

# Online learning of English language courses via blackboard at Saudi universities in the era of COVID-19: perception and use

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Due to the recent coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, a temporary interruption of education activities occurred all over the world. The sudden and quick shift from blended or face-to-face learning mode to the sole online learning mode affected the perceptions of students toward the Blackboard application and the usage. This study aims to investigate the perceptions of students toward the Blackboard application in the process of learning Preparatory Year (PY) English courses as the mere tool of learning and the impact of the students' perceptions on the students' use of Blackboard.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The results are based on a survey conducted with 228 of PY students: 1st level  $n = 126$  and 2nd level  $n = 102$  at Najran University. The data are analyzed to compare the two levels, as the students' prior experience with Blackboard is not the same. The 2nd level students have prior experience of blended learning through Blackboard, whereas 1st level students have no prior experience of learning through Blackboard.

**Findings** – The data of the perceptions of both levels showed that 1st level students' perceptions toward online learning of English via Blackboard were higher than 2nd level students. The data on the frequency of the use of the Blackboard application reflected the perceptions of students.

**Research limitations/implications** – The findings suggest that the students' prior experience of e-learning via Blackboard has an impact on the students' perceptions.

**Originality/value** – The findings of the study contributed to the learning through the management systems research field and online learning of English during the COVID-19 outbreak.

**Keywords** Perception, COVID-19, Online learning, Use, Blackboard

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The students' perceptions of online learning through management systems (LMSs) like Blackboard are largely associated with a student's successful use of these applications (Dhawan, 2020; Fageeh, 2011; Yen, 2020). Therefore, students need to be ready to perceive

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the shift from traditional to online learning and they should be communicated of the importance of Blackboard and other tools of online learning as the only substitute to the traditional instruction in times of crisis (Fageeh, 2011). However, the perceptions of students toward LMSs applications as a substitute to the traditional instructions were affected by the challenges and fears caused by the sudden and quick shift in the period of coronavirus (COVID-19) (Dhawan, 2020). Affouneh *et al.* (2020) stated that the adoption of online learning during the crises had its disadvantages, which demotivated students to learn online via LMSs. Others asserted that students faced many technical difficulties, which hampered and slowed down the learning process (Hoq, 2020; Favale *et al.*, 2020), as well as minimized or stopped the direct communication between teacher and learner. Dhawan (2020) stated that many students also faced psychological problems during crisis – there were stress, fear, anxiety, depression and insomnia that led to a lack of focus and concentration.

Still, many learners perceived Blackboard application as a supplementary learning tool, and not as the only source of learning in crisis time (Robinson *et al.*, 2017). Some of them even feared that online interaction between a teacher and students would replace face-to-face interaction (Alshwiah, 2010). Moawad (2020) pointed out that students' perceptions toward Blackboard were affected by difficulties and worries experienced during the quick and sudden shift from offline to online learning mode. He listed some of these worries like assessment and its fairness, home and academic settings, required tech skills and internet and uncertainty.

To reduce the negative psychological impact of the interrupted situation, Saidy and Sura (2020) recommended universities all over the world should start some procedures such as having proper online academic advisers and psychological counseling for their mental health. On the other hand, Moawad (2020) recommended measuring the perceptions and attitudes of students toward online learning mode via Blackboard in different contexts during the crisis of COVID-19 because the perceptions have an impact on the students' use and performance of online learning. Elfaki *et al.* (2019) revealed that the positive and negative perceptions of students had their effect on the students' performance and use. Therefore, the perception and use of Blackboard research could evaluate the efficiency of Blackboard (Alharbi, 2015; Kashghari and Asseel, 2014). In other words, a student's attitude toward e-learning plays an important role in determining a student's intention to use Blackboard. This interrelationship between perceptions and use controlled the efficient use of e-learning tools.

A review of previous studies in EFL Saudi context showed inconsistent results of the perceptions of students toward the implementation of LMSs (Blackboard) as a blended learning model or as a supplementary and ancillary tool of learning (Al-Dosari, 2011; Al Zumor *et al.*, 2013; Alamer, 2020; Alharbi, 2015; Elfaki *et al.*, 2019; Fageeh and Mekheimer, 2013; Fageeh, 2011; Kashghari and Asseel, 2014; Moawad, 2020; Mohsen and Shafeeq, 2014; Narwani and Arif, 2008). Some of the previous studies showed positive attitudes of students toward Blackboard and some others showed negative ones and few were neither positive nor negative. However, all of the studies described the use of Blackboard and the shift to blended learning as a situation surrounded by challenges. At the time of the COVID-19 outbreak, the sudden shift from offline learning of English language courses to online learning through Blackboard became the current challenge to be faced by students (Basilaia *et al.*, 2020; Saidy and Sura, 2020; Yen, 2020).

