| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Interaction Analysis in Online Learning Communities: The Student Leader

Reima Al-Jarf
Full Professor of English and Translation Studies, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Corresponding Author: Reima Al-Jarf, **E-mail**: reima.al.jarf@gmail.com

| **ABSTRACT**

I used Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle, Nicenet and RCampus in teaching reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar courses to freshman students as a supplement to in-class instruction that depended on the textbook. In each online course, there was a student leader. Student leaders had the highest posts and responses (between 50- 150 posts) and the highest student-student and student-instructor interaction. Student leaders were the first to register. They posted their own threads, short paragraphs, poems and/ or stories on the online discussion board. One posted a daily quote, another posted a weekly poem of hers, and a third posted a daily joke. They could locate information from internet sites. They responded to threads posted by me or by their classmates. They created a warm online climate by responding to their classmates, by sending encouraging messages and thank-you notes, and inviting students to respond to their own posts. Student leaders had a higher proficiency level in EFL, were well-read, had a good writing ability, and many were creative writers. They were more competent and more comfortable with technology than their classmates and above all they were highly motivated and eager to learn. This qualitative study explores a sample of student leaders' role in their online courses, their technological and linguistic competence, their personality traits, the online course environment, their attitutes and online learning experiences, and the instructor's role and characteristics. It also provides sample posts and responses and reports results of interviews with a sample of student leaders.

1. Introduction

Despite the widespread use of all kinds of technologies in second/foreign language learning, some teachers are still complaining of their students' inadequate participation, interaction, collaboration and communication in online courses. A review of the literature by Roberts & McInnerney (2007) found seven most commonly reported problems of online group learning, as identified by both researchers and practitioners. Those are: (i) student antipathy towards group work, i.e., some students do not care for the idea of group work; (ii) the selection of the groups, i.e., tendency to want to be in a group with friends; (ii) lack of essential group-work skills; (iv) the free-rider, i.e., when one or more students in the group does little or no work; (v) possible inequalities of student abilities; (vi) the withdrawal of group members because of feelings of isolation; (vii) the assessment of individuals within the groups (assigning group grades without distinguishing between individual members of the group). In addition, English preparatory school students in Turkey believe that online education has a negative impact on their motivation due to lack of social interaction, a mismatch between expectations and content, organizational problems and the organization of learning environments (Mese & Sevilen, 2021). Students who had low and medium-level motivation were dissatisfied with their online learning. Their dissatisfaction was due to lack of interaction, negative perceptions and dependence on traditional education. Moreover, instructors hear words like motivation, persistence, and retention, yet they do not know how to develop online courses that encourage their students to engage and interact with their classmates (Cakir, Karademir & Erdogdu, 2018). They are unaware that their social presence in their online courses could change the entire atmosphere of a course (Paquette, 2016).

On the other hand, many studies in the literature explored the predictors of academic success in web-based courses. A review of 78 studies on the conditions that determine the effectiveness of large-group learning activities in higher education showed the following: (1) student-teacher and student-student interaction, (2) implementation of active learning strategies, (3) classroom management, (4) students' motivation and commitment, and (5) the use of online teaching resources (Jerez, Orsini, Ortiz & Hasbun, 2021). Another study with one hundred forty students in 19 online courses showed that both environmental factors, instructors' autonomy-supportive interaction and learning environments using constructivist-based pedagogy predicted students' autonomous self-regulated motivation which in turn predicted students' self-reported engagement, achievement, and satisfaction. Personal factors such as interest in the course and technology self-efficacy did not predict students' autonomous self-regulation. Students' autonomous self-regulated motivation did not predict any interaction behaviors either (Russell, 2013).

Further studies in the literature focused on age, GPA, and blended vs completely online courses as predictors of academic success (Vella, Turesky & Hebert, 2016); traditional lecturing blended with computer-supported collaborative learning (Yang, Ghislandi & Dellantonio, 2018); engaging ESL students in a variety of writing activities with computers, either offline or online to increase motivation, confidence, and writing proficiency (Hadi, 2013); the interaction of visual design and creativity in self-paced online learning environments (Rosar & Weidlich, 2022); a multifaceted, student-centered understanding of online education (Henry, 2020); learner engagement, retention and success in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (Padilla Rodriguez, Armellini & Rodriguez Nieto, 2020); activating learners' metacognition to promote learning autonomy of good language learners (Rahman, Angraeni & Fauzi, 2021); students' intention to use emotion-aware virtual learning environment with a lecturer's interaction (Nassr, Aldossary & Nasir, 2021); students' interaction patterns in different online learning activities and their relationship with motivation, self-regulated learning strategies and learning performance (Çebi & Güyer, 2020); icebreaker/introduction discussions and working collaboratively using online communication tools and working on real-world projects and having discussions with structured or guiding questions were the most beneficial (Martin & Bolliger, 2018); the mediating role of online learning motivation among direct lectures, instructor-learner interaction, internet self-efficacy and learning satisfaction (Rahman, Uddin & Dey, 2021).

Other issues investigated by prior research were: the role of self-selected novels and social interaction with college students on engagement and motivation in 12th grade readers (Schreuder & Savitz, 2020); how teamwork experience and self-regulated learning determine the performance of students in an online educational technology course (Oyelere, Olaleye, Balogun & Tomczyk, 2021); the effects of flow, emotional engagement, and motivation on success in a gamified online learning environment (Özhan & Kocadere, 2020); the effect of ability and effort praise feedback had a significant positive impact on male participants' task performance, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation, Individual Differences in Response to Attributional Praise in an Online Learning Environment (Zhao & Huang, 2020).

