The Role of the Tutors in supporting Learners in a Higher Education Distance Language Learning Programme Environment in Saudi Arabia

By:

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the soul of my beloved father, Saeed Halabi, the noble, great father who sacrificed his whole life to raise us and who instilled in us the love of learning and education. It was his biggest dream to see me holding the PhD qualification which is why I fought hard to fulfil this dream.

It is also dedicated to my beloved mother, Musbah Badawi, the wonderful woman who spent all her life praying and wishing to see her sons and daughters educated and honoured. May Allah bless them both.

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Abstract

Learning and teaching English language from a distance is considered to be a new initiative in the tertiary level of the education system in Saudi Arabia. This research study was conducted to explore the e-tutors' perceptions of their roles in a Distance English Language Learning Programme (DLLP) in one of the Saudi universities. It further inquiries how these perceptions in this specific context of teaching and learning may help their learners take control over their learning.

To fulfil this aim, I adopted an exploratory case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic. Moreover, the following overarching research question was formulated:

What are the perceptions of e-tutors about learning and teaching processes in the context of DLLP?

A specific focus of the research was to explore the ways in which the tutors might support their distance learners to be autonomous and attain a level of control over their learning. Three data collection methods were used, namely document analysis, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. A sample of 14 e-tutors was purposely selected from one Saudi university. Content analysis was used to identify critical issues in the collected documents while a thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clark, 2006) was adopted to interpret the data from the reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. Emerging themes include some interesting, unexpected issues related to this teaching context, such as the cultural constraints and their impact on e-learning in Saudi universities, and the necessity of the use of L1 by the e-tutors in their teaching of the English language.

This study's findings contributed to developing a framework which helps e-tutors to encourage their distance learners to control and manage their learning of English as a foreign language in this specific DLLP. It is hoped that such a framework will be beneficial for other e-tutors in similar teaching environments.

List of Abbreviations used in this Study

AAPOR	American Association for Public Opinion Research.
ALECSO	Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization
ANODED	Arab Network for Open and Distance Education
AOU	Arab Open University
CAL	Computer Assisted Learning
CEFR	Common European framework of references
CRAPEL	Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues
DA	Document Analysis
DL	Distance Learning
DLL	Distance Language Learning
DLLs	Distance Language Learners
DLLP	Distance Language Learning Programme.
DLs	Distance Learners
DT	Distance Teaching.
ELC	English Language Centre
ELCA	English language Centre Arts
ELI	English Language Institute
EMES	Education Management Electronic System
FL	Foreign Language.
FLL	Foreign Language Learning.
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
ICT	Internet Computer Technology
IT	Information Technology
KAU	King Abdul-Aziz University
KFU	King Faisal University
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
KSU	King Saud University.
LA	Learner Autonomy
LL	Language Learning
LLS	Language Learning Strategies.
LMS	Learning Management System
MOE	Ministry of Education
MHE	Ministry of Higher Education
NCEL	National Centre for E-learning
PTT	Power Point Presentation
QOU	Qudus Open University
RJ	Reflective Journal
SA	Saudi Arabia
SDL	Self-Directed Learning
SILL	Strategy Inventory for Language Learning
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
SVU	Syrian Virtual University
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1   Introduction

Teaching English to non-native speakers in Saudi universities is conducted in various environments. Online English teaching through distance learning (DL) programmes is one of the relatively new educational initiatives in Saudi Arabia. This study, which was undertaken in one of the Saudi higher education institutions, was mainly aimed at exploring the online English tutors' (known as e-tutors) perceptions of their role in its distance language learning programme (DLLP). A specific focus of the research was to explore the ways in which the e-tutors might support their distance learners to be autonomous and attain a level of control over their English language learning.

This chapter begins by presenting the study background followed by the statement of the problem. It consequently provides a description of the context and presents the aim and objectives of the study as well as the research questions. This is followed by a section describing my positionality as a researcher and the chapter concludes with an outline of how the thesis chapters are organised.

1.1   Background of the Study

The last two decades have witnessed a considerable effort at the higher education level in the Arab countries (Mohamed, 2005). Saudi Arabia (SA) as one of the countries in this region is no exception. Aljabre (2012) asserts that:

> *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has recently spent hundreds of millions of dollars improving the nation's educational system, specifically higher education... The new institutions have come with curriculum development and changes and the introduction of technology for educational purposes.* (p. 132).

The new involvement of information technology (IT) and the introduction of the Internet have promoted changes to the higher education settings. With the installation of the Internet in university life in SA in 1992, universities started to create appropriate environments via libraries and computer laboratories for the students to encourage e-learning. Network services were being released to the universities' faculty offices and some faculty members were starting to use virtual synchronous classes, exploiting systems like WebCT to support their online teaching (Algahtani, 2011) However, it was

not until the years 2006/2007 that the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) in SA formally adopted the provision of degree programmes through DE. This came as a solution for the increasing needs for places in higher education institutions (HEI) which caused the problem of overcrowding in Saudi universities (Alsaeid, 2011). Distance learning programmes were introduced and developed in several main universities in different provinces of SA. Examples of these universities are: King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU) in Jeddah, King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh, and King Faisal University (KFU) in Al-Hasa (Aljabre, 2012). This fairly new development in the Saudi educational context led to the emergence of new terminology such as "distance learning" (DL), "learner autonomy" (LA), "learning strategies", and "e-tutoring" all of which are terms relevant to this particular research study.

The concept of DL has been defined widely and variously by many scholars (Holmberg, 1989; Keegan, 1996; Schlosser and Simonson, 2002; White, 2003; Wang and Chen, 2009). Each scholar defined it according to his needs, understandings, and perspectives. Keegan (1996), for example, defined it as:

> *... the separation of teacher and learner which distinguishes it from face-to-face lecturing; the influence of an educational organisation; the use of technical media, usually print, to unite the [tutor] and learner and carry the educational content; the provision of two way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes; and the participation in an industrialised form of education.* (p. 38).