In the context of the present study, Department of English, Preparatory Year (PY), Najran University, Saudi Arabia, Blackboard was used as the sole tool through which EFL students studied English courses. The matter became challenging when the shift occurred suddenly from blended to a fully online process. Therefore, the study aimed to measure the perceptions of PY students, Najran University and the impacts of the

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students' perceptions on the use of Blackboard as the sole learning tool of English courses in the period of COVID 19. The study, therefore, was designed to respond to the following questions:

- Q1. What are the perceptions of both the 1st level and 2nd level at PY students toward Blackboard as the sole medium of learning during the COVID-19 surge?
- Q2. How are the perceptions of both groups of students toward Blackboard reflected on the students' use of Blackboard?

### Literature review

The situation with the COVID-19 outbreak challenged universities all over the world and compelled them to shift from traditional learning mode to online teaching and learning overnight (Dhawan, 2020). Universities faced challenges such as accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, readiness and quality management. Martin (2020) stressed on the importance of quality management program and continuous development for the success of online learning and preparing everyone to be ready for any interrupted situation. Dhawan (2020) stated that The World Economic Forum reported there was a need for people to be ready for challenging circumstances, as the COVID 19 pandemic enforced many of them to change the way they perceive education. Ayebi-Arthur (2017) illustrated that by the example of New Zealand when seismic activities happened and the educators tried to overcome the barriers, they suggested robust Information Technology infrastructure as a prerequisite for online learning.

In fact, in the time of COVID 19, educators had not been concerned much about the quality of education rather they were busy with the adoption of online learning (Martin, 2020; Mhlanga and Moloji, 2020). The name of educational institutions was under inquiry. They had to maintain the quality of education and performance in the interrupted circumstances. Dhawan (2020) stated that each of these educational institutions was trying to find a suitable alternate to manage these challenging situations. Technical difficulties, students' and teachers' barriers, and preparedness were of many reasons for making the shift was challenging (Al Meajel and Sharadgah, 2018; Parkes *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, educational institutions should innovate solutions to deal with the challenging context during the COVID 19 period (Liguori and Winkler, 2020). Taken an example, China was the first country to deal with this overnight shift from offline to online classrooms, that was, educators had changed their instructional methodology to deal with new circumstances and adapted to the situation of uncertainty (Yen, 2020). To face difficult circumstances, the educational institutions prepared a complete guide for students and instructors to ease the matter and helped everyone to access to online LMSs platform (Yen, 2020). Saudi universities adopted the Blackboard application as an online learning platform, which had all features and facilities to present a real-like classroom context (Basilaia *et al.*, 2020).

#### *Blackboard as a popular learning platform*

There are many popular LMSs such as Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle, LAMS and SAKAI. Blackboard is one of the most popular marketable LMSs adopted in higher education institutions (Narwani and Arif, 2008). Using Blackboard, teachers and learners can change their old and traditional methods of teaching and learning (Mohsen and Shafeeq, 2014). It offers a very collaborative learning platform that can be tailored to suit students' needs (Alharbi, 2015).

Researchers pointed out many virtues of the Blackboard as a learning platform. Alamer (2020) stated that Blackboard was known for its easiness, ubiquity and accessibility.

Narwani and Arif (2008) mentioned that Blackboard was perceived as the best online platform for learning and teaching, content management and the outcomes assessment. Gökğöz Gordeslioglu and Ergün Yüzer (2019) pointed out that Blackboard provided the educators with all features to manage the course and track students' activities. Therefore, Blackboard was widely used because of many features and simple use (Al Zumor *et al.*, 2013; Narwani and Arif, 2008). Moreover, Mohsen and Shafeeq (2014) stated that most of the instructors viewed Blackboard as an organized platform of E-learning that helped to promote the interception of an instructor to students for the success of learning and teaching process. The features of availability, quick feedback, improved communication, tracking skill-building distinguished Blackboard from other LMSs applications and provided students a greater chance to interact with instructors (Whitmer *et al.*, 2016). As a result of these virtues, learning via Blackboard assimilated largely face to face environment.

On the other hand, learning via Blackboard has marked some challenges/disadvantages. First, the institutions should be ready with all facilities and requirements for online learning via Blackboard (Mhlanga and Moloji, 2020). Students and instructors should not face any technical barriers (Al Zumor *et al.*, 2013). Second, students and instructors should be trained and have the required technical skills to use Blackboard effectively (Jena, 2020). As stated earlier, Blackboard has many tools and features, which provide both students and teachers an interactive platform for learning. Therefore, lacking the required technical skills affects the potentiality of Blackboard as an online learning platform (Al Zumor *et al.*, 2013).

