SAUDI FEMALE STUDENTS’ ENGAGEMENT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of SARAH ALI BIN HOSSAN find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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SAUDI FEMALE STUDENTS’ ENGAGEMENT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Abstract

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This is an exploratory qualitative study that aims to investigate how Saudi female English language learners perceived their engagement in language learning and whether and how the use of an LMS technology engaged them. The study included 25 full time female undergraduate students enrolled in a course in a university English Department in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Findings indicate that the participants did not generally perceive themselves to be engaged in their English classes or in their use of LMS to learn English. Students indicated that they would be more engaged with group work, if the tasks were based on their interests, if they had more feedback and more encouragement to participate, and if they were comfortable to making mistakes. Further, there did not seem to be a strong link between grades, participation, and engagement. However, the engagement principles in this study served as an effective guideline for exploration because there was a strong connection between what participants perceived as important and the five components of engagement. Therefore, the principles can provide a practical guideline for what teachers can do to engage students in classes, including when using technology.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Salihah Alqahatani, for her continuous support, motivation, and encouragement and to my children for always being available to inspire me throughout my three years journey.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

English has become an international language due to its widespread use in all types of interactions and communications (Al-Khairy, 2013). As such, a push exists to promote English language learning in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) (Al-Khairy, 2013; Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014). In fact, proficiency in the English language is used as an admission criterion in KSA higher education programs such as dentistry, engineering, and medicine (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014). Although English learning and teaching is limited to specific courses in the universities and institutions in the KSA context, the government and the private businesses consider it an important requirement for economic, social, and scientific development (Javid, Al-Thubaiti, & Uthman, 2013; Khan, 2011). For these reasons, ensuring that Saudi English language learners effectively and sufficiently acquire the English language assumes importance to boost their career choices. This is particularly true for Saudi women, as they do not often have opportunities to learn the English language in English-speaking countries.

Further, engagement in language tasks positively relates to language learning achievement (Akbari, Naderi, Simons, & Pilot, 2016; Lee, 2012). The literature also suggests that the integration of technology into Saudi higher education may make engaging learners easier (Alfahad, 2012; Almalki, Finger, & Zagami, 2013); however, the use of technology in KSA universities is limited to a learning management system (LMS) (Alharbi & Drew, 2014). While some research exists that examines the use of an LMS for language learning, little research explores how or whether Saudi female English language learners are engaged in their language learning in general or when LMS supports it. This paper proposes to fill that gap by first
presenting literature around engagement and technology use then reporting on the methodology and findings of the study, and finally offering conclusions and implications.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores how Saudi female English language learners engage in language learning and whether and how the use of an LMS technology engages them. In order to provide a framework for exploration, this literature review focuses briefly on the links between instructed language learning and engagement and then provides an overview of technology use in language learning.

Language Learning and Engagement

In the literature on second language acquisition (SLA), various principles have been found to promote instructed second language acquisition. The most commonly noted principles include comprehensible input, comprehensible output, social interaction, and noticing (Germain-Rutherford & Martinez-Lage, 2012; Krashen, 2009; Robinson & Ellis, 2007). However, these elements alone do not lead to language learning; students must actively engage in the learning process (Batstone, 2002; Gass & Mackey, 2006; Tsui, 1997). In other words, for optimal learning to occur, learners should be highly engaged in opportunities to be exposed to input, produce output, notice, and interact in the second language.

Engagement Principles

As noted above, engagement is an important aspect of learning in all fields, and language learning is not an exception (Cambourne, 1995; Christenson, Sinclair, Lahr, & Godber, 2001; Moeller & Catalano, 2015; Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2001). Students’ engagement refers to the students’ deep meaningful involvement in a task that results in higher concentration, interaction, enjoyment, and cognitive processing during the task (Egbert, 2003; Lee, 2012; Lutz, Guthrie, & Davis, 2006; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). Engaged learners demonstrate
enjoyment in learning, have a purpose for learning, believe in their capability, take responsibility for their own learning, and seek to understand text (Cambourne, 1995; Parsons & Taylor, 2011). The literature notes various engagement principles, but the most salient ones in engaging students include authenticity, interest, social interaction and communication, just in time feedback, and a challenge/skills balance (Egbert, 2003; Erbaggio, Gopalakrishnan, Hobbs, & Liu, 2016; Meltzer & Hamman, 2005; Newmann, 1992; Parker, Maor, & Herrington, 2013). These engagement principles are explained in the following section.

**Authenticity.** Authentic environments, characterized by significant, valuable, and meaningful tasks that are worthy of effort, promote students’ engagement (Newmann, 1992). Skinner and Pitzer (2012) indicated that teachers need to provide academic tasks that are authentic, relevant to students’ experiences and concerns, hands-on, project-based, integrated across subject areas, and permit students some freedom to choose their own way and to work closely in cooperative groups over long periods of time. According to Ullah, Xiao, and Lilley (2012), students experiencing authenticity in their learning described an intrinsic passion about what they were learning. Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves (2002) noted that the use of authentic materials promotes self-learning and self-regulation and also supports skill development. To illustrate this point, Zerhan and Binnur (2015) utilized quantitative research to determine the process of digitalizing the EFL curriculum using authentic materials. This research involved 12th-grade students found in EFL classes. This study was conducted over 12 weeks, used 37 twelfth grader students, and applied pre-test and post-test that determined attitude scale dependent on the items they received. This study used authentic materials such as radio, television shows, movies, documentaries, and news broadcasts and gave the ESL learners a different perspective cornering the learning of the English language. The authors recognized the
potential for authentic material to give the ESL curriculum a practical use. The results indicated that authentic materials have marked a positive effect on engaging the students in their English course.

**Interest.** When learners get the opportunity to relate to the learning tasks, they are more likely to actively engage in the learning of the second language (Batstone, 2002; Gass & Mackey, 2006). In their study of high school students, Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Shernoff (2014) found that interest is a key aspect of the deep engagement that sets the foundation for motivation and subsequent learning. Other researchers have suggested that interest offers a platform for establishing engagement (Cook & Artino, 2016; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). As they found, interest can inspire learners to seize opportunities to cooperate with others, gain feedback, and learn in a way that supports continual development (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Shernoff et al., 2003; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). For instance, McQuillan and Conde (1996) conducted a study among 11 children and 76 university students and professionals and found that the more interesting the readings were to the students, the more engaged they were in the readings. Furthermore, Zoch, Myers, and Belcher (2015) conducted a series of quantitative analyses to explore student engagement in the classroom setting among 64 students from elementary, middle, and high school. The study concluded that students show interest in the assigned course readings when working in whole group and small group and engage in topics addressed in the class. In short, interest in all aspects of the task can promote student engagement. In part, interest stems from social interaction which is another engagement principle.

**Social interaction and communication.** School environments that provide opportunities for substantive social interaction and communication can motivate students to actively engage in
the learning process (Langer, 2001; Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Through social interaction and communication, students can potentially develop communicatively, socially, and academically as they take part in knowledge construction to improve their competence in communication (Hall, 1993; Toohey, 2000). Learning strategies such as group discussions that combine collaborative learning and structured interactions have been shown to foster engagement (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994). Briggs (2014) used qualitative methodology to explore the role that teacher, students, and the classroom environment play in the process of learning and teaching. An engagement scale measured the roles that these people played in ensuring that the nine Hispanic ESL learners played an active role in this communicative classroom. In other words, this literature suggests that social interaction can lead to interest that facilitates the growth of learners through interacting with their classmates.