This definition is considered by many specialists, such as White (2003) and Wang and Chen (2009) as a very comprehensive one in the field as it sums up basic elements of the concept where a virtual non-physical environment binds the teacher and learner most likely through technical media enabling mutual communication between the two sides. It is worth noting that this definition was before the digital era; in more recent research, Moore et al. (2011) pointed out that the evolution of learning technology made it more difficult for practitioners and researchers to have an agreement on common definitions and terminologies related to distance learning, e.g. distance learning, e-learning, and on-line learning environments. Schlosser and Simonson (2002, p.4) concentrate in their definition on the importance of technology when they identify that DL is '*institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructor'.*

More details of the definitions of this specific learning environment will be presented in the next chapter in section 2.4.

A concept associated with DL and more commonly with language learning and teaching is learner autonomy (LA). In the context of this study, the focus will be on the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language through the chosen institution's distance language learning programme (DLLP). Therefore, it is of relevance here to show how distance language teaching and learning and LA are interrelated. '*The concept of autonomy first entered the field of language teaching through the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, which was established in 1971*' (Benson, 2011, p.9). The *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues* (CRAPEL) was one of the outcomes of this project. For many, Yves Chalon, the founder of CRAPEL, is the father of autonomy in language learning. Henry Holec, who took the leadership of CRAPEL after Yves Chalon, is also a leading figure within the field of autonomy (Benson, 2011). Holec (1979, p.3) defined LA as '*The ability to take charge of one's own learning*'. Following this first definition by Holec, many other language researchers have developed their own definitions; examples of these are cited in Wenden and Rubin (1987), Ellis and Sinclair (1989), Oxford (1990), Dam (1995) and more recently Raya, Lamb, and Vieira (2007). Further discussion on LA and its definitions will be provided in the literature review chapter.

Although seen as interrelated concepts, it was not practically speaking easy to state the nature of the relationship between LA and distance language teaching and learning (Halabi, 2015). Hurd, Beaven, and Ortega (2001, p.341) state that, '*The relationship between autonomy and the teaching and learning of languages at a distance is complex*'. In the context of distance language learning, learner autonomy is seen as a focal yet multifaceted concept (White, 2003). Furthermore, White (2003), who is one of the leading figures in the field of distance language learning, points out to the debate that centres on the means that distance learners need to apply to foster their capacity to be autonomous language learners, and she illustrates the paradigms that affect this debate which are basically related to different interpretation of learners' independence, control, and autonomy (White, 2003). This study will focus on these paradigms as they are significantly related to the fundamental aspects of the research. In this vein, Hurd et al. (2001) and Mancuso Murphy (2007) argue that distance learners are regularly seem to be autonomous language learners because they can control most of their learning activities, such as the time, the space, the subject, the information received and exchanged, and the

type of strategies adopted. White (2003) has a different opinion when she argues that it would not seem right to assume that the distance mode by itself gives rise to LA. The DL environment is just like any other formal learning environment, and may limit or foster the development of the learners' abilities to manage and understand their language – learning process.

In this study, I will concentrate on a very fundamental issue mentioned by White (2003); this issue is "control". In her discussion of control, White (2003) pointed out that LA is developed through "collaborative control" (White, 2003 p,151), which means that learners should have the chance to develop a collaborative control of their learning tasks by interacting meaningfully with other learners and with their teachers. Later on, Benson (2001, p. 47) includes the concept of control in his definition of autonomy: '*the capacity to take control of one's own learning*'. In light of this definition, Benson (2011) further describes that '*autonomy in language learning should at least recognise the importance of three dimensions at which learner control may be exercised*: *learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content*' (p.61). More details about each one of these dimensions and their relevance to this study will be given in the next chapter.

From another perspective, discussing LA and distance language learning leads to the area of language learning strategies (LLS), which will also be considered in this study. Hurd et al. (2001) claim that in order to complete a successful distance learning programme, distance learners need to develop strategies to enable them to work individually. White (1995) emphasises that distance language learners (DLLs) use more metacognitive strategies, such as self-management and affective strategies when compared with conventional classroom learners. More explanation of the nature of these strategies and their relationships to this study will be discussed later.

Meanwhile, the term "electronic or e-tutor" is used for the person who provides tutoring services in the electronic or e-learning online environment. Cornelius and Higgison (2000, p.7) clarify that the term e-tutor '...*includes different meanings such as academics, faculty, instructors, corporate trainers, facilitators, moderators, subject specialists and learning support staff*.' This research will concentrate on the role of the e-tutor in the distance language learning programme (DLLP) in one of the renowned Saudi universities, because, as suggested by Ustati and Hassan (2013), '*Research in distance learning education indicates that teachers play an important role in addressing the students' needs to ensure education success in virtual learning environments*' (p. 292). The role of the e-

tutor will be discussed in detail later in this study to show how far these tutors have a role on encouraging their distance language learners to control and manage their learning, and how they can support them to learn the language in this specific context. Moreover, the tutors' beliefs and awareness of appropriate teaching strategies that might support their distance learners will be discussed.

1.2   Statement of the Problem

There is an increasing interest in accessing higher education in SA but the current physically accessed universities are not offering adequate places to all secondary school graduates who are willing to complete their studies (Alfrih, 2010). Despite the opening of several universities across the kingdom in recent years, the problem has persisted as more and more students could still not secure places for pursuing higher education owing to the limited capacity of these institutions (Alfrih, 2010). As a result, one of the viable alternatives has been the introduction of DL programmes with the aspiration to:

- Solve the problem of overcrowded university classes and the lack of places for on campus students;
- Offer opportunities for those wishing to study and work at the same time, i.e. promoting adult and continuing education;
- Solve the dilemma of those living in places which are far away from universities and colleges.

Hence, many DL programmes were initiated at different universities in SA. This study is conducted in one of these prominent universities in which the distance English language learning programme was established in 2005. The main purpose of establishing this programme in this university was to meet the increased number of students who wished to complete their higher studies and the English language is a prerequisite of their degree.

In SA, English is considered to be a foreign language and is taught as a compulsory subject from Grade Seven at Saudi public schools. In the past, some students did not give English as a subject much attention, because they were not aware of its importance (Ur Rahman and Alhaisoni, 2013). They rather considered it to be a subject that they just needed to pass in the examination. Now, due to the global demands and its being the language of '*business and commerce, science and technology*' (Ur Rahman and Alhaisoni, 2013), its status has totally changed for students. Presently, English for

students is considered to be one of the major subjects to be studied; it is the medium of instruction in medicine, technical education, and many other majors and is no longer merely a subject to pass, but a basic one for Higher Education (Ur Rahman and Alhaisoni, 2013).