#### *Blackboard features*

It was said that technology functions and features are capable of changing the user's perceptions (Zhang and Li, 2005). Blackboard application is equipped with many tools and features such as *course portfolio*, *course content*, *virtual classroom*, *discussion forum*, *assignment and test*, *emails and grade center*.. These Blackboard features increase the potentiality in the learning and teaching process and assimilate it into the traditional classroom learning and teaching process (Whitmer *et al.*, 2016). For example, the feature of the *course portfolio* places a welcome message to students and informs them of the course schedule, syllabus breakdown and introduces features used in the course. It gives students background knowledge of the course. Then, in the *course description* feature, the instructor uploads a detailed introduction to the course such as the goals, objectives, outcomes, activities and strategies required to achieve the goals. The *course content* feature contains all resources and supplementary materials in various formats, text, image, audio, video and animation. These files with different formats can be available according to the set of times enabled by the instructor. In the report released by the Blackboard website (Whitmer *et al.*, 2016) which compared the use of Blackboard features to the success of students, and based on large data analysis it was found that most of the students spend time was in the *course content* feature. The features of *assignments*, *tests and quizzes* are designed similar to the traditional approach with deadlines, guidelines, instant feedback. *Grade center features* record all students' marks and arrange them to be easily accessed by students.

What adds the real-like environment to Blackboard are *virtual classroom features*. It is a web-conferencing platform. Lectures, presentations, questions and answer chats, whiteboard and others are all possible at the convenience of course instructors and their students. The sessions can be scheduled and recorded so that they can be visited at any time. The *announcement feature* is used to keep update students with all tasks and actions to be done on the Blackboard platform. Other features such as *discussion board*, *forums* and *emails* are used for sharing questions and discussion threads and other students-teachers interactions and communications. Researchers found the impacts of various features

of Blackboard on learning the English language when used properly and effectively (Alharbi, 2015; Fageeh and Mekheimer, 2013; Fageeh, 2011). The report released by the Blackboard website (Whitmer *et al.*, 2016) which compared the use of Blackboard features to the success of students concluded that less use of Blackboard features is expected to result in less achievement. Hence, there is a need for reflecting on the use of the various features of Blackboard as an online learning platform to ensure the potentiality and usefulness of Blackboard.

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### *Perceptions and use*

Theories on technology acceptance in the past two decades focused on the perceptions and attitudes of the users to induce the actual usage of the technology. For example, the technology acceptance model (TAM) initiated by Davis (1985), viewed that a valid measure that could predict usage would be valuable to all stakeholders (Hossain *et al.*, 2019). TAM theorized that the perceived usefulness and ease of use factors could assess the actual usage of technology. Based on that, Hossain *et al.* (2019) measured the students' beliefs of new technology used, by the perceived usefulness and ease of use factors. Afterward, Segars and Grover (1993) added the factor of effectiveness to usefulness and ease of use. Accordingly, Hossain *et al.* (2019) investigated the actual effectiveness of m-learning techniques by examining the students' attitudes and perceptions toward the technology used. After that, Venkatesh and Davis (2000) extended the model and called it TAM2 with social influence and cognitive process. Then, in 2003 the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) was introduced by Venkatesh which holds the views of social influence has significance only in mandatory technology use of situation (Hoong *et al.*, 2017). Afterward, the Affective Technology Acceptance model (ATA) involving positive and negative affect factors. These PA and NA induced the perceptions of students toward the technology used (Hoong *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, the above theories revolved around the perception and use of the technology used. The perceptions and attitudes of users toward the technology used could assess the actual usage of the tool and the technology. Across higher education, evaluation of the utility of LMSs applications of learning and teaching process through students' perceptions and use has become established practice (Al-Dosari, 2011; Dhawan, 2020; Hao, 2020; Yen, 2020) because it provides feedback for the course developers on teaching and learning and quality assurance as well (Dyson and Campello, 2003). Such feedback on the perceptions and use of these applications is crucial to ensure the potentiality and usefulness (Weaver *et al.*, 2008), particularly in times of crisis like the COVID-19 outbreak.

In this juncture created by the COVID-19 outbreak, a reflection on the perceptions of students and the use of Blackboard can help in improving for better practices of online-based classes in the days to come in KSA or other similar contexts. In other words, shifting heavily to the use of alternates in technology tools such as Blackboard to present and to instruct different lessons in almost all levels makes it essential to take the perceptions of students of different levels and the use of Blackboard to evaluate the utility of Blackboard. The sudden switch of learning from face-to-face to online-based classes compelled the universities in Saudi Arabia to look for the best substitute and option among the LMSs applications. As then, ensuring the utility of the Blackboard application by measuring the perception and use becomes essential to improve the outcomes of the learning and teaching process via the Blackboard application.