The integration of different types of technologies were explored by some studies such as digital Literacies (social media, online gaming, tagging, picture, voice, and video editing tools, mixing tools, interactive HTML5 contents, translation tools, search engines, (visual) thesauruses, and interactive multimedia-enhanced tools for language teaching and learning (Misir, 2018); enhancing motivation in online courses with mobile communication tool support (Chaiprasurt & Esichaikul, 2013); student engagement on the forum, the support mechanisms offered by elected peers and their role in building an online community influenced second language learning by students (Motzo, 2016); language Student Interaction and Engagement via Twitter (Kelly, 2019); and learning via videoconferencing to increase EFL Interaction confidence, motivation, and ability (Wu, Yen & Marek (2011); interaction and engagement in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) (Tang & Wang, 2017).

A second line of research explored teacher factors that affect success of online language teaching and learning. Learner-to-instructor engagement strategies such as sending regular announcements or e-mail reminders and providing grading rubrics for all assignments were rated as the most beneficial in learner-to-instructor interaction (Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Teacher presence in traditional and online teaching has been considered one of the cornerstones of students' motivation and engagement. However, analysis of student-student and student-teacher interactions in multi-user virtual environments found that diminished teacher presence can encourage students to become active and independent learners (Kuznetcova, Lin & Glassman, 2021). "Instructing the instructor" to use social presence cues in online English composition courses helped create a more inviting and engaging course for the students and encouraged students' interaction and engagement (Paquette, 2016).

Furthermore, instructor qualities such as years of experience, level of education and practical experience predicted 5.6% of student achievement in education online courses, while an instructor's level of training predicted 2.1% of student achievement. The complex nature of online courses and the number of variables already identified as impacting student success (e.g., previous student performance, motivation, computer competence, level of peer/instructor interaction, work commitments) (Martin, 2017).

A third line of research focused on student factors contributing to the effectiveness of online learning. Kintu & Zhu, 2016) found that learner characteristics and background were significant for enhancing intrinsic motivation, satisfaction, knowledge construction and learning performance in blended learning. Only learner interactions were significant predictors of knowledge construction and satisfaction. Learner attitudes were a predictors of learner satisfaction and motivation. Workload management was a significant predictor of learner satisfaction and knowledge construction. No significant differences were found among the different age groups and between male and female students.

In digital exchange, extrovert students were more likely to participate in the Japan-Taiwan digital exchange and to collaborate with group members. Task learning correlated with participation and the extrovert personality type. During the exchange, the students developed a sense of agency through their perceived social interaction, enjoyed the autonomy offered by the activities, and valued the use of English in their communication (Kelsen & Flowers, 2018). In a similar digital exchange between students in South Korea and India, Baber (2020) found that interaction in the classroom, student motivation, course structure, instructor knowledge, and facilitation positively influenced students' perceived learning outcomes and satisfaction.

In addition, player characteristics such as introversion or extroversion, player motivation, and gender affected participation in online games. Introverts spent 6.7 more hours playing games than extroverts, and a significant interaction effect was found between personality and gender (Marvel, 2017).

Higher general mental ability and higher levels of motivation were positively associated with academic performance in a distance learning environment, while low levels of either motivation or general mental ability were associated with lower levels of performance (Logan, Lundberg, Roth & Walsh, 2017). Students with high intrinsic motivation showed higher fluency and flexibility on the creative task and spent a larger percentage of time looking at their own ideas on the screen than students with low intrinsic motivation. Although intrinsic motivation could enhance the fluency of creative ideas in an online group, it does not necessarily promote interaction among group members (Zhang, Pi, Li, & Hu, 2021). Ozer & Badem (2022) found a moderate positive correlation between EFL Turkish students' motivation and academic achievement. However, students' motivation to learn English in a virtual classroom decreased over time.

Furthermore, the literature review revealed lack of studies in Saudi Arabia that explore the factors that lead to online learning success such as student age, gender, GPA, mode of instruction, learning motivation and capability, engagement, attitudes, online learning experiences, students' personality traits, teachers' variables and characteristics of the learning environment. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on student leaders in online courses, i.e., students with the highest numbers of posts, responses, and engagements in online courses. It aims to explore their role in their online course; the factors that contribute to student leaders' high engagement, interaction and contribution to the online courses they are enrolled in; their level of learning motivation and capability, engagement, perceptions/attitudes, and online learning experiences; their linguistic and technological competence, personality traits (social intelligence and emotional quotient); in what ways they contribute to the effectiveness and success of the online teaching and learning process; and the factors that can enhance student learning outcomes and satisfaction level in online classes.

2. Methodology
2.1 Subjects
Twenty student leaders with the highest number of posts, comments and interactions from the reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar online courses that the author taught over several semesters, using a variety of Online Management Systems (LMS) such as WebCT, Moodle, Nicenet, RCampus and Blackboard. The online courses were used as a supplement to in-class instruction that depended on the textbook, i.e., blended learning. The students were all in their first semester of college at the College of Languages and Translation, King Saudi University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. They were concurrently taking 20 hours of EFL courses: Listening 1, Speaking 1, Reading 1, Writing 1, Grammar1, and Vocabulary Building1. The subjects were all females and were all native speakers of Arabic. Their median age was 18 years, and the range was 17-19. All the online courses were taught by the author as well as the face-to-face classes.