Although students in SA, specifically at tertiary level, have started to realise the importance of the English language, most of them still graduate from secondary school incapable of performing a short conversation, as Alshumaimeri (2003) commented. I tend to agree with Alshumaimeri's (2003) claim given my long experience as an English language teacher and coordinator at tertiary level in a Saudi university. I have invested considerable efforts in my students but have received very limited responses. I had many students who were embarrassed to use the foreign language in pairs or in group work and felt ashamed to experience role-play. They never used the opportunities to learn the language outside the classroom. Alshumaimeri (2003) claims that such behaviours might be due to the learners' over-reliance on their teacher, and what is known as spoon-feeding teaching methods were found to be the norm in the language learning and teaching system in SA. It is vital therefore, given that we live in the century of technology and, as previously highlighted, that the Saudi Government spends millions of dollars every year on educational initiatives, to enable Saudi students to access the most modern means of learning that would enable them to be independent learners. However, it can be challenging for DLLs to adapt to new methods of teaching and learning. It can also be difficult for on-line teachers (e-tutors in this context) to help their students to develop new learning strategies and to allow the distance learners (DLs) to have any control over their learning.

Several research studies (Al-Sheri; 2010, Al-Dosari, 2011; Alenezi, 2012) investigated DE in Saudi higher education, yet to my knowledge, no study has investigated the role of the e-tutors in promoting DLLs' autonomy in such learning environments. Some Saudi studies investigated the challenges faced by both learners and instructors in DE (Al-Sheri, 2010), while others, more specifically, examined the future potential for developments in on-line English language teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia (Al-Dosari, 2011). In addition, Alenezi, (2012) aimed to explore the faculty members' perceptions of e-learning in higher education in SA. (More details of other Saudi studies and their findings will be presented later in the literature review).

It is hoped that this study will contribute to research on DE and its relation to learner autonomy in Saudi Arabia and fill the gap seen in previous studies conducted in this context. This study hopes to explore, through the e-tutors' perspectives, the actual role they play in an English language distance learning programme and how far they encourage their distance learners (DLs) to have control over their learning of the language. Moreover, none of the past research in this context seems to have provided a clear framework to be followed and consulted or a set of guidelines that can be used by e-tutors to practise e-tutoring effectively in Saudi universities. Accordingly, and with the urgent need for such a framework, this study will develop a framework that would enable e-tutors to help their distance learners to develop suitable strategies to learn the language from a distance. The recommendations and suggestions which will emerge from this study can be used by decision-makers in this context to enhance the quality of the current programme and may also be used as a model to instruct tutors on how to help their learners to manage their own studies, bearing in mind that research has indicated a lack of such frameworks (McMullen, 2009).

1.3   Context of the Study

Before discussing DL at the university in which this study was conducted, it is worth shedding some light on the history of this university in general, to provide the context for the case study of this doctoral research. This university is located in Jeddah, the Western province of the country. It was founded in the late 1960s and started its first year with very few students (around 68 males and 30 females) (Alsaeid, 2011). In the 1970s, it had changed into a Government university. Since then, this university has noticeably expanded to become one of the largest universities in Saudi Arabia with a population of roughly 80,000 undergraduate and graduate students in various study fields (Alsaeid, 2011).

The English Language Institute (ELI), one of this university's institutes, was first called the English Language Centre (ELC). It was initially established by the British Council in the 1970s to teach English language courses to over 500 male students at the Engineering Colleges; the female students were very few during that time (less than 100). During that time, the ELC was part of the College of Arts and Humanities at this university. In 2006, the University introduced a new condition where six credit hours of 'General English Courses' were taught on a compulsory basis to all newly-admitted students, as was the case in many of the other universities in Saudi Arabia. The students must take and

successfully complete these courses before choosing a major at one of the various/available colleges. This condition enhanced the pressure with the regular growth of Foundation Year student intake every year. The regular English language programme for foundation students includes four levels of instruction, which match the common European framework of references for language (CEFR), the students need to sit a placement test after admission to ensure they are placed at the relevant level (Gamlo, 2014). As the ELC's responsibilities grew with the increase in 'Foundation Year' student numbers, it became an independent entity in 2008 renamed as the English Language Institute (ELI). The ELI provides general English language courses annually, both face-to-face and online, to just over 12,000 female and male full-time Foundation Year students; the number of staff employed by the ELI is around 600 men and women qualified faculty staff number across the campus (Alsaeid, 2011).

In regard to distance learning programmes, this university was one of the first to deploy e-learning in SA to benefit its distance students. To facilitate both on-line and regular learning, this university has one of the largest electronic libraries in the country with around 16,000 e-books (Alsaeid, 2011). To show its commitment to enhancing the quality of DL programmes, a Deanship of e-learning and Distance Education was set up at this university. With regards to the distance language learning programme (DLLP), once the e-tutors are recruited, a two-day training workshop is held by the Deanship. This pre-training workshop is intended to clarify the job duties for the e-tutors, students' assessment methods followed in this programme, students' attendance system, e-tutors' evaluation methods, and technical support contact methods (see Appendix 1 for a copy of distance learning teachers' job duties). During the workshop, the tutors are presented with a booklet which includes a summary of the programme regulations (see Appendix 2 for a cover page of this booklet). Lastly, this workshop is meant to respond to any inquiries the tutors might have in regards to their language teaching from a distance in this specific programme. The teachers' job duties document and the DLL programme regulations booklet are some of the documents analysed as part of the research process. Details of these will be explained later in the methodology chapter.

Several e-tutors are recruited from the ELI every year by the Deanship of e-learning and Distance Education to teach English as a general prerequisite course to those female students who study from a distance. E-tutoring for these recruited teachers would be considered an additional job and they are separately paid for it and they would need to be fully qualified to be able to manage between two jobs, namely regular classroom teaching

and online tutoring (e-tutoring). In this programme, the number of distance learners (DLs) increases every year and reached approximately 3000 female students by the year 2014. Students from all cities, towns, and villages of SA enrol on-line as distance learners in different majors and English is a compulsory course for all DLs. Each on-line session varies in enrolled student numbers. Some sessions have about 40 students and others might reach 90 students.