Prior studies in the Saudi EFL context examined the utility of Blackboard via students' perceptions and use and they showed inconsistent results of the perceptions toward the implementation of Blackboard as a blended learning model or as a supplementary tool of learning. For example, Fageeh (2011) showed that students had accepted the shift to blended

learning and showed positive attitudes toward Blackboard, while [Al-Maqtri \(2014\)](#) found that students had considered learning through Blackboard was not effective. [Al-Dosari \(2011\)](#) also found that both students and teachers had believed that learning improved through the use of Blackboard in comparison to the traditional approach. In contrast, [Kashghari and Asseel \(2014\)](#), in their pilot study at King Abdulaziz University, concluded that although Blackboard helped students improve their listening skills, but not sure of speaking skills. In addition, the male students had negative attitudes toward Blackboard and so misused this learning tool with the spread of plagiarism. [Gökgöz Gordeslioglu and Ergün Yüzer \(2019\)](#) conducted a study on the effectiveness of the listening and Speaking course using Blackboard in EFL context, foundation year and found that the students' perceptions were positive. In contrast, [Mohsen and Shafeeq \(2014\)](#) pointed out that the teachers at Najran University had positive perceptions of Blackboard to English language teaching, but the students' perceptions were somehow negative. Most of the participants in [Mohsen and Shafeeq \(2014\)](#) study showed that Blackboard increased teacher-learner rapport and supported the success of teaching English. [Al Zumor et al. \(2013\)](#) proved that blended learning at King Khaled University improved reading scope and opportunities, as well as vocabulary development, but he also commented on the fact that the lack of internet access as one of the barriers to the use of Blackboard caused demotivated students.

Thus, the perceptions of students toward online learning through Blackboard changed in response to the surrounding circumstances. For that reason, [Fageeh \(2011\)](#) stated that students had positive perceptions of Blackboard in the condition of being ready for e-learning. Therefore, students' readiness to learn through Blackboard plays a very important role in the students' perceptions. Furthermore, research indicated that the speed and accessibility of the internet pose a serious issue in the use of Blackboard for language learning ([Dhawan, 2020](#); [Huang, 2020](#); [Mohsen and Shafeeq, 2014](#)). For example, [Sun et al. \(2008\)](#) showed that with good internet speed and access, the students' perceptions were positive and their language skills were improved. In the period of COVID-19, such difficult circumstances increased and so the present study investigated the perceptions of students toward online learning through Blackboard amidst the difficult circumstances that were faced by students when learning online.

## Method

This study aims to find out the perceptions of PY students, Najran University (batch 2020: 1st level, who had no prior experience with Blackboard; 2nd level who had prior experience with Blackboard) toward Blackboard as a learning tool of English language courses. It also intends to reveal the impact of the students' perceptions on the use of Blackboard and its features. To answer the questions of this study, and due to the current situation of social distancing, the data were collected by an online survey questionnaire. [Fraenkel et al. \(2015\)](#) pointed out that online surveys have wider access to distant and hard-to-reach participants who can access it via many devices; computers, tablets, mobile, etc.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts: perception and use. The perception questionnaire (Adapted from [Pusuluri et al., 2017](#)) consists of 12 Likert statements, which are further divided into two internal sections: six statements are devoted to the merits of learning via Blackboard and the other six are devoted to the challenges of learning through Blackboard. The perceptions questionnaire is a Likert scale and has the scores of strongly disagree-1, disagree-2, undecided-3, agree-4 and strongly agree-5. The calculation of the scores depended on the questions of the study.

The second part of the survey was adapted from [Whitmer et al. \(2016\)](#), who stated that filtering Blackboard features provided substantial pieces of evidence of the use of Blackboard and gave enough data for robust analysis. Therefore, the researcher used this

part of the survey to examine the student' use of pf Blackboard. The purpose of this part was to collect data regarding participants' use of Blackboard.

The researcher obtained permission from the deanship administrators to conduct the current research. Then, the link to the survey was sent to students. The participants remained anonymous and encouraged honesty, and participation was strictly voluntary. The population of the survey included students of the PY of both levels: 1st and 2nd level. To ensure that participants had a clear understanding of the survey purpose and items, the survey was translated into Arabic. [Fraenkel et al. \(2015\)](#) described the validity and reliability of the study outcomes should be correct, useful, appropriate and meaningful. Thus, the researcher, to minimize the invalidity and unreliability risks, sent the questionnaire to experts in the present study field. The experts reviewed the questionnaire and provided valuable comments which were incorporated. Then the questionnaire was tried out with a group of students to ensure reliability. See [Table 1](#) below.

*Participants and setting*

PY is the first step of students' academic journey where they should acquire the required skills such as communication skills, study skills and technical skills for facilitating e-learning. Therefore, PY aims to prepare students academically, socially and technologically to pursue their future study, and hence PY is the setting of the present study. Both sections of male and female students of PY, Najran University ( $n = 228$ ) participated in the study (batch 2020, second semester) 1st level ( $n = 126$ ) and 2nd level ( $n = 102$ ) as shown in [Table 2](#) below.

**Results**

This study investigated the perceptions of students toward Blackboard as an online learning tool in the era of COVID 19. It also aimed at finding the impact of the perceptions of students on the use of Blackboard. To answer the questions of this study, the data were collected by the online survey questionnaire of two parts: perception and use. The perception part was further divided internally into two parts: the merits and challenges of Blackboard. The data collected from the perception part of both levels were compared and validated by the data collected from the other part of the questionnaire, which was devoted to students' use of Blackboard.