2.2 Data Collection
Each student leader was followed up for a whole semester. Her posts, responses, messages, pre- and post-test scores, and course grades were collected. They responded to a computer literacy questionnaire. At the end of the semester, all student leaders were individually interviewed. They were asked about their family background, home environment, learning experience, digital literacy skills, what motivates them to participate, interact, and post on a daily basis.

The sample of courses consisted of reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary and the sample of Online learning Management systems use were Blackbord (B) and Nicenet (N). Post analytics for each student enrolled in each course and for all the students (as a group) were obtained from the Blackboard and Nicenet course statistics. Student analytics are reported in frequencies and percentages. The students' role in the online courses, their digital competencies, language proficiency, personality traits, the online course environment, the role of the instructor and students' attitudes and reflections on their online learning experience are reported qualitatively.

3. Results

3.1 Student Leaders' Post Analytics by Course

Figure 1 shows the median and total messages posted by student leaders in 5 courses (Writing1, Grammar1, Vocabulary1 and Grammar1) using the Blackboard and Nicenet LMSs. The online course analytics show that the total number of messages posted by the whole class in the 5 courses is 657, 283, 350, 279, 364 with a median of 26, 6, 7, 7, 14 respectively. Compared with the class total and class median, student leaders posted almost 25%, 17%, 12%, 17% and 19% of the total class messages. No significant differences were found between the Blackboard and Nicenet LMSs in the number of messages posted by student leaders or by type of language course.
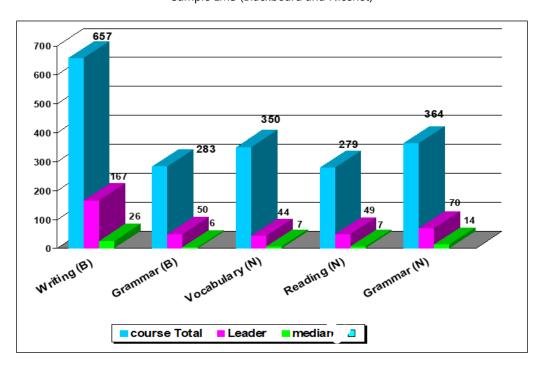
Figure 1: Median And Total Messages Posted By Student Leaders In Sample Courses Using A Sample LMS (Blackboard and Nicenet)

These findings are consistent with findings of other studies by the author, in which students who enrolled in online English language courses (reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, art education and so on) as a supplement to in-class instruction (blended learning) made higher gains than students who received in-class instruction using the textbook only. Asynchronous bended learning enhanced students' motivation, confidence, and English languaga proficiency (Al-Jarf, 2013a; Al-Jarf, 2010; Al-Jarf, 2009a; Al-Jarf, 2009b; Al-Jarf, 2007a; Al-Jarf, 2007c; Al-Jarf, 2006a; Al-Jarf, 2006b; Al-Jarf, 2006c; Al-Jarf, 2005b; Al-Jarf, 2005c; Al-Jarf, 2004a; Al-Jarf, 2004b; Al-Jarf, 2002). They are also consistent with findings of prior studies in the literature. Vella, Turesky & Hebert (2016) found that students enrolled in blended courses in the USA obtained higher grades compared to those enrolled in completely online courses. Yang, Ghislandi & Dellantonio (2018) also found that traditional lecturing blended with computer-supported collaborative learning improved the quality of teaching and facilitated motivation, interaction and achievement of deep understanding compared to traditional lecturing only. Engaging ESL students in a variety of writing activities with computers, whether offline or online, increased their motivation, confidence, and their writing proficiency (Hadi, 2013).

3.2 Student Leaders' Role in Online Courses

The author's observation and follow up of student leaders throughout the semester revealed that student leaders were autonomous learners. They were self-motivated and interested. They were the first to register. They checked their online course

on a daily basis. They were the first to respond to new threads. They invited their classmates to register in the online course, and called on them to respond to their posts. They responded to threads posted by the author (the course instructor) or by their classmates. They had the highest student-student and student-instructor interaction. They posted their own threads, short paragraphs, poems, and/or stories on the discussion board. One posted a Quote of the Day, another posted a weekly poem of hers, and some posted a daily joke, this day in history, a daily riddle and others. They created a warm, supportive online climate by responding to their classmates, by sending encouraging messages and thank-you notes and inviting students to respond to their own posts.

3.3 Student Leaders' Technological Competence
Results of the computer literacy questionnaire showed that 80% of the student leaders had high digital skills. They could word-process, and use MS Office (WORD, Powerpooint, and Excel). They could use e-mail and Messenger. They were familiar with search engines, could browse the internet, and locate information in Internet Websites. They could look up words in online dictionaries. They could download and upload videos from YouTube. Each had an account on social media and could use tagging, picture, voice, video editing and mixing tools. They could play online games. They were more competent and more comfortable with technology than their classmates. They could use the different online course tools without any help. In brief, they are tech savvy. Those who were less competent were acquiring new digital skills fast on their own or were learning from each other.

As in Al-Jarf (2005a), student leaders have many technological skills and they are keen on using computers and online courses. As in Misir (2018), Chaiprasurt & Esichaikul (2013), Motzo (2016), student leaders' ability to use social media, tagging, picture, voice, and video editing tools, mixing tools, search engines, and interactive multimedia-enhanced tools for language teaching and learning. Their diverse technological skills enhanced their motivation in online courses, and their engagement on the Blackboard and Nicenet online discussion forums. Their technological skills played a role in building a second language learning online community and influencing language learning.