Two e-learning systems, which were run by the DL Deanship, were in use during the conduct of this study. They are called CENTRA (a Saba product) and EMES (Education Management Electronic System). CENTRA provides a synchronous virtual classroom which allows DLs to access live classes from wherever they are (e.g. work or home) and it allows students to hear their instructors (e-tutors in this study) by using a web browser accessed via CENTRA. Meanwhile EMES has features similar to the widely used blackboards and WebCT systems. It allows for asynchronous interaction between the students and their e-tutors via e-mails, discussion forums, assignments, quizzes and frequently answered questions (FAQs) to provide information on technical problems or other problems that may face the students though their use of the site (Alsaeid, 2011). The DLs, via EMES, need to register and obtain an online account (user name and password) to be able to log into the CENTRA system and the instructor has to provide the students with her name, contact hours, objectives of the course, assessment methods of the course and the Web address of the course they will be using (Alsaeid, 2011).

The DLs study two English courses in one academic year:

1) English Language Centre Arts 1 (ELCA 1): a 3 hour per week credit course taught in the first term at two levels: Beginners and Elementary (it is a term system; courses are counted by hours).
2) English Language Centre Arts 2 (ELCA 2): a 3 hour per week credit course taught in the second term at two levels: Pre-intermediate and Intermediate.

The textbooks used in these courses are a series of 'New Headway Plus: (Oxford University Press)' for the four different levels beginners to intermediate. The syllabus is based around the units of the books focusing on the teaching of all four language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking). The textbooks are electronic versions and they are uploaded for the students in the course content, and the supplementary materials are also available as PDFs. There is an on-line English meeting (session) held once a week for students as part of the programme; this lasts for ninety minutes.

At the beginning of each term, a weekly plan is arranged by the Deanship of e-learning and Distance Education (see Appendix 3 for a sample of a weekly plan). This plan includes full details for the e-tutors about the textbooks, the units and tasks which need to be covered throughout the term. The e-tutors are expected to cover two units from the books during each weekly session. Two types of communication tools are used; synchronous and asynchronous. Chat-box, used during the session, is an example of the first type and e-mail, used outside the session, is an example of the second type (more discussion of these types of communication will be available in the Chapter 2, section 2.7). DLs would write their questions/queries and answers to certain tasks and exercises in the text Chat-box and would send their assignments and homework via email. It is significant in this context to emphasize that during the session, the e-tutors cannot see or hear the students and the DLs can only listen to their e-tutors' voice explaining the lesson and the lesson is recorded to enable them to re-listen to it whenever they need to (issues around communication between the e-tutors and DLs will be investigated as part of this study and will be discussed in later chapters).

1.4 Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to develop a framework for tutors to help their distance language learners to manage and control their learning of the foreign language at the DLLP.

The objectives of the study are:

- To investigate the role of the e-tutors and current methods they use in supporting their DLLs to manage and control their learning;
- To investigate the concept of LA within a DLL context at the chosen university from the e-tutor's perspective;
- To explore the perceived weaknesses and the strengths in the current teaching practices;
- To investigate the obstacles and constraints faced by the tutors in their role as e-tutors.

1.5 The Research Questions

This study is an attempt to address the following research questions:

Overarching Question:

- What are the perceptions of e-tutors about learning and teaching processes in the context of the DLLP?

First Question:

- What are the e-tutors' perceptions of their roles in the DLLP and how can these roles be enhanced?

Second Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, what role do distance language learners play in their own learning in the context of DLLP?

Third Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, which learning and teaching strategies may enable the learners to become more autonomous?

Fourth Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, which aspects related to the DLLP challenge or support the e-tutors in their role in this Programme?

1.6   Positionality

Rosen (1998) assures that:

> *A person's knowledge can only exist by virtue of a vast range of past experiences which have been lived through, often with the most intense feelings. These experiences, including textual experiences (books, lectures, lessons, conversation, etc.) we have been taught to disguise so that our utterances are made to seem as though they emerge from no particular place or time or person but from the fount of knowledge itself (p. 30).*

Sikes (2004) contends that "researcher positionality" is '*the most significant factor that influences choice and use of methodology and procedures*' (p. 18). She further argues that it is therefore important for the researchers to clearly define '*... where they are coming from in terms of their philosophical position and their fundamental assumptions*' (p. 18). This involves clarifying the researcher's values and beliefs, political allegiance, religious faith, social class, ethnicity, gender, and historical and geographical background, as all these factors have the potential to influence the manner in which a researcher conducts an inquiry. Furthermore, Rosen (1998, p. 30) posits that:

In light of the views shared by Rosen (1998) and Sikes (2004) and other like-minded authorities, I will highlight my social background and my life experiences, beliefs, and

thoughts that I consider to have had an impact on the way I conducted my study. This aims to help the readers to better understand and interpret my writings in the appropriate context. The following sections will discuss my social background, education, and work experience.

1.6.1 My Personal Background

I am from Saudi Arabia, an Arab country which is one of the highest oil-producing countries in the world, yet its technology is not as advanced as it should be. I grew up in Makkah, a city that is considered to be the holiest city in the Islamic world and known to be the Islamic capital for all Muslims. All Muslims all over the world pray five times a day facing the direction of Makkah. Millions of Muslims from all over the world come to Makkah every year to perform a pilgrimage as a form of worship known as Hajj and Umrah.

My grandfather worked as a 'Mutuef' (Pilgrims' guide) hosting many pilgrims at his house, which was specially prepared for this purpose. As a result, I used to meet and interact with people from different countries and nationalities. Although I could not speak English very well at that time, it is interesting to note that I managed to communicate with the people by using the few English words I was familiar with. This motivated me later to learn the English language. I therefore started learning English from the age of nine.

1.6.2 My Education and Work Experience

My interest in learning the English language led me to pursue undergraduate studies in English language literature and education. I got my BA Honours degree in English language literature and education in 1984 from Umm-AlQura University and had been employed as a Teaching Assistant/Associate at the same university, teaching English language. This was a compulsory course for all the university students from all the departments. From 1990, I embarked on my MA studies on a part-time basis and achieved the qualification in 1994.