“Just-in-time feedback” and practice. Just-in-time feedback is also an essential factor in student engagement and learning (Kotecha, 2011; Wiggins, 1998). According to Newmann (1992), real-world feedback is often immediate while feedback from teachers is often delayed. This delay makes comprehending and integrating the feedback difficult and consequently negatively affects engagement. On the other hand, just in time feedback enables learners to identify what they know and what they do not know. Existing evidence suggests that provision of prompt and constructive feedback is essential for high engagement levels (see, for example, Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991; Wiggins, 1998; Wilson, 2012). In another study, Ene and Upton (2014) utilized qualitative and quantitative methods that focused on the potential that feedback has in engaging learners in the process of acquiring communication skills. This study obtained its results using 12 ESL learners (six from China and six from Saudi Arabia) who had three teachers who contributed feedback electronically. This research reveals that a
large proportion of the electronic response was made up of minor remarks that consisted of feedback that was explicit, systematic, principled, and directive. The results suggest that students found the electronic feedback useful and that it engaged them in their language tasks. In sum, just in time feedback can help students engage because they immediately see their errors and can move past them.

**Challenge and skills balance.** This engagement principle explores the balance between an individual’s skills and challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997b; Egbert, 2003; Lee, 2012). When a balance exists between skills and challenge, learners may engage, complete their tasks successfully, and be motivated to tackle more challenging tasks (Egbert, Akasha, Huff, & Lee, 2012; Whalen, 1997). As noted by Csikszentmihalyi (1996), engagement can only be maintained when learners continually face new challenges that force them to increase their skills to tackle the challenges. Jamieson and Chapelle (1988) found that skill-challenge balance was essential for predicting the attitudes of second language learners. They also found that engagement is likely to be induced when the reading materials are not too easy or too challenging and lead to students’ comprehension of a theme. In other words, tasks that are just above the students’ current level seem to engage them and, therefore, lead to comprehensible input. Mirlohi, Egbert, and Ghonsooly (2011) surveyed 168 Iranian higher education students involved in language tasks. They concluded that engagement occurred when students’ “skills ... were neither overmatched nor underused” (p. 265). This confirms the literature that indicates challenge/skills as a crucial element in students’ engagement.

From the principles of engagement, it is evident that various strategies are needed to promote the deep involvement of students in the SLA process. Researchers have linked the key principles of engagement with second language acquisition (e.g., Badger & MacDonald, 2010;
Findings suggest that language learners are likely to experience deep engagement when they are absorbed in communicating with native speakers or when there are intensely involved in reading a passage (Egbert, 2003; McQuillan & Conde, 1996). Various scholars have also proposed the use of technology to promote engagement (e.g., Egbert, Akasha, Huff, & Lee, 2012; Carrasquillo & Nunez, 1988; Ybarra & Green, 2003). The following section explores how technology might be leveraged to promote engagement in language learning.

**Learning Management System’s (LMS) Use in Language Learning**

Technology has become a core part of the learning process, and it is being utilized in various ways in foreign/second language teaching to engage students and support their language learning (Chun, 2011). According to Bahrani and Sim Tam (2012), technology-based approaches provide a framework for exposing learners to new and authentic materials. Consequently, they can promote engagement for second language acquisition. In addition, a plethora of research has shown evidence that certain computer-mediated communication (CMC) and multimedia tools can be effective in aiding culture or language learning for some levels of learners (e.g., Chun, 2011; Krashen, Wang, & Lee, 2016; Office of Education Technology, 2014).

As a result, many higher education institutions in KSA have adopted different kinds of learning management systems (LMS) to design multiple opportunities to enhance students’ learning outcomes (Ishikawa, Akahane-Yamada, Smith, Kondo, Tsubota, & Dantsuji, 2015). A learning management system (LMS) is a software environment that is used worldwide by K-12 schools and higher education institutions (Sayfouri, 2016). It enables the management and
delivery of learning content and resources to students (Martin, 2008). There are different types of LMSs, but according to the literature, the current LMS’s leaders in the education sector include Blackboard, Moodle, and Canvas (Bryfczynski, Pargas, Cooper, & Klymkowsky, 2012). The LMS used across KSA higher education, Blackboard, is a web-based system used to support teaching and learning across the disciplines.

Various studies have shown that the use of LMS in education has become crucial to students’ learning experiences (e.g., Aldosari & Mekheimer, 2013; Asiri, Mahmud, Bakar, & Ayub, 2012; Mohsen, 2014; Trayek, Faud, Hassan, & Sariah 2013). The use of LMS enables the language learners to be actively engaged in learning activities upon creating collaborative teams or addressing real-world problems using discussion board or the Blackboard collaboration system (Jackson, 2007). Moreover, the use of LMS allows the language learners to get immediate feedback through multimodal features available in the platform such as recording and writing text in private or in public (Kay, Reimann, Diebold, & Kummerfeld, 2013).

A study by Erbaggio, Gopalakrishnan, Hobbs, and Liu (2016) focused on how LMS can be used to engage students. These researchers carried out a study to examine the extent to which technology can be used to incorporate authentic materials to maximize their benefits. A multiple case study design was utilized in the study to examine how technology, alongside authentic materials, could benefit foreign language learning. The sample included 22 French language learners, 25 Italian language learners, and 20 Chinese learners. All the participants were undergraduate students. Various LMSs, including Blackboard, were utilized in the case studies. The outcome of the study indicated that the use of technology approaches to offer access to authentic materials positively impacted the attitudes of the learners towards content, learning design, and evaluation, and, consequently, increased student engagement.
Similarly, Hussein (2016) conducted a study to examine the effect that Blackboard-based instruction had on the achievement of pre-service students in the Faculty of Education for Girls in Bisha, Saudi Arabia. The participants were a group of 40 students from the Department of English who were randomly picked and randomly allocated either to the primary study group or the control group – each with twenty participants. Notably, the primary study group of 20 participants received instruction through Blackboard Collaborate, where teachers and students communicate with one another, view presentations or videos, interact with other participants, and engage with resources in work groups. On the other hand, the 20 participants in the control group’s instruction used the traditional techniques. The author found that compared to traditional instruction where discussions tend to be relatively unbalanced, with one or two participants dominating class discussions, Blackboard-based instruction provided learners with equal opportunities for participation. The findings of the research indicated that the participants were more engaged in the Blackboard-based teaching that allowed for social interaction and for just in time feedback. They also achieved more, compared to the traditional instructional techniques, as it provided them with numerous opportunities to explore alternative means to interact with teachers, peers, course material, and activities.

The above literature shows how the use of LMS platforms such as Blackboard can promote the engagement of second language learners. The research indicates that the effective use of LMS platforms can promote student engagement if they are used to facilitate skills-challenge balance, the use of authentic materials, interest, social interaction, and just in time feedback (Al Shlowiy, 2016; Erbaggio, Gopalakrishnan, Hobbs, & Liu, 2016; Hussein, 2016). In other words, the use of an LMS platform can be an effective approach in engaging language
learners in their learning process based on the content provided by the educators; however, outcomes depend on how LMS is used.