3.4 Student Leaders' Linguistic Competence
Pre-test results given to students in each course at the beginning of the semester showed that 75% of the student leaders were proficient in English. The other 25% were of average or low proficiency level. Most had the highest pre- and post-test scores in their classes. Most were fluent speakers of English. They were avid readers. They were skilled writers and most of them were even creative writers. They always read material of interest to them. They had an excellent vocabulary knowledge. Most had a high cognitive ability. Those who were less proficient in English, were working on extra material and exercises to improve their English (See Examples 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 in the Appendix).

3.5 Student Leaders' Personality Traits
Interviews and in-class and out-of-class observations showed that students' leaders in the current study tended to be intrinsically motivated, enthusiastic, sociable and outgoing (extroverted) with a good sense of humor. They were popular among their classmates (peers). They were courteous. They were highly motivated and eager to learn. They had a high Emotional Quotient (EQ). They were adventurous and willing to try and make mistakes while using the online course. They were well-organized. They had higher level thinking skills such as critical thinking and analytical skills. They had many hobbies such as reading, writing, playing sports, listening to music, an making collections. They had educated and supportive parents.

Traveling, studying abroad and speaking English at home were not factors contributing to most student leaders' interest, high engagement and interaction. Many went to a public school, never traveled and never studied abroad. All student leaders read a lot, and watch English movies. Those with average and low proficiency level were motivated by classmates who were more proficient and they liked to co[y their example (See Examples 6 to 9 in the Appendix). They had strong interpersonal relationships and were well-informed. Characteristics of student leaders are summed up in what Sulaf, Sarah and Juju wrote about themselves[1]:

> ### Sarah wrote about herself:
> *Hello everyone! I would just like to say that I'm so happy to be in class with you,...I'm a little bit shy, that's why I take time to have new friends,... I hope we'll enjoy this year together! thanks for reading after all! Good Luck!*
>
> *I'm 17 years old, I have two wonderful sisters younger than me. What I like to do in my free time is reading,..it fascinates me! I like to read biographies and teenagers' stories. I also like sports (playing badminton and swimming), listening to music, writing long letters to some pen-friends, and making collections!*

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[1] Quotations of students' posts and comments have not been corrected nor edited. They have been kept as they are.

Sarah told her classmates about herself and how she responded to them:
My name is Sarah, I'm a member of the writing course at the College of Languages and Translation, I'm only 17.I really like my college, all the girls and teachers are friendly there. In my free time I like to read a lot, well. .I'm supposed to! I've too many to read in Arabic, English and French!.I like also playing badminton, it' just like tennis, but there's a "flying ball" instead of a "ground ball". Sport is great as Al-Anoud said! (I liked your message Al-Anoud!).

Sulaf wrote about herself:
I have lots and lots of hobbies like reading novels!!! I am a book worm! and writing is my life !I like to write whatever I think of! I will start writing in this site instead of papers:)! I also like drawing cartoon characters. I like playing with the piano when I have nothing to do, I like to play every song I hear!! I like to bake chocolate chip cookies, as a matter of fact its the only thing I am good at in cooking beside fried eggs! lol!! I will get you some one day, you will love it!!!!! In the end I would like to say that I am a kind of a person that can never give up.. I keep smiling most of the time, I never worry!! and I hope everyone would do that and stop grumping all the time!! A smile doesnt cost any money although it affects people's hearts in a magical way!!

Sample Jokes Posted by Juju

- *Teacher: Sam, your composition on "My Dog" is exactly same as your brother's. Did you copy his?*
  Sam: No, teacher, it's the same dog!

- *Teacher: If I have 7 oranges in one hand and 8 on the other, what would I have?*
  Sam: Big Hands!!!!!!

- *Teacher: What's the chemical formula for water? Sam: "HIJKLMNO".*

- *Teacher: What?!*
  Sam: Yesterday you said it's H to O!!!
  have fun :o) If u like it I have more ... LooOOol Bye Bye ....

- *Cute jokes. I would like to read jokes and have a laugh together with my students every day. It is a good idea to post some on our discussion board. So could you please post more whenever you can? Reima*

Juju's Sense of Humor
hi there .... tomorrow is my birthday . I'll be 18 WooOw . don't forget the gift OK :o) loool. bye bye . juju
Happy Birthday, Juju! I wish you many happy returns of the day! Reima

hello my friends..
how are you? i just want to say thaaaanx for all, who said HAPPY BIRTHdAy to me or who sent a nice card to my e-mail... i'm so glad :o). also, there is another thing that made me happy do you know what is it ?!?!?! when Dr. Reima said juju, i was shy but you know that was too kind of her.

Here's what Sara wrote about an article that she read:
In fact, I wanted to write about an article I've just read in this site. It talked about languages that are facing extinction, it interested me because there's a language in France (my mother's country!), that faces extinction, it's called "Alsacian", it comes from "Alsace" which is a region in the north-east of France, it was a spoken German dialect since Middle Ages, because the region was under different influences (German and French) but after the Second World War, it began to disappear. My grand-parents taught their children the "Alsacian "language, French was taught at schools. Unfortunately, I don't speak this language bacause my mother chose to teach us French!. Although, I know some expressions in Alsacian like "Ich will dich gnutsche", it means "I will hug you!" and it's often said to children!. Thank you for reading my message! I hope you enjoyed it!   Sarah

Another example of interaction and encouragement between Layla, a student who writes poems and the author when Layla wrote her first poems:

I wrote: *Congratulations to our young poet Layla! Today was one of the brightest days in my 16-year teaching career, as two of my students were really outstanding. Layla presented a poem of hers and Mashael presented her first field study in front of a large audience. You made me really proud and hopeful at a time when many young people are busy with fashion, video clips, movies, star academy and the like. I was so proud to learn that everybody was impressed by your talent. Keep up the good work and I am sure there is a great future ahead of you. May God bless you!*

Layla replied: *Dr. Reima .. Thank you for your splendid words .. these words give me a great push forward .. You don't have an idea about how much I'm happy .. Reading your post added a beautiful taste to my memories of this semester. Thanks*

I added: *I have posted your poems in the WATA (World Arabi Translators association) website. I used your first names*

Layla responded: *Thank you very much doctor for posting our poems! I can not describe the joy and pride I feel now. Of course you can add my last name if you like. You should not even ask for my permission.*

Dear Dr. Reima, *I want to thank you for the gift you gave me today. It is without doubt the best gift I have ever had. I wanted to have a picture of yours but you said before that you are not ready to give away any of your memories. And the note is very great and useful (actually my elder brother wanted to have it so bad it means a lot to me to have a note you designed . So thank you very very much for this gift that is close to my heart. You do not have a clue about the joy I felt once I saw it. I'm not finished with expressing my feelings but I am out of words.   THANKS*
    yours, Looly

I commented: *I am glad this website is inspiring to my young poets. I am glad my lovely students are searching within themselves and trying to do something. This is how we learn to write, when we feel the need and enthusiasm to write. I also like the friendly and supportive atmosphere in here, and the fact that each of you is appreciating her other classmates. May Allah bless you all! As a teacher, I feel great.*

It seems that student leader characteristics and personality traits in the present study contributed to the effective learning environment. The students' enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation seemed to play a vital role in their learning outcomes. As in the current study, Al-Jarf (2007a); Al-Jarf (2007b); Kintu and Zhu (2016) found that learner characteristics and background were significant for enhancing intrinsic motivation, satisfaction, knowledge construction and learning performance in blended learning.

Extrovert students were more likely to participate in the Japan-Taiwan digital exchange and to collaborate with group members. Task learning correlated with participation and the extrovert personality type. During the exchange, the students developed a sense of agency through their perceived social interaction, enjoyment of the autonomy offered by the activities, and valued the use of English in their communication (Kelsen & Flowers, 2018). In Marvel's (2017), player characteristics such as introversion or extroversion, player motivation, and gender affected participation in online games.

The student leaders' higher general mental ability, higher language proficiency and higher motivation, as Logan, Lundberg, Roth & Walsh (2017), Zhang, Pi, Li, & Hu (2021), and Ozer & Badem (2022) indicated, were positively associated with their academic performance in the English language course. Low levels of either motivation or general mental ability were associated with lower levels of performance. Students with high intrinsic motivation showed higher fluency and flexibility in students' creative tasks, who spent a larger amount of time reflecting on their own ideas on the screen than students with low intrinsic motivation.

3.6 The Online Course Environment
In all online courses, the online environment was informal, student-centered and self-paced. The students could write on or post any topic of interest to them, whenever they needed and regardless of the number of topics they wanted to post. Interviews with student leaders showed that the online learning environment had the most positive effect on their learning and on their attitude towards the language courses (reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary). They reported that the online course made language learning an enjoyable task. It provided a non-threatening learning environment for using a new way of expressing themselves in English that they never experienced before. Their motivation and sense of achievement in English were enhanced. The online courses created an open and supportive environment, where anything that the students posted was accepted and encouraged. All the students were encouraged to trust their own linguistic ability in English. The online learning environment nurtured their creativity, interaction, motivation and engagement in every way possible. The students dived into a variety of learning tasks because they were exciting, challenging, and fun. They felt comfortable and unthreatened to reach maximal linguistic potential. All the students enrolled in the online courses had a positive personal relationship with their classmates and the course instructor which was fostered by the online learning environment. Friendliness, sense of humor and playfulness prevailed in the online social environment. Peer and instructor support among those students in their first semester of college was also important. Student leaders in the present study received positive feedback from their instructor and online classmates. Unlike the traditional classroom in which their classmates would not have a chance to read each other's poems, stories and opinions and they would not receive

support and encouragement from them. The following are examples of how students felt and how they responded to each other's posts[2]:

Layla wrote in response to Haifa's first poem: *Wonderful and remarkable!!! Is it really your first poem? It's so great! And SO true. I have the best memories about 191. Grammar WAS really fun. I thought because it was fun! But now I know I was wrong. Dr. Reima makes it fun. So enjoy every moment in that lecture because later on you'll notice the difference !*

I responded: *Well Arwa and Layla, I am really flattered. I never thought I could do miracles until last semester. It's been more than 20 years since my junior high school students wrote their little poems and I went crazy with joy. Now you make me feel that every single minute I spend in the classroom, and every tiny effort I expend is worth it. This is the best reward I can ever get as a teacher. May God bless you all! I am going to post your poems in the WATA website so the whole world reads them!*

Fatima wrote: *WOW arwa i never know u have that great poetry in you its wonderful. Thanx. best wishs*

Darene added: *how nice..! I can tell that you're a poetess.. I liked the analogy between the blueness of the book and Dr Reima's eyes .. I really wish I had a chance to be your student again, Dr Reima .. (I'm not envying them: D). Arwa, I hope you continue on your way and never be shy to show up your talent .. eager to read more,, thanx..*

The online course environment in the current study that contributed to learning effectiveness is consistent with results of other studies in the literature. For example, the creation of an online module based on blended learning pedagogies, which included personalized learning experiences helped preservice teachers feel more prepared to engage in personalized learning at the end of the course than they did at the beginning (Arnesen, Graham, Short & Archibald, 2019).