I learned a lot from my teaching experience at Umm-AlQura University. It was my first experience of interacting with students. I believe I was very patient and supportive to my students. I also learned how to deal with very slow learners as well as those who were

highly motivated to learn a new language. Traditional teaching methods were used, yet the percentage of students who were very keen to learn the language was relatively high.

In 1999, I transferred to my current university in Jeddah. I started my job as a lecturer and English language instructor at the Medical school. The English Department in this school works closely with the University's Institute of English Language, based at the main campus. I taught English for eight years to medical students from various medical colleges, including the Department for General Medicine, Medical Technology, Dentistry, and Nursing.

Furthermore, I worked for one term on the external programme of Intisab (providing online English lessons to students at a distance). This programme was similar to the current one of distance teaching, but it was initiated before the distance teaching programme. Teaching on this programme, earned me good experience, as it was the first time I taught virtual classes. Later on, I worked on the programme that I am researching now too.

Thus, my long experience of teaching English to different levels of students at two outstanding universities has greatly motivated me to rethink the environment and the circumstances under which a large number of students study the language. The students' overreliance on their teachers, the practice of traditional 'spoon feeding' methods of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, and the lack of students' control over their language learning encouraged me to think of the role played by the e-tutors in a distance education environment and whether these e-tutors are able to create a different atmosphere for teaching and learning. I feel that it is time for tutors and decision makers involved in teaching English as a foreign language at high level to think of the necessity of changing the traditional role of the tutors as the main authority in the learning process and to start encouraging their learners to be more independent, autonomous language learners. It is, moreover, time for tutors themselves to be aware of the teaching strategies which might help their learners to have more control over their language learning.

1.7   The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis will be structured as follows:

Chapter 1: This chapter starts with the introduction to the study which includes the background, the statement of the problem, the context of the study, aims and objectives of the study, the research questions, as well as my positionality in this study.

Chapter 2: This chapter presents a literature review on the relevant topics including an overview of higher education in Saudi Arabia, a brief description of English language learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia and women's education in the country. A historical background of distance education is then presented followed by a discussion on the role of e-tutors in DE. The chapter concludes with a thorough discussion on the issues related to leaner autonomy and the deployment of language learning strategies as well as definitions and conceptual frameworks of autonomy.

Chapter 3: This chapter highlights the research methodology and methods used to generate data to respond to the research questions. It reviews the research paradigms that underpin the research methodology, and explains the research design and process of the study as well as the research sampling. Issues related to collecting the data and the data analyses are also discussed as well as the ethical issues considered in the study.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents and discusses the primary data generated from the study in relation to the study's first three research questions and related themes. The chapter also interprets the research findings in light of the reviewed literature.

Chapter 5: This chapter presents and discusses the primary data generated from the study in relation to the study's final research question and related themes and subthemes.

Chapter 6: This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the study findings and aims to address the study's overarching question. In addition, the study's contributions recommendations, limitations and suggestions for future research work are presented.

2   Introduction

Three key aspects of this research study are that it is conducted in a higher education setting, the participants are female e-tutors and they are teaching English as a foreign language to female distance learners in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this chapter commences with an overview of higher education in Saudi Arabia, a brief description of English language learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia and women's education in this country.

The chapter then presents a historical background to distance education (DE) and includes some of its most prominent definitions and conceptions in the literature. It also highlights some of the differences between Arab and non-Arab contexts in relation to distance education before focusing on distance education in Saudi Arabia. There is then a focus on the role of e-tutors in DE. The chapter concludes with a thorough discussion on the issues related to leaner autonomy as well as definitions and conceptual frameworks of autonomy.

2.1   Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

As this current study is conducted in one of the Saudi universities, I thought it might be important to provide some information about the history of the higher education system in Saudi Arabia.

The 1930s marked the beginning of formal general education in Saudi Arabia; however, the higher education system began formally in the late 1940s and 1950s with the establishment of several colleges and the first Saudi university, King Saud University (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2004). The history of higher education in Saudi Arabia, according to the MOE (2004), can be divided into three stages: The foundation stage, the expansion stage and the comprehensiveness stage. The following is a summary of the characteristics of each stage:

The Foundation Stage (1949-1960)

This stage witnessed the building of the first blocks of higher education in the country where the College of Islamic law (Shari'a) was established in Makkah in 1949, followed by the establishment of the Teachers College in 1952. By 1957, King Saud University

was founded in Riyadh, the capital city of SA as the first university. Four colleges of, Science, Arts, Pharmacy, and Administrative Sciences were included in this university by that time.

The Expansion Stage (1961-1980)

The establishment of new universities has markedly increased in various provinces of the Kingdom in this stage. These new universities are the Islamic University in Madina, 1961; King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah, 1967; Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, 1974; King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran and King Faisal University in Al-Hassa, 1975; and finally Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah, 1980. A total of 58 colleges were included in these universities. It is worth pointing here that the university system in SA, as described by (Clark, 2014), is patterned according to the United States education structure with two-year associate degrees, four-year bachelor degrees, and two-year master's degrees and where the term 'college' is synonymous to faculty in the Higher Education context of SA. Moreover, several of these universities have campuses in other smaller cities in addition to their main campuses. King Abdul-Aziz University, for example, has a branch in Madinah.

The Comprehensiveness Stage (1981-2016)

During this stage, the Saudi government was focused on expanding the spread of institutions of higher education to the various districts and provinces of the country. More than 80 institutions were developed across the Kingdom including in small cities, towns and villages, this has provided students with better chances to continue their higher education without commuting to major cities.

By 1975, The Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) was established as a main authority to improve the quality of higher education in Saudi universities and colleges (Almalki, 2011). Until 1993, the Ministry of Higher Education was known as the Supreme Council for Universities (Al-Showaye, 2002). The Ministry of Higher Education supervises and controls all matters related to higher education learning with two main objectives; expanding the existing universities and launching new institutes of higher education throughout the Kingdom, in addition to developing undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in many modern and old disciplines at the universities and colleges in the country. Accordingly, Saudi students are able now to get degrees in approximately all fields of study inside SA (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2003).