**Research Questions**

Based on the literature above, this study explores female Saudi university students’ engagement in English language learning and whether and how the use of an LMS technology engages them. The guiding research questions were:

1. How engaged do students say they are in their language learning in general?
2. How do students use an LMS in their language learning? When students use the Blackboard LMS, how engaged do they perceive themselves to be? Why?

Answers to these questions might lead to improvement in the use of LMS and engagement strategies for female Saudi language learners.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This is an exploratory qualitative study that aims to answer the questions noted above. In this section, the methodology is described in terms of participants, context of the study, data sources, and data analysis. The limitations of this study are also addressed.

Participants

The participants were female undergraduate students enrolled in a course in the English Department at a university in Saudi Arabia. A total of 25 full time students between 20 and 23 years old took part in the study. All the participants were native Arabic speakers taking an EFL course as sophomores (4th semester). All of the participants had studied English in elementary and high school and for two years in the English Department in the university in Saudi Arabia. In addition, although the teacher provided proficiency data about the students, she did not otherwise participate in the study.

Participants were enrolled in an introduction to computers course taught in English by one female EFL instructor as part of their program. She had taught for almost five years in the program but was originally from Pakistan. Most of the materials and interactions were in English. For example, participants were asked to communicate with the teacher and peers and to have their answers in English orally or in a written form. They were also asked to answer open-ended questions in English which required them to have English writing skills. The class ran for three months instead of the usual four because the Education Ministry urged schools to finish classes and courses before the Ramadan month started.

Some of the results of a background survey (described under data sources) are presented here to provide context for the study. As part of the survey, the participants were asked to rank
themselves according to their language proficiency and confirmatory data was provided by their teacher. Based on an average of these two data sources, the students’ English proficiency in this study can be loosely characterized as five lower-intermediate, 13 intermediate, five higher-intermediate, and two advanced. Also, based on the background survey, the participants seemed to be either very confident or confident in using the majority of the Blackboard features while learning English. According to the participants, eighteen of them had used computers for studying English before the Spring semester 2017 and 7 had not. Although all of the students at the university used the LMS for at least two years, those seven students might not consider the use of LMS as using computers to study English. Those who said they had used computers for studying English previously indicated that they used them to watch YouTube educational programs (5), do research (2), watch movies (2), do homework and take exams (5), study computer classes (2), check grades (2), watch online lectures (2), participate in discussion (2), translate vocabulary (2), listen to music in English (1), or communicate with native speakers (3). Some overlap exists in the aforementioned data because participants were given choices to write and some of them wrote more than one criteria. As noted, some of these uses were in Blackboard, because it was the LMS used in every year of the university. In addition, 21 students had used an LMS like Blackboard before the study started for all the classes and courses and for two years.

**Context**

The research took place using in part the Blackboard platform, which is described in this section in order to provide a picture of this part of the research context. The researcher asked the course instructor, who expressed a willingness to work with her, to add her to the Blackboard course space in order to monitor the activities of the participants. When the students entered the
Blackboard course, a list of links in a menu down the left hand side of the screen provided the titles of all the courses the teacher teaches; however, students only saw the courses in which they were enrolled, so they should easily locate their course. Upon entering the course, students saw a welcoming page and course map that showed the content of that course. On the left side of that welcoming page, many links led to different parts of the course. This is known as the Course Menu. Participants used these links to access and view various areas of the course such as: about the course (112 times), announcements (98 times), lectures (409 times), recorded lectures (60 times), quizzes and exams (53 times), projects and assignments (90 times), discussion board (544 times), course messages (353 times), my grades (130 times), and support (30 times). Within these links, students found their assigned learning materials in the form of text, graphics, and files. In addition, the teacher provided instructions for any tasks she asked the students to do with the Blackboard. For instance, the teacher posted instructions on how to login to online live lectures in BB, as shown in Figure 1.
**Figure 1.** Teacher Instructions on Accessing the Online Live Lectures and Completing Tasks

After Watching the Lecture

Furthermore, the students were trained on how to navigate through the Blackboard at their first year and before they started using it for their classes. The training lasted for a week for all the new students in the university and was done by one teacher who was an expert in using computer systems in general and the Blackboard in particular.

**Data Sources**

Data were collected during the Spring semester of 2017. Multiple sources of data were utilized in this study to allow for both triangulation and a complete description. The following sources were used to collect the required data:

1. **Background survey:** This survey was distributed to the participants during the fourth week of
the Spring semester 2017 and its aim was to collect general background information about the participants, including perceived proficiency in English; familiarity with LMS use, particularly Blackboard use; and experiences in English language learning. This background survey was originally in English and was translated by the researcher into Arabic. Another native Arabic speaker who is fluent in English was asked to translate the Arabic version into English (back translation) and the two translations were checked and compared by a native English speaker.

The questionnaire contained eight questions. These questions included inquiries such as (1) How would you rate your general English language proficiency? and (2) How confident are you about using Blackboard? (See Appendix A for the background survey.)

2. Engagement surveys: Data from two engagement surveys were collected to fulfill the goals of this study. These two surveys were adapted from Egbert (2003) and modified to suit this study. The changes were in the content, but the structure of the questions was maintained. For example, in Egbert’s (2003) survey, one of the questions was “This task was interesting to me.” For the first survey about general English engagement, it was modified to “My English classes are interesting to me.” In the second question about engagement with LMS use, it was written, “The use of Blackboard in my English classes is interesting to me.”

Each engagement survey contained 14 statements; each element of the engagement framework was addressed by two statements and one or more questions. The 10 questions used a Likert-type format (1=Never to 5=Always), while the questions were open-ended. The goal of using open-ended questions was to provide a chance for the participants to use their own words to express their perceptions. Moreover, the responses obtained from the open-ended questions were more detailed, variable in content, and longer than the closed-ended ones. As such, the
open-ended responses offered rich information for the researcher to capture and understand the diverse views of the participants without limiting their responses.

The English class engagement survey focused on the participants’ perceptions of their engagement in their English language learning. As soon as permission was granted, the researcher gave the survey to the participants in class in the 8th week of the semester. Some of the questions covered in this survey included: Are your English classes interesting to you? Is the content of your English classes meaningful to you? (See Appendix B for the English class engagement survey).

The LMS engagement survey addressed the attitudes and perceptions of the participants toward the use of Blackboard in language learning. The researcher gave this second survey to the participants in class in the 9th week of the semester after they had completed their work in the LMS. The LMS engagement survey covered questions such as: Is the use of Blackboard in your English classes interesting to you? Are you challenged when using Blackboard in your English classes? (See Appendix C for the LMS engagement survey).

3. Blackboard documents: These included the comments, discussion board entries, and feedback from the Blackboard course space. During their interaction in the Blackboard platform, the participants used various tools such as announcements, lectures, recorded lectures, E-learning resources, quizzes and exams, projects and assignments, BB collaborate, discussion board, course message, my grades, support, and tools. The information shared through these tools in the form of comments, discussion board posts, and feedback were captured and analyzed by the researcher. In addition, course analytics reports created by the LMS, such as Overall Summary of User Activity for Course Tools and All User Activity Inside Popular Content Areas, were retrieved from Blackboard. These reports helped the researcher in describing how learners
interacted with course materials, learning activities, and one another. The researcher calculated the number of time students logged in and used each tool. These calculations enabled the researcher to look at the total activity within the course, as well as the relative activity of one tool in comparison to others.