3.7 Instructor's Role and Characteristics
In all her online courses, the author who is also the instructor of the online courses under study, served as a facilitator. She created an informal, positive and supportive learning environment that is secure for making grammatical and spelling mistakes. Learning online was student-centered, not teacher-centered. It focused on anything that the students liked to do and learn rather than working on limited formal tasks related to the textbook. The author's relationship with the students was that of a friend and peer rather than an authoritative one. Every now and then, she would make announcements, send private and public messages, thank you notes, greetings on individual and public occasions such as birthdays, holidays, deaths and so on. To break the ice, she would introduce herself and ask the students to introduce themselves (in a post) to get to know each other. The students felt free to e-mail each other or e-mail the author on any occasion like birthdays, religious and national holidays or whenever they needed help. The authors also communicated with the students through her website Chatbox and the university SMS service (Al-Jarf, 2021b; Al-Jarf, 2021c). Further discussions and interactions were held via Elluminate web-conferences (Al-Jarf, 2014a; Al-Jarf, 2013b)

Regarding students' posting, the author prompted the students, and made comments with a sense of humor using questions or keywords. She supported inquiries, discussed students' difficulties. She modeled the skills and tasks that she assigned in the online course and wrote sample posts on the same topics as the students. She encouraged all the students, including student leaders, to read and write more, to interact, engage in and be actively involved in the online discussions and activities. The students responded to and commented on each other's posts and even on her posts. She provided feedback, help, and encouraged the students. The slightest improvement was noted and commended. The students were encouraged to write and post for communication without having to worry about errors. If she had to correct errors, few errors were corrected each time in the assigned tasks but not in the free writing posts. To motivate the students, she give extra credit for participation, for completing the tasks and for the extra posts. The more the students posted, the more extra marks they got (Al-Jarf, 2021a).

The instructor qualifications, level of training, knowledge of educational psychology and theories of learning, foreign language teaching methodology and the way the she managed her online courses is consistent with other studies by the author which found that the positive, relaxed, encouraging, interactive atmosphere contributed to students' learning and achievement (Al-Jarf, 2022f; Al-Jarf, 2022g; Al-Jarf, 2022h; Al-Jarf, 2020b; Al-Jarf, 2014c). Martin (2017) reported that instructor qualities such as years of experience, level of education and practical experience predicted 5.6% of student achievement in education online courses, while an instructor's level of training predicted 2.1% of student achievement. The complex nature of online courses and the number of variables already identified as (e.g., previous student performance, motivation, computer competence, level of peer/instructor interaction, work commitments impacted students' success.

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[2]Quotations of students' posts and comments have not been corrected nor edited. They have been kept as they are.

Moreover, the online language learning environment in the current study is similar to those described in prior studies. Analysis of student-student and student-teacher interactions in multi-user virtual environments found that diminished teacher presence can encourage students to become active and independent learners (Kuznetcova, Lin & Glassman, 2021; Al-Jarf, 2020a; Al-Jarf, 2020c; Al-Jarf, 2020b; Al-Jarf, 2017a). Using social presence cues in online English composition courses helped create a more inviting and engaging course for the students and encouraged students' interaction and engagement (Paquette, 2016).

As in the present study, the effect of ability and effort praise feedback had a significant positive impact on students task performance, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation, individual differences in response to attributional praise in an online learning environment (Zhao & Huang, 2020).

3.8 Students' Attitudes and Reflections

Student leaders' responses to the end-of-semester surveys revealed positive attitudes towards the online courses they were enrolled in and towards their participation, engagement, interaction and improvement they were making in English. Participation in the online courses enhanced their self-esteem, motivation and sense of achievement and improvement. The students enjoyed reading and writing, enjoyed the comments, and interaction with their classmates and were motivated to write more and more. Learning English in a blended learning environment encouraged writing and exchange of ideas. The amount of students' posts that the students have written increased in an environment secure for making mistakes. The student leaders reported that the online course atmosphere was fun. They enjoyed the student-student and student-instructor interactions which increased as the semester progressed. They enjoyed practicing multiple skills in English (writing, reading, spell checking, vocabulary, and grammar), and the variety of innovative technologies utilized: the online course, WWW resources, e-mail and word-processing, online discussion forums, and apps. They noted that learning in a blended learning environment was more beneficial and fun than learning in the classroom only, as they did not feel that posting online was a chore. They could communicate with their classmates and instructor any time outside the classroom. They did not have to worry about making mistakes, and about being picked on. They felt free to post anything of interest to them, unlike the limited, boring topics of the textbook and the traditional classroom. They stated that through interaction and collaboration, they had a chance to know more things about their classmates and their instructor such as personal issues, family life, events, achievement. Furthermore, the students' declared that they benefited from the online grammar, writing and vocabulary tasks and resources posted by the author (Al-Jarf, 2022e; Al-Jarf, 2017b; Al-Jarf, 2014d).

Students' perceptions, online learning experiences and positive attitudes confirm findings of Baber's (2020) study that interaction in the classroom, student motivation, course structure, instructor knowledge, and facilitation positively influenced students' perceived learning outcomes and satisfaction. They also confirm the conclusions of Jerez, Orsini, Ortiz & Hasbun's (2021) study that summarize the conditions that determine the effectiveness of large-group learning activities in higher education as follows: student-teacher and student-student interaction; implementation of active learning strategies; classroom management; students' motivation and commitment; and the use of online teaching resources. It also confirms the results of a study by Russell (2013) which stated that environmental factors, instructors' autonomy-supportive interaction and learning environments using constructivist-based pedagogy predicted students' autonomous self-regulated motivation which in turn predicted students' self-reported engagement, achievement, and satisfaction.