The Ministry pursued these goals to ensure that higher education could be accessed by every Saudi student. Public universities in Saudi Arabia, as pointed out by Alfrih (2010), are run and controlled by the MHE and have received generous attention from the highest position holders of HE in the government. The number of newly-admitted male and female students has tripled in the period of 1999-2012 with a total of 109,049 students in 1999 to become 329,696 in 2012. This high demand from high school graduates aiming to pursue their higher education, urged the Ministry of Higher Education to adopt the provision of degree courses through the distance learning system (Alfrih, 2010).

Continuing efforts from the Saudi government are in place aiming to open more schools, colleges and universities, and to create new modes of learning such as distance education and e-learning which depend on modern technological tools in many institutions all over the country. Male and female students, who hope to continue their studies in HE can join these institutions (Alfrih, 2010). As a result, the number of main universities and colleges has radically increased in Saudi Arabia in the last 10 years. There are currently 27 high-capacity government universities, and a total of 51 private colleges and universities. A list of these universities along with a description of each is available on the portal of the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2016).

In spite of this tremendous progress in the number of universities and colleges in SA, which are distributed over several provinces in the Kingdom; there is still a shortage of places for those wanting to continue their higher studies. To solve this problem, the Saudi government continues its efforts to improve the quality of its higher education by investing more in this sector. In order to improve the current distance learning system in the SA and provide the students with more places, the MHE established a distance learning (DL) and e-learning centre (Alfrih, 2010).

A detailed description of the situation of distance education in Saudi Arabia will be presented in section 2.10 of this chapter.

2.2   Teaching and Learning English in Saudi Arabia

This study, which was conducted in one of the Saudi higher education institutions, was mainly aimed at exploring the tutor's role in the teaching and learning of English from a distance. This section provides a general overview of the teaching and learning of English in Saudi Arabia.

The teaching and learning of English as a foreign language is vital in schools and universities in developing countries, Saudi Arabia is no exception. English as a foreign language (EFL) was introduced as a compulsory subject in Saudi public schools in 1927; the teaching and learning of English used to begin in middle schools (at the age of 13-15) and continues to secondary schools (at the age of 16-18). By 2011, the system changed and English was introduced to students at grade 6 (at the age of 12) and by 2013 it was brought forward to the fourth year of schooling (at the age of 9) (Alhinty, 2016).

Students usually meet four times per week for a 45-minute class at each grade. The teaching and learning system of English, just like the whole education system in SA, is totally under the control of the MOE where English teachers have to follow a national syllabus with specific guidelines and the same agreed deadlines (Mahboob and Elyas, 2014). The MOE identified several general objectives and aims for teaching English in Saudi Arabia some of which are:

1) To make the students more conscious of the importance of learning English; as it is the basic means of international communication, and to develop their positive attitudes towards learning English.
2) To help students to get the required linguistic competence needed in numerous life situations and in different professions, thus, contributing to their intellectual personal and professional growth.
3) To develop the consciousness of the students about the economic, cultural, religious, and social issues of their society and share them in finding suitable solutions for these issues.
4) To develop the linguistic competence that makes the future students able to present the Islamic issues and values in a proper, moderate manner.
5) To help the students to linguistically benefit from English native language nations to potentially enhance the concepts of international cooperation and to gain a better understanding of cultural respect between different nations (MOE, 2011).

Although these aims and objectives sound promising and encouraging, unfortunately their application in the real world is totally different as the teaching and learning of English has faced many obstacles and challenges in the country. In her discussion of some of these challenges of teaching and learning of English in Saudi schools, Alhinty, (2016) points out that:

1) English is basically taught as a subject rather than as a mode of communication. This results in teacher-centred English classes where teachers talk most of the time and few chances are left for students to interact. As a result, passive, bored, and less motivated students are graduating from schools;

2) EFL syllabuses and textbooks, as she cited from (Assalahi, 2013), contain topics which are unrelated to students' interest. These textbooks are usually very long and higher than their level of proficiency.

3) There is very limited exposure to English and chances to practise the language due to teachers' reliance on old teaching methods.

In addition to these challenges mentioned by Alhinty (2006), Alharbi (2015) adds that teachers' ineffective teaching methods or their lack of enough training in English has led to learning being mostly through rote memorization. This learning style, as he thinks, has negatively affected students' critical-thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and their development of creativity skills as well as their reliance on themselves when learning the language.

These challenges experienced by EFL learners in Saudi schools as shown through these Saudi studies seem to imply that the level of some EFL students who join the universities after graduating from schools is not satisfactory.

At university level, the teaching and learning of English language starts at the foundation year where students sit for a placement English language test and '*The English language programme for foundation students is comprised of four levels of instruction, which match the common European framework of references for language (CEFR)*' (Gamlo, 2014, p. 7). This placement test identifies the student level, yet students can be exempted from studying English if they provide a TOFEL score of 32 or above or an IELTS band score of 4.5 or above (Gamlo, 2014).

In summary, the findings of these studies about the teaching and learning of English in Saudi schools and universities advocates my position as a researcher that the role of the e-tutor is crucial in helping their DLLs to have some control over their language learning and that these e-tutors must be given some freedom to develop new pedagogical teaching practices to help their learners to achieve this control.

2.3   Women's Education in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, women's education has attracted controversial debates for a period of time. Women's education remained under the supervision of the Department of Religious Guidance under the name of the General Presidency for Girl's Education at all levels until 2002, while men's education was run by the Ministry of Higher Education (Hamdan, 2005). The reason behind this difference in supervision was to make sure that female education did not diverge from its main purpose to prepare women in Saudi Arabia to become good wives and mothers according to the religious leaders of the General Presidency. This Presidency, which is less prestigious than the Ministry of Higher Education was influenced by religious conservative leaders (Hamdan, 2005).

The General Presidency for Girl's Education in SA was integrated under the Ministry of Higher Education in 2002 (Hamdan, 2005). This occurred as a consequence of a tragic fire accident that took place in a girls' elementary school in Makkah and resulted in the death of 15 students and teachers. The reason behind this high number of fatalities was down to the presence of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice and the religious police, who advised firemen at the time of the incident not to enter the school because the girls were not wearing the Hijab (head scarves). This incident caused controversy in the Saudi media and was also covered by the foreign media. The amalgamation of the General Presidency for Girl's Education and the Ministry of Higher Education has genuinely improved the situation of women's education in Saudi Arabia.