*Part 1: students' perceptions*

In general, the results showed that perceptions of students toward online learning through Blackboard during COVID-19 were not positive, but the perceptions of 1st level students were higher than 2nd level students (1st level  $m = 2.12$  to 2nd level  $m = 1.94$ ).

**Table 1.**

Reliability statistics

	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
	0.815	12

**Table 2.**

Statistics of the participants in the study

Participants	Frequency	(%)	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
<i>Valid</i>				
Level 1	126	55.3	55.3	55.3
Level 2	102	44.7	44.7	100.0
Total	228	100.0	100.0	

No.	Statement	Level	UN		SD		D		A		SA		Mean	SD	
			N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P			
1.	Blackboard offers a lively and interesting way of learning the English language	Level 1	126	19.0	36	28.6	15	11.9	30	23.8	21	16.7	1.9048	1.39459	
		Level 2	102	20.6	42	41.2	12	11.8	21	20.6	6	5.9	1.5000	1.20025	
2.	Blackboard offers much needed variety in the learning of my English language courses	Level 1	126	14.3	30	23.8	18	14.3	36	28.6	24	19.0	2.1429	1.36067	
		Level 2	102	11.8	30	29.4	27	26.5	27	26.5	6	5.9	1.8529	1.12044	
3.	Using Blackboard helps me to learn various aspects of my English language courses at my own pace	Level 1	126	9.5	21	16.7	24	19.0	30	23.8	39	31.0	2.5000	1.33716	
		Level 2	102	14.7	42	41.2	15	14.7	24	23.5	6	5.9	1.6471	1.16591	
4.	Using Blackboard can help improve my English language skills	Level 1	126	23.8	27	21.4	21	16.7	27	21.4	21	16.7	1.8571	1.42949	
		Level 2	102	20.6	48	47.1	9	8.8	15	14.7	9	8.8	1.4412	1.22332	
5.	I wish to learn English courses via both face-to-face instruction and Blackboard	Level 1	126	30	23.8	42	33.3	9	7.1	27	21.4	18	14.3	1.6905	1.41118
		Level 2	102	20.6	15	14.7	24	23.5	18	17.6	24	23.5	2.0882	1.44950	
6.	I wish my teachers engaged me more often in Blackboard	Level 1	126	21.4	21	16.7	15	11.9	30	23.8	33	26.2	2.1667	1.51658	
		Level 2	102	20.6	30	29.4	24	23.5	12	11.8	15	14.7	1.705882	1.32447	

**Notes:** Keys: UN = undecided; SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; A = agree; SA = strongly agree; N = number; P = percentage

**Table 3.**  
Results of part 1  
(items 1 to 6)

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The results of the first six items, which were devoted to the Blackboard merits revealed as shown in [Table 3](#) below that the perceptions of 1st level students of PY toward the Blackboard tool of English language courses were more positive than the 2nd level students.

As shown in [Table 3](#), six items were reported which were devoted to the merits of using Blackboard in learning English language courses by PY students, Najran University, KSA, at the period of COVID-19. The results showed that 1st level students' perceptions of Blackboard were higher than 2nd level students. 1st level students appreciated the variety of learning tools provided by Blackboard to learn the English language with a mean of 2.14. In the response of students to items 2,3 and 4 on how Blackboard helped improve their learning of English, the 1st level responded more positively than then 2nd level with  $m = 2.17$  to 1.65 of 2nd level students. For example, in response to item 3, 54% of 1st level students in comparison to 29% of 2nd level students agreed that Blackboard helped them learn various aspects of the English language at their own pace and with a mean of 2.5 to 1.64. Therefore, the 1st level students believed that Blackboard was an appropriate tool to learn the various aspects of the English language. On the other hand, 2nd level students have not shown agreement to the statement No.3. In response to the statement "using Blackboard can help improve my English language skills", 1st level students showed higher positive perceptions with 21.4% SA and 16.7% A than 2nd level students who opposed the statement with 41.7% SD. Item 5, as shown in [Table 3](#), which was devoted to learning through both blended learning and face-to-face, showed that 1st level students opposed to the statement with  $m = 1.7$ , while 2nd level students agreed to the statement with  $m = 2.09$ . 1st level students preferred Blackboard as the only tool of learning and 33.3% of them strongly disagreed with item 5. The result of item 6 could be a summary of the students' perceptions and attitudes toward learning English through Blackboard. 1st level students liked to be engaged more in Blackboard more than 2nd level students who disagreed with the statement with 29.4% SD and 23.5% D.

The other six items of the perception questionnaire were centered on the challenges which might affect the perception of students toward learning English through Blackboard as shown in [Table 4](#) below. The general results of this section showed that both groups agreed to the challenges with  $m = 2.19$  of the 1st level and 2.18 of 2nd level.