4. Conclusion

The author's experience with highly motivated students in a variety of online courses shows that it is not difficult to engage students, get them to participate, interact, and communicate with their classmates and instructor and practice English with enjoyment. Engaging students in online learning does not require a high proficiency level in English, nor a special talent. All an instructor needs to do is to encourage the students to write and post anything of interest to them rather than focusing on grammatical and spelling errors. Positive feedback and encouragement are essential. The students need an online learning environment that is supportive, and secure for trial and error. They need to feel free to express themselves and need to feel good about themselves and about what they can do and achieve.

To enhance EFL students' active participation and engagement in online learning, this study recommends that more time be spent on collaborative and interactive learning rather than independent and solitary learning by engaging students with strategies such as:

1) Integrating mobile apps in online instruction such as mobile audiobooks, mobile fiction apps, mobile flashcards, mobile dictionary apps, listening and speaking apps, vocabulary and reading apps (Al-Jarf, 2022c; Al-Jarf, 2022j; Al-Jarf, 2021h; Al-Jarf, 2021d; Al-Jarf, 2021i; Al-Jarf, 2020d; Al-Jarf, 2012a; Al-Jarf, 2012b)
2) Encouraging the students to sign up for a class blog, where each student can write on a daily or weekly basis on topics of interest to them and where they can develop their reading, vocabulary and grammar skills as well (Al-Jarf, 2022a; Al-Jarf, 2022b).

3) EFL instructors can integrate online resources such as TED Talks, YouTube videos and mobile dictionaries which the students can use individually or collaboratively (Al-Jarf, 2022k; Al-Jarf, 2022j; Al-Jarf, 2021i).

4) Integrating social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Periscope for online discussions, lecture delivery, communication and extensive language activities (Al-Jarf, 2021g; Al-Jarf, 2018, Al-Jarf, 2015a; Al-Jarf, 2014b).

5) EFL instructors at Saudi universities may use supplementary activities to enhance students' engagement and interaction such as conducting online debates about current global issues, asking problem-solving questions, giving project-based assignments, inviting guest speakers online, connecting writing and speaking topics with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, creating podcasts on topics of interest to the students and publishing them on Twitter, creating digital stories, reading multicultural children's short stories, and integrating technology such as Slido, Kahoot and Padlet in online learning (Al-Jarf, 2021e; Al-Jarf, 2021f; Al-Jarf, 2015b).

Finally, a variety of Online Learning Management systems such as Zoom, WebEX, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and others and utilization of Apps such as Padlet, Slido, and Kahoot may be subject to future research to find out how they can be best employed to motivate EFL students, especially in the distance learning environment in the post-Covid-19 Pandemic era when blended learning has become mandatory.

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Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6255-1305

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Appendix
A Sample of Students' Creative Writing and Interactions with Their Instructor and Classmates[3]
Example 1:

Hi Ms. the Best by Najla
Congratulations Prof. Reima. You've been nominated for the best teacher I've ever met and you won. Because you are the best teacher I've ever known, I will never forget a person like you and that's why I don't want you to forget me. I hope this card will help you to do so. I learned from you a lot. You inspired me. I really respect you more than you know. I admit in the first class I didn't like you, but in the end after knowing you I really liked and loved the person you are and respected you a lot.

The other reason to give you this card is to tell you that I'm so happy with what I've accomplished this semester, and since you played a part in making me so happy you deserve at least a word like: Thank you.

Thanks & Sorry:
Thanks for everything you did to help us understand our lessons.
Thanks for the website that improved my writing a lot.
Thanks for sharing your great stories with us.
Thanks for spending your time answering our questions and explaining with details.
Thanks for being so tough & strict in the beginning with me and the other students, because that helped me, personally, and the other students to be the way we are today.
Thanks for being so nice in the end with me and the other students.
Thanks to Allah you are my teacher.
Sorry for annoying you, asking questions just before one day of the exam.
Sorry If I ever did something wrong without saying sorry.
Sorry if we didn't met your expectations as hard working students.
Sorry for coming late the last class.
Sorry for giving you a hard time to make us understand the summery and other things.
I wish you the best, and a life full of joy.
See you after two weeks or so.
Your Student

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[3] The author did not edit nor corrected any grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors in the students' poems and responses

Najla

Example 2:
Children by Tofoul
looking at a child gazing through a window of a car
takes my vision really far,
what can this young child be thinking of?
& is his world full of love?
adulthood is what childhood creates
it all depends on how lucky is ur fate,
some have a terrible childhood
they would runaway if they could,
what's the fault of this little child brought into this universe
brought up by angels it had no evil curse,
All children are born innocent
their souls from God were sent,
it's life that changes those children's minds
it really depends on what will they find,
is it good or evil?? we don't know!
by time in their existence it will show....

Example 3:
Letter for the Beyond by Layla
When you left
You took my life with you
All the reasons to be alive
Were simply: you
You've taken the light of my eyes
Since that day
That dark night, you kissed me goodbye
You said you'll be leaving
I laughed and told you to visit or even drop by
I woke up the next morning
And went to your room
It was empty, the bed was surprisingly neat
There was no sign of life, absolutely no heat
I got out and looked into those teary eyes What are all these people doing here?
What do they want?
Answer me, ease my pain!
The answer stroke me
Like a thunderbolt
I still remember that night
Every sentence, every word
Yes they made me laugh once
But now, they stab my heart like a sword
You'll never come back, I know
Soon enough I'll follow you
You know I always do.