Due to the high demand of women's higher education in SA, universities which were originally established for men, started opening girls' colleges but in separate campuses (following Islamic rules of segregation of the two sexes) (Alqrani, 2014). The first women's university with its own campus was King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh, which opened in 1979 (Hamdan, 2005). The Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) continued to support females' higher education and provided them with opportunities to enrol in twenty-three public universities distributed across various areas of the country as well a chance to join other private universities. Meanwhile, King Abdullah's Foreign Scholarship Programme (KAFSP) supported females who wished to study abroad, with the condition of having a male guardian when travelling for the first time from SA (Algarni, 2014). A number of 1374 Saudi women were granted scholarships in 2006 to study abroad with a monthly allowance for the student's male guardian and a monthly grant for the student herself (AL Lily, 2011). Al Lily (2011) refers to this dramatic change

in women's educational status in SA and argues that '*This initiative allowed women to shift in less than four decades from being excluded from formal state education to the current situation where they are sponsored by the state to study abroad*' (p. 124). As a Saudi citizen, I am one of those fortunate women who were sponsored by my government to pursue my higher education abroad.

2.4 History and Definitions of Distance Education

For almost two centuries, distance education has gone through considerable changes in the means of learning and how it is communicated. Over this period, various forms of communication evolved extending from undeveloped correspondence through the postal service to the extensive range of tools available from the Internet (Moore et al., 2011). Societal changes as well as the rapid developments in communications technology and in information has led to changes in the learning environment, hence increasing awareness of and demand for new types of education (White, 2003). 'Online learning' as an example of one of these types is known to have a history dating back to the 1980's; whereas the origins of another form known as 'e-learning', were not fully revealed (Harasim, 2000). It is said that DL activities started from the end of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, yet it became definitely recognised only by the end of the 19th century (Holmberg, 2003). During this time, a number of correspondence schools was founded and distance education methods were applied to university education for the first time.

Wang and Liu (2003) point out that the origins of DL began in 1840 in England when the "uniform penny postage" was established and when the students were provided with Isaac Pittman's (1840) shorthand instructions via correspondence. Later, by 1843, the Society of Phonographic Correspondence was created, and it was developed into Sir Isaac Pittman's Correspondence College. By 1970, the Open University in the UK was established and it is now considered to be the UK's largest DL institution, with around 200,000 students from inside and outside the UK (Payne & Bradbury, 2002). Distance education in the academic field has developed rapidly since the 1970s and has now become '*a dominant part of the landscape of higher education*' (McFarlane, 2011, p. 12). Nowadays, an extensive number of universities around the world are using distance-education as their sole or chief mode for courses delivery as well as for interaction with students and for counselling.

Many authors and researchers have used a wide array of definitions for distance education (DE) and distance learning (DL) over the last two decades; the two terms have often been

used interchangeably and in some cases synonymously. It is argued that the term 'distance education' is the most commonly used term when referencing distance learning (Moore et al., 2011). According to Moore and Kearsley (1996), distance learning involves providing opportunities for learners who are far away from the university but in need of acquiring knowledge in a convenient way to their personal circumstances. Interaction between learner, the teaching source and the teaching content is through the application of different media and technological communication tools (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The process includes an instructor who provides the instructions at disparate times and who is, more importantly, physically located in a different place from the learner. Furthermore, Moore et al. (2011) add that the design of different types of learning environments can depend on the target audience, the learning objective, type of content, and access (physical, virtual and/or both). They also focus on the role of technology '*It is important to know how the learning environment is used, and the influences of the tools and techniques that distinguish the differences in learning outcomes as the technology evolves'* (p. 129)*.* Hassan et al. (2013) have a similar idea, *'Distance education evolves parallel to the advancement of technology. Previous years have shown the evolution of distance education as a second opportunity to learn'* (p. 760).

Dede (1996) further explains that distance education involves the use of different pedagogical methods '*The innovative pedagogies empowered by these emerging media, messages, and experiences make possible an evolution of synchronous, group, presentation-centered forms of distance education—which replicate traditional "teaching by telling" across barriers of distance and time'* (p.4). On the other hand, Keegan (1996), as cited by Moore et al. (2011) went further to suggest that DE is an "umbrella" term which includes other terms like correspondence education that might have been used as a synonym to DE.

Moreover, Phipps and Merisotis (1999) point to the significance of understanding the meanings and the characteristics of DL to evaluate the essential learning setting.

In terms of defining DL, consulting related literature reveals that identifying one common definition of DL would not be possible for the following reasons:

1. The term has been defined widely by many specialists (Holmberg 1989; Greenberg1998, Keegan 1998; Schlosser & Simonson 2002; White 2003; Wang & Chen 2009) each of whom presented it to reflect their needs, understanding, and perspectives;

2. DL is an umbrella term as pointed out by Ko (2006); it reflects different educational settings including correspondence education, autonomous learning, self-directed learning, open learning, self-regulated learning and open education;

3. White (2006) contends that it is difficult to come up with a definition of distance language learning and teaching that embraces the different views held by those involved in this mode of learning such as teachers, researchers, and learners.

4. Owing to the rapid change of technology, it is hard to have a specific definition of the term. Alosh (2001) confirms this by saying '*No single model or definition of distance learning exists because the technology is changing as fast as new capabilities become available*' (p. 347). Conrad (2006) adds that the term DL has evolved, depending on technology to refer to other learning forms such as virtual learning, e-learning, web-based learning, technology mediated learning, online learning and online collaborative learning.

Keegan's definition (1996), (cited in the first chapter section 1.1of this thesis, p.2) is one of the leading definitions in the field. Wang and Chen (2009, p. 4), state that Keegan's definition synthesizes earlier researchers' definitions and outlines five main elements of DL. These elements are respectively:

- The semi-permanent separation of learner and teacher;
- The impact of educational associations in the preparation and planning of learning materials;
- The usage of technological tools to interact between teachers and learners;
- The two-way provision communication which enables the student to begin dialogue;
- The possibility of teaching people as individuals not as groups, with the opportunity of infrequent meeting.