The responses of participants to item 7 showed that both 1st and 2nd level students did not perceive Blackboard as an unnecessary shift with 28.6% SD and 35.7% D of 1st level to 20.6% SD and 32.4% D of 2nd level. The gap was big between the two groups in the response to item 9. 1st level students rejected the idea stated in item 9 of 42.9% SD compared to 14.7% SD of 2nd level students. Both groups disagreed that Blackboard is an unnecessary shift, whereas 1st level students disagreed that Blackboard is not useful in learning English more than 2nd level students. Both groups admitted that access to the internet was a challenge as shown in their response to item 8. Similarly, the majority of both groups agreed to the statement "I face technical problems while using Blackboard to learn the English language". Item 11 got the highest mean among other statements with  $m = 3.02$  to  $m = 2.9$  of 1st level and 2nd level students, respectively. 52.3% of 1st level students disagreed with the statement in item 10 as compared to only 38% of 2nd level students. 1st level students believed that learning through Blackboard developed not only their knowledge of computers but other skills as well. Finally, the results of item 12 showed that both groups required equally more training to use effectively Blackboard features. The results of item 12 revealed the need for training students particularly in using various Blackboard features.

No.	Statement	Level		N		SD		D		A		SA		Mean	SD
		N	N	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P		
7.	Learning English language through Blackboard is an unnecessary shift	Level 1	126	18	14.3	36	28.6	45	35.7	9	7.1	18	14.3	1.7857	1.21067
		Level 2	102	18	17.6	21	20.6	33	32.4	18	17.6	12	11.8	1.8529	1.24596
8.	I cannot use Blackboard to learn English language because, I donot have access to the internet	Level 1	126	24	19.0	18	14.3	12	9.5	42	33.3	30	23.8	2.2857	1.45798
		Level 2	102	33	32.4	15	14.7	12	11.8	21	20.6	21	20.6	1.8235	1.56959
9.	Learning English language through Blackboard is not useful	Level 1	126	15	11.9	54	42.9	24	19.0	24	19.0	9	7.1	1.6667	1.13137
		Level 2	102	24	23.5	15	14.7	15	14.7	18	17.6	30	29.4	2.1471	1.56317
10.	Using Blackboard helps develop only my knowledge of computer and internet	Level 1	126	18	14.3	18	14.3	48	38.1	30	23.8	12	9.5	2.0000	1.15931
		Level 2	102	18	17.6	15	14.7	24	23.5	36	35.3	9	8.8	2.0294	1.25435
11.	I face technical problems while using Blackboard to learn English language	Level 1	126	15	11.9	6	4.8	6	4.8	33	26.2	66	52.4	3.0238	1.35920
		Level 2	102	9	8.8	3	2.9	15	14.7	33	32.4	42	41.2	2.9412	1.21723
12.	I need to learn more about how I can use the features on Blackboard better	Level 1	126	15	11.9	9	7.1	30	23.8	54	42.9	18	14.3	2.4048	1.18104
		Level 2	102	27	26.5	6	5.9	18	17.6	15	14.7	36	35.3	2.2647	1.62241

**Table 4.**  
Results of part 1  
(Items 7 to 12)

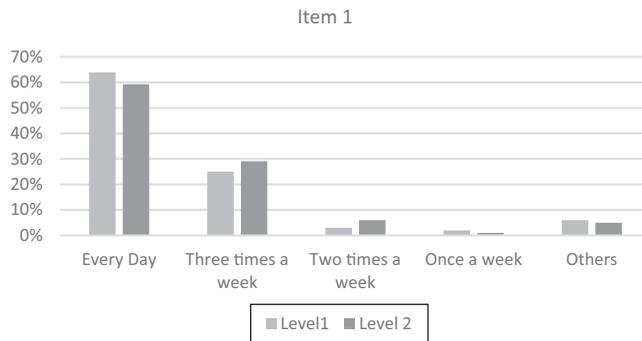
*Part 2: students' use*

The perception results of both levels were reflected in the second part of the questionnaire which was devoted to the students' use of Blackboard in learning English courses at PY, Najran University. The gap found between both levels in the previous perception analysis was reflected in the use of Blackboard. The first item of part 2 revealed that the majority of both levels logged in Blackboard every day, but the 1st level got higher percentage in option 1 and lesser in options 2 and 3 than 2nd level students as shown in [Figure 1](#) below.

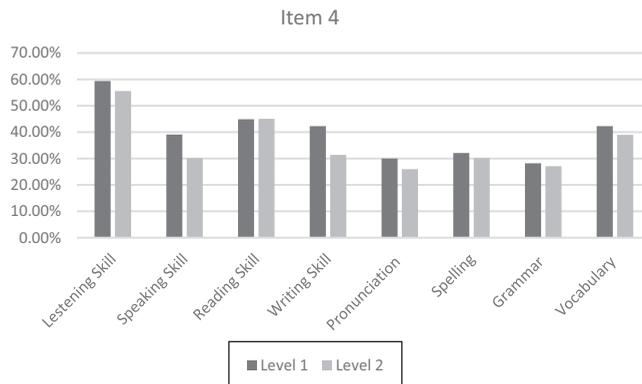
Similarly, the results of part 1 showed that 1st level students thought that Blackboard improved all aspects of English with a percentage higher than 2nd level, were reflected in the results of part 2 item 4. 1st level students believed that learning via Blackboard improved all aspects and skills of English more than 2nd level students. Listening skills got the highest percentage above 50% with a difference in favor of the 1st level, while reading comes next with 45%, equally for both levels. Writing skill comes third with 42 to 31% for the 1st level and 2nd level, respectively. Speaking occupies the last position among the four skills with 39% to 30 of 1st level and 2nd level students, respectively. Also, 1st level students believed that learning through Blackboard helped them grasp the various aspects of English such as pronunciation, spelling, grammar and vocabulary more than 2nd level students as illustrated in [Figure 2](#) below.