Example 4:
Life by Layla
In a jungle, we live
Where only the strongest lead and the weak must give
Where there is only darkness
..a bright sky is a myth
Where freedom is far-fetched
.. a lost hope, buried in the depth

No matter how far you walked
You will never find an exit
This jungle is complicated, poisoned and broken
No one can fix it
Your friend in the night
Might be your enemy at dawn
That evil jungle has its spell on every living soul
Be careful when you walk
Because every where there is a hole
That is our life, indeed
Where you can be killed, for doing a good deed!

Example 5: By Farrah
Hello there evrybody,
My name is Farrah. Im 18 years old. Im a fellow colleague to most of you out there, only a mere gawky level one student with nothing but a high-school degree up her sleeve to the great Professor Reima. Who we all look upon with admiration and respect. Of course I dont plan on staying with that description. I hope one day that I, too will be great. Hopefully this is the beginning of something. Thank you Prof. Reima, thank you and all other instructors out there who work their hardest to broaden our horizons. Not that I've met any as hardworking as you. Wish us luck Prof. Reima, wish us luck in pursuing our dreams and ambitions. Thanks again.

Ps: I kind of noticed something as I was reading the rest of what the girls posted. Why do all the girls here seem to be only proud of their brothers? I, too have a brother. Im not proud of him at all. Why should I be proud of what he does, when here it is so easy for him to accomplish anything. I, on the other hand am proud of my sister (who is also named Reima). She is working hard to get her masters degree all the way in California. Now thats something I should flaunt and be proud of. Thank you.

Example 6: Responses to Haifa's poem. Haifa is an average student. Shows how students motivated each other and *competed with each other*
   When I Feel Sad by Haifa
   When I feel sad
   I never go to bed
   I want to by happy
   so I get ready
   To do some thing
   but not strange
   try to have smile
   and quiet for a while
   I change the shape of my room
   Take a paper and write a poem
   go to buy flower
   Forget the hour
   If you have sadness
   Try to do this
   Then you say

Example 7: How students motivated, interacted and competed with each other
   FROM: Prof. Reima Al-Jarf
   This is very good Haifa. I like it very much. it is cute and light. Keep on trying.

   FROM: GHADA
   How beautiful are they
   FROM: Layla
   Very good Haifa ! It describes your feelings loud and clear. Keep your pen moving !

   FROM: arwa
   Although its sad , but I like it , don't be sad we are with you when you need us

FROM: fatima
sorry i'm late hayoofi its just i was alittle busy last 2 days .. your poem is really nice n discribing thank you dear for this wonderful writing of urs keep it up by the way u'll never be sad when i'm around. lool just kidding. bye

FROM: Haifa
hi Prof. Reima
thanks for replying and thanks for these great world, its make me happey and i well keep on trying.. thanks alot Prof.

hi layla..
i am glad you like it thanks alot.. and i will by keep on writing..

hi Arwa,
thanks arwa, i'm not sad but thats a feel. every body in this world feel sad some times, thats normal. thanks alot agian and have a nice day. best wishes ..

hi fatmah..
dont by sorry sis its ok and i happy you like it.. best wishes..

Example 8: How students motivated each other & competed with each other
> **FROM: Asma**
> Hi Prof. Reima, Hi girls,
> Thank you Haifa for this cute poem ...well done ..and good for u.
>
> **FROM: Maryam**
> your poem is very integral, I love it. actually I do not know the rules for writing a poem,,,, but I will try.
> *I want to be alone*
> *I won't say a word*
> *I know it's insane*
> *but, what're you going to say*
> *I'll try to be a wise*
> *I'll remove all the mist*
> *I know I have a mistake*
> *(*when I feel sad*)*
> *I'll fall down and cry*
> *in that case ,,,*
> *I'll wish I'm die*
> THANKS,
>
> **FROM: Haifa**
> hi Asma..
> thanks for replying sis and i happy you like it
> hi Maryam
> thanks alot for your nice worde i happy you love it and really this is god try sis keep on trying.. best wishes

Example 9: Here are examples of students' interactions and comments:

Sarah's response to a story that I wrote about my mother's death:
Dear Dr. Reema...
I was really touched by what you've written,..it is sad to lose someone we love and care about,..but I think that we all have to pass through tough moments, and it is God's well after all,...

Your story remembered me my grand-mother, she also had health problems, especially with her liver,.. I think she had the same as your mother(Hepatit C), I remember the face of my mother crying the day she passed away. I don't remember anything about my grand-mother, because I was only 4 years-old when it happened..

Like you said Dr. Reema, friends' support is so important in these moments. I remember how painful it was when I knew that a French friend of mine lost her young cousin. He was a soldier, and was in mission in Kosovo when he died. I knew how she felt and I tried to support and calm her as much as I could. Now it became a sad souvenir for her...
Sara

Sarah's Interaction with classmates
Hayat wrote:
Hi sara,
I want tell you that all the Quote you had wrote is wonderul like you.
I would like to tell you that this is a great poem, it's realy wonderful like all the thing you wrote .

Sarah responded:
Hello Hayat!!
Well, thank you for your sweet words. I'm so happy that you liked the quotes I wrote!! And by the way, you are the one who's wonderful! you are kind and have always something nice to say to others!!.
Bye ,Sarah