4. Teacher ranking of student English proficiency: As noted in the participants section, the teacher ranked student English proficiency to confirm or refute student self-perceptions. The researcher provided the teacher with a chart that included the participants’ names and spaces to evaluate each student’s reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in English. The teacher wrote one, two, or three for each skill. One is below the average for this class, two is average for this class, and three is above the average for this class. This chart was given to the teacher in the 10th week of the semester so the teacher got to know each student’s English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills before evaluating them. (See Appendix D for teacher ranking of student English proficiency chart).

5. Semi-structured interviews: Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with five of the participants. The questions were based on data from the surveys. The intention was to gather in-depth information regarding the perceptions and attitudes of the EFL students. Students were chosen based on their language proficiency scores; for example, two interviewees were advanced, two were low proficiency, and the other was medium based on the teachers’ scores and their own evaluation of their proficiency. This choice was based in the theory, which indicated that students of different proficiencies in the same class needed different challenges, which were not provided by the curriculum. Only five were interviewed because: (1) the number of the interviewees represented 20% of the original number of the participants, (2) once the course ended the participants became geographically dispersed, which made it hard to meet the
students face to face, and (3) after the fifth interview the data appeared to be saturated; in other words, all of the interviewees gave the same answers. The semi-structured interviews were instrumental in collecting information that was not captured in the surveys and the Blackboard documents. For example, one interview question was, in the surveys, you selected (always) as an answer about your interaction with your teachers and your classmates using Blackboard; however, observing you on the Blackboard platform gave me a different understanding. Can you explain what you meant by that choice? These interviews were conducted by the researcher in the 12th week of the study. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for data analysis. (See Appendix E for interview questions).
CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

Analysis of data took several forms. First, the data collected from the close-ended questions from the two engagement surveys were analyzed by running descriptive statistics to find the average degree of participants’ perceived engagement in their English language learning in class and when they were using the Blackboard. The averages of all students across each question in both engagement surveys were reported as the following, based on semantic logic: 1 (Never), 1.01-1.99 (almost never), 2-2.99 (rarely), 3-3.99 (sometimes),4- 4.99 (usually), and 5 (always).

Next, data from the background survey, open ended questions in the two engagement surveys, Blackboard documents, and interview transcripts were analyzed using an open-coding analysis. An open-coding analysis was used in the determination of patterns and themes based on the reflections of the participants (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For instance, open coding was utilized to understand the properties of data including the frequency of keywords and patterns (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Based on the theoretical framework of this study, codes included terms such as authenticity, social interaction and communication, interest, just in time feedback, and challenge and skills. For the interview transcripts, the researcher explored all the data sources to identify and code common themes. In this study, colored markers were utilized in the identification of themes to ensure that the context of the data was not changed and visually indicated the themes as suggested by Dooley (2007).

Furthermore, an axial coding approach was used to assure that all data in this study were covered by the codes, to gather all the data that has the same code, and to find evidence that supports the codes made earlier. The reason for utilizing an axial approach in analyzing these
data was to find the dominant and the less important elements in this research (Boeije, 2010). After coding the data, the next step involved prioritization of the themes with the aim of reducing the data. This process was accomplished through the comparison and categorization of the themes from each source of data. Once the priority themes were identified, the researcher examined the validity of the remaining themes to find patterns that show how engaged students say they are in their language learning in general and, when students use Blackboard, how engaged do they perceive themselves to be. Why?

In order to ensure the validity of the research, three approaches were utilized (Creswell & Poth, 2017). First, the data collection methods were triangulated by linking and comparing the data from the background survey, two engagement surveys, and semi-structured interviews in order to find trends or patterns to answer the research questions accurately (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1995; Patton, 1990). Second, the researcher used inter-rater reliability for the interview transcription whereby a graduate student not involved in the data analysis exposed to the data and asked to do the coding using the five coding terms mentioned previously and then match with the researcher coding (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997). Finally, member checking was employed whereby the researcher checked with the participants when interviewing them that what they said matched what the researcher understood (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations were anticipated in this study. First, only 25 female EFL participants from one department at one university were involved. As such, there is a limitation in the data and this is a key weakness of qualitative methods (Duffy, 1985). However, this number of participants allowed the study to look more deeply at the issues under question than if there had
been more participants. In addition, the researcher’s personal experience in the context, as a native Saudi and Arabic speaker, the standardization of courses and LMS use across the Kingdom, and the similarity of responses help to support the validity of the data.

Moreover, the focus on only female students limits the ability of the researcher to do a gender comparison of the results; however, since there is no co-education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia due to cultural and religious restrictions, this study can inform teachers in female-only institutions about their students. In addition, because Saudi women are not used to being interviewed by external researchers, they may have been hesitant to share their true feelings; they may have also been afraid that the interviewer would share the findings with the teacher, even though they were told that this would not happen and they were not asked specifically about the teacher in the study. In future studies, building trust between the researcher(s) and the participants might support their openness.

Finally, the shortened semester, which was not foreseen, impeded the researcher’s ability to collect additional data from these students and the teacher, but the study still provides a solid initial exploration that can support future research.

**Findings and Interpretations**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the engagement of Saudi female English language learners in their learning and whether the current use of the Blackboard LMS engages them. The findings and interpretations are presented below in order of the research questions in order to build a clear description of the findings.

**How engaged do students say they are in their language learning in general?**

In this section, the answers are represented by themes based on the theoretical framework. The result of the English classes engagement survey is reported in Table 1.
Table 1

Averages of All the Participants’ Survey Answers Across Each Question in English Classes in General

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest</th>
<th>Authenticity</th>
<th>Challenge and skills balance</th>
<th>Just-in-time feedback</th>
<th>Interaction and Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interest.** The general English language engagement survey included two statements that addressed the participants’ interests. As shown in Table 1, 3.72 (sometimes) is the average of how the participants perceived how interesting their English classes are and 3.08 (sometimes) is the average of the perception of how often the content of the English classes addresses the participants’ interests. The data in Table 1 show that all the participants perceived themselves to be slightly more interested in their English classes in general than in the content of their English classes, but overall their interest is not high.

Additionally, in the open-ended questions on the survey, 12 participants who found themselves to be usually or always interested in their English classes wrote comments such as “in class activities and tasks that encourage the interaction and the discussion between the students and the teacher are leading to have an interesting English classes” and “clear instructions from the teacher and the quality of the teacher work are the things that make my English classes interesting.”
These comments suggest that the teacher’s way of teaching and of explaining and giving the lessons, activities, and tasks in each class is playing an important role in making the participants’ English classes interesting or not interesting. This agrees with the theoretical framework of engagement.

The data also show that nine of the participants were sometimes interested in their English classes because they were eager and motivated to learn the English language and that they have the desire to be fluent in English as well. Their enrollment in the English classes helped them achieve their goals and desires. For instance, in the interview, student four stated, “I like to learn other languages like English and I find all my English classes to be important and interesting in general. I am motivated to learn the language and most of these classes help me to meet my goals. I try to enjoy each class because each class teaches me something different than the other class.” There appears to be a connection between the participants’ high value, the intrinsic desire of English learning, and the importance of English learning activities and the participants’ being interested in their English classes. Future research can help to investigate the nature of this connection. The rest of the participants were somewhere in between.