Similarly, items 2 and 3 in part 2 revealed almost the same results of the perception section. Item 2 confirmed the previous results of the perception part as shown in the distribution of the use of Blackboard features. The most visited features of Blackboard by

**Figure 1.**  
Result of part 2  
(Item 1)



**Figure 2.**  
Result of part 2  
(Item 4)

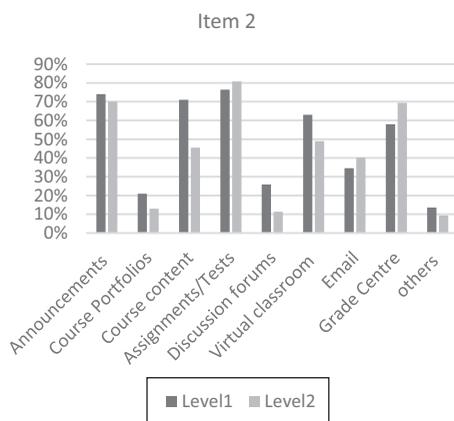


1st level students were *assignment/test* (76%), *announcement* (74%), *course content* (71%) and *virtual class* (63%). Comparatively, the most visited features of Blackboard by 2nd level students were *assignment/test* (81%), *announcement* (70%) and *grade center* (69) which indicated that 2nd level students mostly used Blackboard as a tool of communication more than a tool of learning. The other features of Blackboard were less visited by both groups, but 1st level students visited *discussion forums* and *course portfolios* more than 2nd level students and 2nd level students visited *email* more than 1st level students. The results of item 2 were confirmed in the results of item 3 as shown in [Figures 3](#) and [4](#) below.

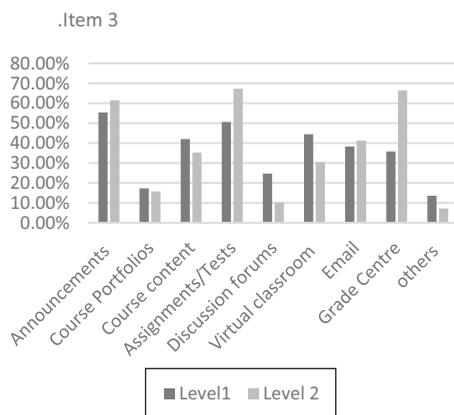
1st level students wanted their teachers to use *course content*, *discussion forums* and *virtual classes* more 2nd level students. 2nd level students focused on communication features such as *announcements*, *assignments and tests* and *grade centers*.

### Discussion

The study aimed to evaluate online learning via the Blackboard application in the unpredictable circumstances with the COVID-19 outbreak. The results revealed that the participants reported a difference in their perceptions toward online learning of English language courses when they were instructed to use Blackboard. 2nd level students had prior



**Figure 3.**  
Results of part 2 (Item 2)



**Figure 4.**  
Results of part 2 (Item 3)

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experience of learning online via Blackboard as a supplementary tool for a complete semester, but their perceptions were negative toward online learning via Blackboard as the sole tool of learning. On the other hand, 1st level students who had no prior experience with online learning via Blackboard were slightly positive and higher than 2nd level students with  $m = 2.12$  of 1st level to  $m = 1,94$  of 2nd level. By comparing the results of both groups in both parts of the questionnaire, it was validated that the findings and the results of the perception part were reflected and emphasized in the results of the used part.

First, the study has proven the interconnected relationship between the students' perception and use of Blackboard as an online learning tool warranted evidence from previous research of Blackboard implementation (Al-Dosari, 2011; Fageeh, 2011; Hassan Ja'ashan, 2015; Mohsen and Shafeeq, 2014; Pusuluri *et al.*, 2017). Based on that, these studies (Alamer, 2020; Elfaki *et al.*, 2019; Gökğöz Gördeslioğlu and Ergün Yüzer, 2019) strongly connected the students' use of Blackboard to their perceived and perceptions of the tool. Fageeh (2011) found that students' acceptance and readiness to use Blackboard as a learning tool was crucial so that students became active Blackboard users. When Blackboard was perceived by students as an appropriate alternate to face-to-face classroom instruction, students considered it useful and interesting and vice versa (Fageeh, 2011). Similarly, Alamer (2020), who investigated the attitudes of students toward Blackboard at King Khaled University in learning English vocabulary came up with findings commensurate with the present study by connecting the students' use to their perceptions. He found that students had not shown high positive perceptions, which can be attributed to the limitation of the use of Blackboard as a blended learning tool.

