and week 5 post-test

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation | Variance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group A Traditional Pretest | 31 | 10 | 32 | 21.05 | 6.261 | 39.206 |
| Group A Traditional Posttest | 31 | 12 | 32 | 22.92 | 6.214 | 38.618 |
| Group B Blended Pretest | 31 | 11 | 31 | 20.76 | 5.477 | 29.998 |
| Group B Blended Posttest | 31 | 16 | 32 | 26.02 | 4.582 | 20.991 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 31 | | | | | |

However, as suggested by Khine and Lourdusamy (2003), it is important to include an element of face to face instruction in any Blended learning delivery. Participant responses indicated that the face to face component was valuable in supporting the online delivery of learning.

The design of the e-learning website played a key role in both the perceptions and academic performance of participants in this study. It was investigated as to the extent to which the students studying Arabic as a second language were able to employ the e-learning website (i.e. the tool used to facilitate Blended learning) to achieve the learning and teaching objectives of the Arabic Language Lessons course. While participants did not indicate a clear preference for either of the learning strategies, they did record higher satisfaction with some Satisfaction Components related to the e-learning website, including educational materials and online learning resources (see Table 3).

Results of the Evaluation Components indicated that the e-learning website provided differentiation from Traditional learning in the areas of efficiency, decreasing the barrier of

language, ability to get required information, reading in Arabic and confidence about learning Arabic. Consideration should be given to the design of the e-learning website, to maintain these areas of advantage and build on other areas determined to be essential for Arabic language learning. When considered in relation to academic ability outcomes, the e-learning website's effectiveness is confirmed. Future research into the design of e-learning websites may provide further information on the optimal design of e-learning to achieve the learning and teaching objectives of the Arabic Language Lessons course.

Significantly, results from the participants show that those taught using e-learning with a small component of face-to-face intervention emerged as more knowledgeable than those who attended language classes. It enabled students to achieve greater learning outcomes and it is therefore recommended that the use of an e-learning website be employed as an effective means for students wanting to learn Arabic as a second language. Interviews with participants gave more insight into these results.

**Table-3.** Participant perceptions of satisfaction components

| | Satisfaction Components | | Significant Difference | Condition | Group A | Group B |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Blended learning | Traditional learning | | | | |
| 1 | The educational material provided in normal class | The educational material provided before or during class | Yes | Students more satisfied with Blended learning | Educational Materials in Blended learning and Traditional learning are different | |
| 2 | Online learning resources | Interaction with teacher in class teaching | Yes | Students more satisfied with Blended learning | Understanding of Resources of Blended learning and Traditional learning is different | Understanding of Resources of Blended learning and Traditional learning is the same |
| 3 | Interaction with teachers and other students in the lab | Interaction with other students in the class | Yes | Students more satisfied with Traditional learning | Interaction in Blended learning and Traditional learning is different | |
| 4 | Arabic language learning outcome | Understanding the educational materials | Yes | Students from Group A more satisfied with Blended learning. Students from Group B more satisfied with Traditional learning | Benefit of Blended learning and Traditional learning is different | Benefit of Blended learning and Traditional learning is the same |
| 5 | Overall quality of Blended learning (online and face to face learning experience) | Overall quality of face to face learning experience | Yes | Students more satisfied with Traditional learning | Quality experience of Blended learning and Traditional learning is different | |

One factor was that e-learning allowed students to go back and review the lesson; they could therefore spend more time going back to listen to the teacher and thus improve their pronunciation. Participants also liked the facility of the online discussion forum, where they were able to communicate with each other, and which gave them more peer support and motivation.

A further factor which gave satisfaction was the website feature which gave the ability to access an online dictionary; this was much easier and quicker for learners to look up words than in a paper-based dictionary. An extra bonus with the online course was that participants with low level computer literacy actually improved their skills. By practising every day they became more confident in their writing skills and the use of a word processor. They also improved their research skills, and felt that they would not have made such progress in a traditional classroom.

This paper indicates that e-learning is a viable and effective way of providing language courses to migrant communities, who may not always have access to classes. It shows that Arabic language classes can successfully be delivered through an online course. This also provides the

possibility that language skills could be improved before the migration journey commenced, and therefore allow migrants to enter the new country with a better level of the foreign language.

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