Overall, the participants were moderately interested in their English classes. They were slightly more interested in English in general than they were in the specific content of their classes. The interview data help clarify these survey responses; three of the interviewees expressed that they sometimes found the content of some classes to be interesting, too. For example, Student 24 stated, “Sometimes in the grammar class, for instance, I get a chance to write a sentence or a paragraph from a topic of my interest area using the tense the teacher asked for. Additionally, in the reading class, there are variety of topics the book addresses that I find myself interesting to know more about them. On the other hand, sometimes the content of some
of my English classes is not interesting to me because some of them, like English literature and poetry for instance, are not interesting topics and these two courses have the most sophisticated English words which make these two classes difficult and boring for me.” Other students responded in much the same way.

The data revealed that the more the students found the English language important to learn and the more the teachers addressed different topics of students’ interests in their classes and different activities and tasks that allowed them to negotiate meaning and interact with each other, the more the students will be interested in their English classes and the content of their English classes. This suggests that participants’ interest, as the literature notes, is an important element in their engagement. It also seems that the content of their classes could benefit from a stronger connection to students’ interests. This finding supports previous research discussed earlier in the literature review on the importance of interest to learning.

**Authenticity.** The general English language engagement survey included two statements that addressed authenticity. As demonstrated in Table 1, 3.52 (sometimes) is the average of whether all the participants are planning to use what they learned in their English classes outside the classroom or not and 3.36 (sometimes) is the average of whether all the participants found the content of their English classes meaningful to them or not.

Participants, who perceived the content of their English classes to be only sometimes meaningful, also seemed to be sometimes willing to use what they learned in their English classes outside the classroom. More specifically, the data in Table 2 indicate that not all participants found the content of their English classes to be meaningful. In the survey, participants’ comments on the content of their English classes included, “not usefulness,” “not related to our life experience,” and “meaningless.” For instance, student two stated, “Some of
the courses like English literature and poetry were not meaningful to me as they included the most difficult words and from my point of view not related to my life experience by any means. As a result, I will not be using any of the things I learned in these two classes outside the classroom.” Data from the interviews, however, indicated that some participants have different perceptions about the value and the meaningfulness of the things they learned in their English classes. For instance, one of the interviewees (student four) stated, “I can say that I can use most of the things I learned in my English classes outside the class because most of the lectures, lessons, tasks, and activities provided by the teacher were related to what I am doing outside the classroom. For example, I can apply what I learned in my grammar, reading, study skills classes outside the class when communicating with foreigners or when I am using any of the social media to connect with any other people from other countries. In fact, applying what I learned in my classes outside helped me developing my skills like my speaking, writing, and listening skills.” This implies that some participants found the content of their English classes to be valuable and meaningful and therefore they intended to use it outside the classroom. However, the general trend shows that the participants felt that their classes were only moderately meaningful and, therefore, consideration might be paid to the authenticity of language tasks and the use of LMS.

**Challenge and skills balance.** The general English language engagement survey included two statements that addressed challenge and skills balance. As shown in Table 1, the average of how the participants perceived how challenged they are in their English classes is 3.08 (sometimes), and 3.52 (sometimes) is the average of participants’ perceptions of whether they had the skills to learn in their English classes or not.
Regarding those participants who found themselves sometimes challenged by their English classes, they also commented in the same survey that classes like grammar, writing, and speaking are the ones they found to be the most challenging. For example, according to the interviews, Student One stated, “The teacher, for instance, in the speaking class gave us a lecture about how to make an order in a restaurant. After she introduced the lesson she asked us to come up with different words or sentences other than the ones in the book to help us being more creative and to allow each student to participate. In this case, I found myself to be challenged by trying to come up with new words or sentences. I was able to take the challenge. This kind of challenge is amazing and it keeps me focus the whole period of the class.” More than half of the participants felt the same way. However, participants also commented that their English listening, reading, and grammar classes were either too boring or too easy. For example, in the interview, Student One said that there is no challenge for her in the listening class because it is all about “repeated information and tasks,”. This implies that repetitious information and tasks were boring because they were performed almost every week in the course. Thus, this suggests that too much repetition, a staple practice in many English classes, may not be engaging to all students.

Although participants perceived that they are only sometimes challenged, depending on the English class, they often have the skills to learn in their English classes. For instance, Student One stated, “I think I always have the skills otherwise I would not be able to pass all my English classes with A.” In addition, Student Two said, “I think I always have the skills to learn because every time the teacher provided us with any tasks, exams, or activities I was successfully trying to do well in the assigned work. If I would not have the skills then I would not be able to do some or all of the tasks, activities, or exams and, therefore, I would not be able to pass or
complete my classes.” In other words, participants perceived that they do have the skills but not necessarily the appropriate level of challenge in their English classes. According to the literature, this means the participants are not achieving as much as they could be if they were challenged more in their English classes. As a result, instructors might review the level of challenge and consider providing a variety of challenges. Future research can investigate appropriate levels of challenge for these students.

“Just-in-time feedback.” The general English language engagement survey included two statements that addressed just in time feedback. According to the data in Table 1, the participants perceived that they received the needed help to learn in their English classes sometimes (3.4) and they get immediate feedback from the teacher or classmates in their English classes sometimes (3.24).

Eleven participants generally indicated in the open-ended questions in the same questionnaire that they did not feel comfortable participating in their English classes because of their English proficiency level and, therefore, they did not get the help they needed; however, they perceived that when they did participate, they sometimes got either positive or negative feedback. According to the participants, the positive feedback helped them learn the language while the negative feedback seemed to hinder their learning success. For instance, Student 17 wrote, “I am not always getting feedback in my English classes, maybe one to two in each class, but almost all the help and the feedback I got from my teachers or my classmates was helpful as I got to know my mistakes and learned from them.” Furthermore, Student Nine wrote, “sometimes I would only get feedback in my English classes because I did not like to participate, maybe because I could not speak English fluently yet. Some of the feedback or comments I got from my teachers or classmates were negative and that from my point of view hinders my
success in learning the language because I am not confident about asking about anything anymore.” This implies that the help and feedback the participants received in their English classes were limited by their participation in the class; this participation, in turn, may have been limited by their perceived challenge/skills balance.

When interviewed, Student One confirmed this, saying, “I usually get immediate feedback from the teacher or from my classmates in my English classes. It is unlikely that in any of our classes the teacher or any of my classmates would not correct me if I said or wrote something wrong.” Student Three added, “Only sometimes I participated in my classes because only some of my English classes are interesting and I felt motivated to talk and discuss some the topics addressed in them. As a result, I only sometimes got feedback and received the help needed in all of my English classes. The more I participate in my classes the more likely I will receive the needed help and the more likely to get feedback from the teacher or my classmates.”

Nine of the participants wrote that they did not participate often in their English classes because of their perceived low proficiency and unengaging tasks; therefore, they received limited feedback from the teachers and peers. In contrast, seven of the participants noted that they were able to participate because their English language and proficiency levels were better and because they were interested and engaged in some of the topics addressed. In other words, instructors might encourage their students by providing opportunities for all students to participate and, therefore, receive feedback from the teachers and peers in their English classes.

**Interaction and communication.** The general English language engagement survey included two statements that addressed interaction and communication. As shown in Table 1, participants perceived that they were interacting with their teachers and classmates sometimes
(3.52) and interacting with their teachers and peers keeps them focused in their English classes usually (4.12). This was the only average higher than 4 in the survey.