Second, the present study found that the prior experience of online learning via Blackboard as an ancillary tool affected the perceptions of students in the era of COVID-19. The perceptions of 2nd level students who had prior experience of online learning via Blackboard were not found as expected. Their prior experience of learning English language courses through blackboard was limited to using Blackboard as a tool of communication and not as a learning tool. Mohsen and Shafeeq (2014) investigated blended learning through Blackboard at Najran University and found that students mostly used it as a tool of communication rather than as a learning tool. In the same vein, Fageeh and Mekheimer (2013) emphasized on the prior experience of the students with Blackboard and found that the experience of students on using Blackboard was crucial and the better experience in using Blackboard, the greater knowledge students can gain and vice versa.

Another example is that of Pusuluri *et al.* (2017) study at Aljouf University, where Blackboard was presented there as an ancillary or a blended learning tool. The researchers reported that the perceptions of students toward Blackboard were negative and they neither agreed nor disagreed about Blackboard offered a lively and interesting environment for learning English courses. Similarly, the present study found 2nd level students opposed to the statement "Blackboard offering interesting and lively environment of learning". The findings of the present study showed less percentage of 2nd level students' use of *virtual classrooms feature and discussion forum* which represented the channel of online learning and interaction. These features embraced the interesting and lively e-learning environment, unlike 2nd level students, 1st level students who had no prior experience of online learning via Blackboard revealed higher positive perceptions, which were reflected in their use of Blackboard features. 1st level students logged in almost every day and visited mostly the *virtual* and *content features*, *discussion forums* which focused on the delivery of lectures, subject materials and instructor-students interaction.

Third, the present study demonstrated evidence that online learning via Blackboard improved students' English language skills in the period of COVID-19. For example, the findings of the present study are consistent with Al Zumor *et al.* (2013) in that learning English via Blackboard improved their listening skills. Al Zumor *et al.* (2013) attributed that

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students gained confidence because they could repeat the listening track at their pace. This is consistent with the statement “Using Blackboard helps me to learn various aspects of my English language courses at my own pace”, to which the majority of the participants in the present study agreed or strongly agreed to the statement. Furthermore, the results are in line with the findings of [Al Zumor et al. \(2013\)](#) which indicated that using Blackboard developed the three aspects, namely, reading skills, vocabulary and listening skills. The current study also found almost the same results with students where the three aspects of language reading, listening and vocabulary got the highest among the other aspects of English. The results are also in line with [Alharbi \(2015\)](#), who found that Blackboard supported reading abilities and facilitated students’ interaction.

Fourth, this study found poor internet access and lack of technical skills were the major challenges of online learning of English via Blackboard in the era of COVID-19. More than 50% of participants agreed to items 8 and 11 in which both the above problems were mentioned. The challenges of using Blackboard as a tool of learning were found in harmony with [Alshwiah \(2010\)](#) and [Al Zumor et al. \(2013\)](#), who found that the two major deficits of learning English via Blackboard were internet access and lack of technical skills. As a result, students in both studies, as well as the current study require more training and orientation in learning via Blackboard. [Al-Maqtri \(2014\)](#) found that removing all barriers that hamper online learning via blackboard guarantee success.

### **Conclusion and implications**

The overall results indicated that the students’ perceptions had a great impact on the students’ use of Blackboard as an online learning tool during the COVID-19 outbreak. In the present study, not all PY students perceived Blackboard as highly positive during the COVID-19 outbreak. When students were grouped according to levels (1st level and 2nd level), there was a significant difference found in the perceptions and use of Blackboard. 1st level students who had no prior experience of online learning via Blackboard had slightly positive perceptions, whereas 2nd level students who had prior experience of online learning via Blackboard had less positive perceptions of Blackboard as an online learning tool. This might be because students the prior experience of online learning was not properly presented and ultimately affected students’ perceptions ([Fageeh, 2011](#)). Another substantial factor found to affect students’ perceptions toward Blackboard, was the barriers and obstacles to using Blackboard. Lack of access and fewer tech skills were challenges, and so caused a negative impact on students’ perceptions toward Blackboard. Therefore, there is a need to introduce online learning via Blackboard regularly and properly and overcome all deficiencies to create a more motivated and effective online learning environment.

### **Limitations**

However, there are several limitations to the present study, which should be addressed in future studies. The quantitative results could be enhanced by adding qualitative aspects such as group discussion and interviews. The study measured the effectiveness of online learning via Blackboard using a survey of students’ perceptions, not the actual learning outcomes. This could have been better obtained by measuring learning outcomes and comparing them with a control group not learning via Blackboard. Furthermore, the study was confined to one university; wider results could have been obtained if data were collected from other Saudi universities.

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