In the open-ended survey questions, participants commented that interacting with their teachers and peers is not happening often in their English classes. For instance, Student 17 wrote, “Interacting with my teachers and classmates helped me learning English better because I got to know my false information and I got to gain more knowledge by exchanging ideas and constructing knowledge even though the interaction was not happening regularly.” Other data from the interviews supported these findings. For example, Student 24 stated, “I only interact with my teachers and with my classmates when the teacher addressed a meaningful topic in the class or in the classes that I find them to be interesting to me and those are not many.” Because the interaction between teachers and students appeared to be relatively infrequent, only some participants got the benefit of such interaction.

Although participants perceived that they were only sometimes interacting with their teachers and peers in their English classes, the interaction was usually keeping them to focus and concentrate in their English classes; nine of the participants reported that they felt active and engaged in some of their English classes when there was interaction between the teachers and the peers. Student Four stated, “Actually when interacting and communicating with my teachers and classmates about any topic or tasks in my English classes, I usually find it to be fun and useful.” Another student (Student One) stated, “I usually interact with my teachers and peers because participating and interacting in groups with my classmates and individually with my teacher kept me focusing and allowed me to critically thinking of the topic we are discussing.” This coincides with existing scholarship that learners had greater engagement with interactive and communicative tasks (Hall, 1993; Toohey, 2000). The literature notes that interaction and
communication can play an important role in fostering the student engagement and in helping them construct new knowledge in their English classes as they got a chance to exchange ideas and information. This implies that teachers in these classes need to think about providing the students with activities and tasks which allow them to be in groups where they can interact with each other and with their teachers and negotiate meanings. These kinds of activities and tasks might help contribute in the students’ involvement and engagement in their English classes.

To conclude, data from the English classes engagement survey and from interviews indicated that participants overall perceived themselves to be only sometimes engaged in their language learning. Particularly, the data showed that participants perceived the content and the topics discussed in some of their English classes valuable, worthy and related to their real life and background. In addition, some participants showed interest in learning the English language because of their high value for the English language and English learning. Moreover, the data showed that some of the participants who received appropriate feedback and within a specific time in their classes were engaged in their learning process. Furthermore, based on the open-ended questions in the survey and the interviews, tasks and activities that involved appropriate challenge and skills balance kept the learners focused and engaged in the class. Finally, group activities and tasks seemed to increase learners’ social collaboration and to engage the learners in their language learning. These findings support the link between the engagement principles and the language learning as discussed earlier.

**How do students use the LMS in their language learning? When students use Blackboard, how engaged do they perceive themselves to be? Why?**

This section describes the use of each Blackboard feature and it is followed by the findings on their engagement during use. The twelve Blackboard elements that were available to
the participants were examined. According to the data presented in table 2, the entire class has logged in to the course tools in Blackboard in the semester 1912 times. Although this number shows how many times the participants logged in, it does not tell us exactly what they did.
Among these tools, the data showed that lectures and discussion board were used most often. This is logical because this is where the content of the class was located. However, the use of Blackboard varied greatly between the participants. While all the participants logged into the lectures and discussions, as shown in Table 2, the participants’ usage of lectures ranged from

### Table 2

*The Overall Summary of User Activity for Course Tools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blackboard Tools</th>
<th>Total of times students login</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About the course</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcements</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded Lectures</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quizzes &amp; Exams</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects &amp; Assignments</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Board</td>
<td>544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Messages</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Grades</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools Area</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1912</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
three to 50 times and their usage of the discussion board range from four to 56 times in the semester. Student Two and Student Five indicated that lectures and discussion board were the features they “frequently use” in Blackboard and found to be the “most useful” ones as being “highly relevant to course materials.” Along with “course messages,” they needed to log in to these features to check what was posted by the teacher. In other words, their use of the aforementioned features was based on what they perceived to be including the most important information. According to the literature, this could be because the students found these features to be authentic as they were directly related to passing the class. On the other hand, the other features like about the course, announcement, recorded lectures, quizzes and exams, projects and assignments, collaboration, course messages, my grades, support, and tools area were found to be less used. Student One and Student Three said that some of those features were “less valued” because they did not learn from these features. In other words, these other features seemed to be not as authentic to the participants so they did not use them very often.

The data in Table 3 show an interesting pattern for half the participants between time spent accessing lectures and discussions, students’ grades in the course, and students’ LMS engagement scores.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Grade (out of 30)</th>
<th>Average of students’ English proficiency</th>
<th>Total of lectures and discussion board</th>
<th>LMS engagement score for each</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The Relationship between the Students’ Grades, their level of English Proficiency, the Times They Used the Lectures and the Discussion Board, and the LMS Engagement Scores
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Scores from the teacher</th>
<th>Logins</th>
<th>Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 10</td>
<td>26.50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 11</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 13</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Days</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 16</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 17</td>
<td>26.50</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 19</td>
<td>15.50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 21</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 24</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In particular, students who accessed the lectures and the Blackboard discussion board very often had a greater likelihood of earning a high grade and being higher on the engagement scale.

When looking at the relationship, it appears that the most successful and engaged students are those who access lectures and discussion board most frequently; students doing poorly do not access those tools very often and they seem to be not as engaged. It appears that the pattern is consistent for students in the middle range of grades, who logged in an average number of times,
and have an average engagement score. It is unclear why the other participants did not follow the same pattern, and future research can investigate this issue more deeply.

For the second part of this question, the data are presented according to the components of the theoretical framework for this study. The result of the LMS engagement survey is reported in Table 4.

Table 4

*Averages of All the Participants’ Survey Answers Across Each Question in the LMS Engagement Survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Interest</th>
<th>Authenticity</th>
<th>Challenge and skills balance</th>
<th>Just-in-time feedback</th>
<th>Interaction and Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interest.** The LMS engagement survey included two statements that addressed the participants’ interests. As shown in Table 4, the average of how the participants perceived how interesting their use of Blackboard is in their English classes was 3.36 (sometimes), and the average of the perceptions of how often the English content in Blackboard addresses the participants’ interests is 3.6 (sometimes). In other words, participants found themselves to be slightly more interested in the use of Blackboard than in the content of Blackboard in their English classes, but in general, their interest is not high. This is similar to what was found in the
general English survey; this might be because the same type of instruction is used in both the English classes and the LMS.

Data from the open-ended questions in the survey support the findings from the table; some participants found the LMS use more interesting than others. For example, six of the participants who perceived the use of Blackboard to be usually or always interesting wrote that they were interested in “the importance of the lectures,” “doing assignment”, “taking quizzes”, and “checking grades while they are at home”. Seven other students found the use of Blackboard to be “a type of change from the traditional face to face classes,” “easy to use”, and “save time”, and therefore, interesting. Furthermore, during the interviews, Student Four reported, “I found the use of Blackboard to be interesting. It is nice to use this kind or any other kind of technology along with the traditional classes. It makes the learning more fun and it provides us with different opportunities while learning.” In other words, about half of the participants found the use of Blackboard interesting but still they were not highly engaged in using it.

Regarding the English content in Blackboard, one of the participants wrote in the open-ended questions that “new and interesting topics” posted by the teacher in the lectures or in the discussion board are the things that make the LMS content interesting for her. Three other participants wrote that “the English content in the Blackboard is very interesting as it benefits us to learn the English language and develops our language proficiency.” Some participants found themselves practicing English more when using the Blackboard and therefore develop their English proficiency level. One of the interviewee stated, “Knowing the fact that my English develops more while using the Blackboard makes me feel the use of Blackboard is interesting to me.”
On the other hand, four of the participants seem to never found the use of the Blackboard to be interesting. They wrote comments such as “not interesting at all” and “nothing will make the use of Blackboard interesting.” Further, two of the participants indicated in the interview that they felt bored and not motivated when using the Blackboard because the topics addressed in the lectures and in the discussion board were not related to their interests.

To conclude, the data show that more than half of the participants were only moderately interested in using Blackboard. They were slightly more interested in using Blackboard than they were in the content of Blackboard. Because the students appeared overall to be willing to use and interested in using Blackboard, if the teacher were more aware of the students’ needs and interests she might be better able to address different topics and interests in the Blackboard platform. As the literature suggests, addressing their interests could help them being engaged in the English content when using the Blackboard.

**Authenticity.** According to Table 4, 3.36 (sometimes) is the average of whether all the participants say that they are planning to use the English they learned in Blackboard outside of their English classes and 3.16 (sometimes) is the average whether all the participants found the English content in Blackboard in their English classes meaningful to them or not. These two averages are pretty close from each other and indicate that students did not perceive the use of Blackboard as very authentic to them.

Almost half (13) of the participants who declared that they are willing to use what they learned in Blackboard outside their English classes were also stating, in the open-ended questions in the survey, that some of lectures, tasks, and activities were related to their experiences and they were significant as they were leading them to learn the language. For instance, in the interviews, Student Three stated, “I believe everything posted in the Blackboard
by the teacher is meaningful to me. The lectures, the assignments we are asked to answer, the quizzes we have to take to pass our class, the tutorials the teacher posted to help us access the lectures or the quizzes are important.” On the other hand, three of the participants indicated that they will never use the English they learned in Blackboard outside the English classes because the English content was not meaningful to them and not related to their life experience. One of the interviewees stated, “I am not getting the benefit from the use of Blackboard in learning English as most if not all of the materials were not meaningful to me.”

Overall, Blackboard use was not perceived as any more authentic for English learning than the participants’ English classes, perhaps because, as the data show, the same traditional class content and format were supported by Blackboard use instead of technology use transforming the instruction. Therefore, reviewing the authenticity of the instruction and Blackboard use may change this.

**Challenge and skills balance.** In Table 4, the average of how the participants perceived how challenged they are by the use of Blackboard in their English classes is 3.12 (sometimes), while the average of whether participants perceived themselves to have the skills to use Blackboard is 3.96 (sometimes).

In response to the open ended questions in the survey, five of the participants indicated that sometimes they were challenged using Blackboard when they have poor Internet connection that will not allow them to login into the Blackboard. Students perceived that their grades suffered because of this. For instance, Students 15 and 12 both wrote, “The network sometimes is bad which did not allow me sometimes to login to the Blackboard to attend an online lecture, take an exam, see announcements from the teacher, or submit an assignment on time which cause me losing some grades.” In addition, eight of the participants stated that taking exams and
submitting assignments in the Blackboard platform was kind of challenging for them at the beginning of using Blackboard. However, after training and getting used to the Blackboard, it seems to be easy and interesting. For example, Student Four said, “At first, doing assignments and quizzes was not easy for me. It was pretty challenging. Later on, I find the use of Blackboard to be easier as I got trained by our teacher and as I got used to do things in Blackboard like assignments and taking quizzes. In fact, from my point of view, the Blackboard platform is friendly use.”

When asked about their skills, nine of the participants wrote that they did not find anything hard or that they did not have the appropriate skills to do in Blackboard. For example, Student 16 wrote, “There is nothing I found to be too hard or I did not have the appropriate skills or knowledge when using Blackboard.” Three of the participants indicated that “there was nothing challenging” while they were using Blackboard.

Overall, the participants perceived that they almost usually had the skills to use the LMS and they felt that they were only challenged part of the time. According to the literature, this lack of balance would result in some boredom with the use of the LMS. Like in their English classes, if the LMS use challenge them more (aside from technical difficulties), then they might be more engaged and therefore achieve more.

“Just-in-time feedback.” Table 4 presents the average of how participants perceived that they received the needed help to use Blackboard (3.64, or sometimes) and the average perceptions of receiving immediate feedback from the teacher or classmates in Blackboard (2.92, rarely).

However, in the open-ended questions, 14 participants indicated that sometimes they did get feedback when using the Blackboard in their English classes and that this feedback
information is useful to them as they got a chance to “learn from their mistakes,” “get to know new information,” “practice the language,” and “increase their skills in their language learning process.” For instance, Student 22 wrote, “I usually get feedback from my teacher and sometimes from my friends in the Blackboard in my English classes and I found that to be so helpful as I learned something new from my mistakes.”

On the other hand, five of the participants indicated that they did not get feedback from their teacher or their peers when using Blackboard in their English classes and, therefore, they assumed that feedback is not important for their language learning. The participants’ comments include: “I did not get any feedback from my teacher so I am not really sure about the nature of any feedback if it will be effective or not or if it is going to help or hinder my success.”

In sum, the participants who received the feedback considered it useful and important to their learning but not all of them get feedback through the LMS. According to the literature, feedback is a crucial component of both engagement and language learning and participant who received it acknowledge that. As a result, with more attention paid to providing timely and sufficient feedback through the LMS, students might engage more in their learning, as suggested in the literature.

**Interaction and communication.** According to Table 4, the average of all the participants and whether they were interacting with their teachers and with their classmates using Blackboard is 3.28 (sometimes) and the average of all the participants of how often they collaborated with their peers in English in Blackboard is 3.4 (sometimes).

Participants also reported in the open ended questions in the survey that they were sometimes interacting with their teachers and classmates in Blackboard and that interaction in Blackboard was helping them being succeed in their English classes. For example, Student 11
wrote, “I always interact when there is a discussion in the discussion board in the Blackboard because when I interacted I got a chance to exchange my ideas and thoughts with my teachers and peers and vice versa.” When interviewing students, they confirmed that interaction with teachers and peers was not happening all the time, but they also confirmed that almost all the information they got during the interaction is supporting their learning process and were found to be beneficial and related to their English learning. Student Three stated, “I sometimes interact with my teachers and peers in English in Blackboard and usually when I did I found it to be beneficial for me as I learned new things and develop my English learning.”

Generally, participants perceived that interaction between teachers and peers using the Blackboard platform is important for their English learning. It seems that participants’ interactions with their teachers and peers affected their English learning in a positive way since the data show that participants found the interactions helpful and a crucial element in their success in their English classes. However, since the interaction was not happening very often among teachers and peers through Blackboard, the students were probably not as engaged in their learning process as they could be.

The overall data from the LMS engagement survey and from the interviews showed that participants perceived themselves to be only fairly engaged according to the engagement components outlined in the literature. The data showed that the overall range of engagement scores was from 2.92 to 3.96, suggesting that all students found themselves at least sometimes engaged in their English learning when using Blackboard. So, the above findings indicated that the aforementioned engagement principles are critical to engage students more in Blackboard and more attention should be paid to the English content addressed in Blackboard.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

The present study explored female Saudi university students’ engagement in English language learning and whether and how the use of an LMS technology engages them. Based on the theoretical framework, the findings indicated that the participants did not generally perceive themselves to be engaged in their English classes or in their use of LMS to learn English. This may be because they did not perceive the four engagement principles as being addressed in their English classes or in the use or content of the LMS. Students indicated that they would be more engaged with group work if the tasks were based on their interests, if they had more feedback and more encouragement to participate, and if they were comfortable to making mistakes.

Further, there did not seem to be a strong link between grades, participation, and engagement. Future research can look more deeply into these relationships. However, the engagement principles in this study served as an effective guideline for exploration because there was a strong connection between what participants perceived as important and the five components of engagement. Therefore, the principles can provide a practical guideline for what teachers can do to engage students in classes, including when using technology. As Egbert (2003) and McQuillan and Conde (1996) indicated, female Saudi university English students may be more likely to be engaged in their classes when educators apply the engagement principles.

Implications

Based on the conclusions above, implications for teaching and research are addressed. The findings from this study highlight how Saudi female educators could consider addressing the engagement principles for their instruction and use of technology. For instance, if teachers don't
know students well, it will be hard to engage them in class or when using Blackboard, so the first step would be to find out more about students’ interests, backgrounds, and experiences. Moreover, when teachers do not provide various tasks or activities for the students that lead to interactions with teacher or with peers or that lead to meeting their challenge and skills balance in class or when using Blackboard, then students might not engage, so teachers need to find the appropriate tasks and activities that meet their students’ needs. Then, when teachers do not provide feedback to their students, then students will be more likely to not be engaged in their learning, so teachers are encouraged to provide just in time feedback for their students in class or when using Blackboard. As a result, the use of the engagement principles might lead the students to be engaged and, therefore, succeed in their classes as well as their use of Blackboard.

**Directions for Future Research**

Findings in this study provide important guidelines for future research and teaching. One promising direction for future research would be to investigate the interest of Saudi women students and to see what they consider authentic to help them acquire an effective way of learning and to increase their engagement level in their learning process. Another area to explore would measure quantitatively the effectiveness of feedback and interaction on students’ engagement in either their English classes or when the participants used the LMS. Future research may also investigate how engagement principles can be incorporated in class and in the LMS to fully engage the students in their learning process.
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Appendix A

Background Survey

This survey is designed to have an idea about your background information. There is no right or wrong answer for each question. There are eight questions in this questionnaire. Please respond to each question with the answer that best represents you.

Thank you for your participation.

1. What is your name (first, last)? (your name and data will not be shared with anyone)

2. How old are you?
   a. 18 – 19
   b. 20 – 21
   c. 22 – 23
   d. 23+
   e. Other _____________

3. How long have you studied English?
   a. 1 year
   b. 2 years
   c. 3 years
   d. 4 years
   e. Other _____________

4. Where did you study English? Please list all the places that you have studied English in.

5. How would you rate your general English proficiency?
   a. Beginner
   b. lower-intermediate
   c. Intermediate
   d. Higher-intermediate
   e. Advanced
   f. Other _____________________

6. How do you like to learn English best in class? (Please check all that apply)

   I like to learn by:
   □ Talking to the teacher in class
7. How confident are you in using the following features of the Blackboard learning platform?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blackboard Features</th>
<th>Very confident</th>
<th>Confident</th>
<th>Somewhat confident</th>
<th>A little confident</th>
<th>Not confident at all</th>
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<tr>
<td>Posting</td>
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<td>Replying</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submitting assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding videos and other media</td>
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<td>Posting videos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using audio recording</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking quizzes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading announcements</td>
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<td>Sending emails</td>
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<td>Viewing course grades</td>
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<tr>
<td>Checking calendar for due dates</td>
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</table>

8. Have you used computers for studying English before this semester?
   a. Yes  
   b. No  

If yes, what did you use them for? Please be specific.
9. Have you used a learning management system (e.g. Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle) before this semester?
   
a. Yes  
b. No

If yes, for which class(es) and for how long?
Appendix B

English Classes Engagement Survey

Section 1.

Instructions: Circle one response for each item.

1. My English classes are interesting to me.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always

2. The content of my English classes addresses my interests.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always

3. I will use the things I learn in my English classes outside of the classroom.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always

4. The content of my English classes is meaningful to me.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always

5. I am challenged by my English classes.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always

6. I have the skills to learn in my English classes.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always

7. I receive the help that I need to learn in my English classes.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always

8. In my English classes, I get immediate feedback from the teachers or classmates.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always

9. I interact with my teachers and my classmates in my English classes.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always

10. Interacting with my teachers and peers keeps me focused in my English classes.
Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Usually  Always
Section 2.
*Instructions: Please answer the questions below as completely and concisely as possible.*

1. What in your English classes do you find challenging?
   
   b. What do you find that is boring or too easy in your English classes?
   
   c. What is too hard or you do not have the appropriate skills or knowledge for in your English classes?

2. What makes your English classes interesting or not interesting to you?

3. How often do you get feedback in your English classes?
   
   b. How does the feedback help or hinder your success in your English classes?
4.  
   a. How often do you interact with your teacher or peers in your English classes?

   b. How does the interaction help or hinder your success in your English classes?
Appendix C

LMS Engagement Survey

Section 1.
Instructions: Circle one response for each item.

1. The use of Blackboard in my English classes is interesting to me.
   Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

2. The English content in Blackboard in my English classes addresses my interests.
   Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

3. I will use the English that I learn in Blackboard outside of the classroom.
   Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

4. The English content in Blackboard in my English classes is meaningful to me.
   Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

5. I am challenged by the use of Blackboard in my English classes.
   Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

6. I have the skills to use Blackboard in my English classes.
   Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

7. I receive the help that I need to use Blackboard in my English classes.
   Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

8. I get immediate feedback from the teachers or classmates in Blackboard.
   Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

9. I interact with my teachers and my classmates using Blackboard.
   Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

10. I collaborate with my peers in English in Blackboard.
Section 2.

Instructions: Please answer the questions below as completely and concisely as possible.

1. a. What in Blackboard use do you find challenging?

   b. What do you find in Blackboard use is boring or too easy?

   c. What is too hard or that you did not have the appropriate skills or knowledge for when using Blackboard?

2. What make the use of Blackboard in your English classes interesting or not interesting to you?

3. a. How often do you get feedback when using Blackboard in your English classes?

   b. How does the feedback in Blackboard help or hinder your success in your English classes?
4. 
   a. How often do you interact with your teachers and/or your classmates in Blackboard?

   b. How does the interaction in Blackboard help or hinder your success in your English classes?
Appendix D

Teacher Ranking of Student English Proficiency

Instructions: Please rank your students according to their general English proficiency. Your responses will not be shared with the students.
1. Below the average for this class  2. Average for this class  3. Above the average for this class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student name</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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:Notes
Appendix E

Semi-structured interview questions

1- In the surveys, you wrote……………………. Could you please explain that statement to me?

2- By looking at the Blackboard platform, I saw …. Can I ask you why …?

3- In the surveys, you selected…… as an answer for ……………………………, however, observing you on the Blackboard platform gave me a different understanding. Can you explain what you meant by…?

4- By looking at the Blackboard platform, I saw that you were ………………………………… while in the surveys you wrote…………………………………………. Could you please explain more to me about your thoughts?