Later on, Keegan made a very important distinction to his definition of DE when he described the two basic elements of distance education. These two elements and their relationships are simply illustrated in the following Figure:
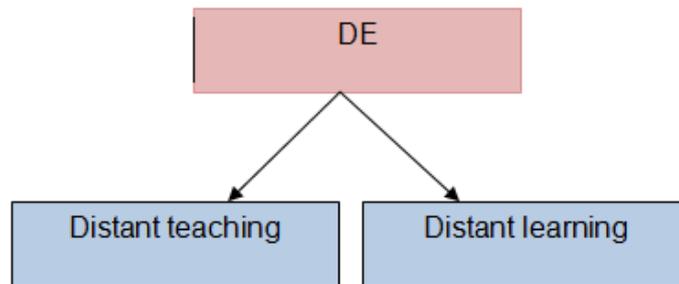
Figure 2.1: Keegan's (1996) Distance Learning Elements

According to Keegan (1996), the first element of DE, is "Distance Teaching" (DT) which focuses on a process followed to develop materials for distance learners; such materials could be developed either by the teacher or the institution that has relationship with this specific mode of education. The second element is "Distance Learning" (DL) which focuses on the learning process as perceived by the students in this specific context. According to Keegan (1996, pp. 37-39), *'DT looks at instructors and their role in delivering distance education while DL looks at the learners themselves and how they can achieve the goals of the course, programme, or outcomes successfully.'*. This distinction is very relevant to this study where both concepts will be used. However, there will be more emphasis on DT, in which the role of the e-tutors and the pedagogical aspects of this specific DLLP are investigated, for reasons which will be explained later on in Chapter Three.

By (2002), Schlosser and Simonson concentrate in their definition on the importance of the technology. They state that DL is *'institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructor'* (p. 4). Wang and Liu (2003) claim that the term of DE is defined differently by different educators and professionals; this, in reality, completely supports what is mentioned earlier in this section about the difficulty of defining DE. According to them, DE is: *'the information transfer process of delivering resource-sharing opportunities to learners away from conventional learning institutions or site'* (p. 121). It is noted that despite the lack of consensus on a specific definition for the term of DE, most DE scholars focus in their definitions on the idea of physical separation between the teacher and the learners, the role of technology in DE, and the students' absence from conventional classes.

On the other hand, a number of authors (Keegan, 1996; Holmberg, 1989; Moore & Kearsley, 1996, cited in Stenerson, 1998; Moore, 1990, cited in Maguire, 2005; Nekatibeb, 2001; Ball 2003) focused in their definitions on the importance of good planning of DL processes in addition to the basic idea of separation. Good planning is very fundamental, in my opinion, in any DL programme, as lack of good planning will result in the failure of the programme. DE has also been described as mediated subject-matter presentation (one-way traffic from the supporting teaching organisation to the learners) and mediated interaction between students and their tutors (two-way traffic between both) (Holmberg, 2005).

According to what has been mentioned above, definitions of DL depend mainly on many variables. Those variables can be summarised as follows:

- Learner-centred models of learning; there is more emphasis on the learners in the learning process.
- The learning materials (i.e. that the material planned for DT is appropriate for the learners' age and level).
- The type of learning technology used in each programme (e.g. Internet, TV networks, satellite technology, and mobile texts).
- New theories of learning (e.g. interpretivism, and constructivism).

In summary, given the intricacies of the process of DE, it can be said that it is a challenge to develop a comprehensive definition for distance learning and teaching. The following section describes one of the fundamental theories which underpin DE.

2.5   Distance Education and Theoretical Underpinnings

Many learning theories have been developed with the emergence of distance education. The theory of transactional distance (proposed by Moore, 1972), for example, was the first attempt to articulate a theory about DE. This theory stated that DE is not simply a geographical distance between learners and teacher, more importantly; it is a pedagogical concept (Moore, 1993) which developed over time based on research studies in the field of distance learning and education (Moore and Kearsley, 1996). Distance education, according to this theory, is viewed as a teaching-learning relationship, implying that teachers, DLs, and organisations are responsible to create plans and find solutions to overcome their separation. This separation which involves both physical distance and distance of understandings and perceptions is called, a transactional distance. A summary

of this theory of transactional distance will be provided later to clarify the idea of the main features of distance education (from which DL results according to this perspective). This theory is highlighted in this study because it tends to encapsulate the concept behind DL as it is explored in this study.

Moreover, in his discussion of the theory of transactional distance, Moore (1993) has identified three variables which critically impact transactional engagement in distance learning and teaching. These variables are: dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. Dialogue, according to Moore, describes a positive interaction or series of interactions that occur between the instructor and the learners from a distance. Structure means '*the way in which the teaching programme is structured so that it can be delivered through the various communication media*' (Moore, 1993, P. 26). The programme's level of structure determines if the transactional distance between the teacher and the learner is low or high according to Moore (1993), i.e. if the dialogue between the teacher and the learner is not existing, the transactional distance is high, whereas the transactional distance is low in teleconference programmes where the dialogue exists between the teacher and the learner. The third variable, learner autonomy, is focused on the learners' ability to determine the goals, the learning experience, and to evaluate his/her learning programme (Moore, 1993). Moore (1993) also pointed to the relationship between dialogue, structure and learner autonomy where lower dialogue and greater programme structure lead to more learner autonomy. This means that programmes vary in the degree of autonomy expected of the learners. In other words, DLs have various opportunities to make decisions about their own learning depending on the level of transactional distance of the programme. More details of the implications of these variables in this study will be available later in the discussion of LA (section 2.13.1). The focus of this research is to explore DL and the role of the e-tutors within a DLLP context. In light of the above discussed theory, it would be interesting to see how high or low the transactional distance is perceived by e-tutors in this programme and gauge the rigidity and flexibility of it, whether teacher-led or learner-directed. This study will also reveal the degree of dialogue which this programme can provide and the suitable structure of learning materials and their effect on the leaners autonomy.

Many theories of DE (based on ideological, philosophical and empirical bases) have been proposed over the years (Rekkedal, 1994; Sherry, 1996). From another perspective, a discussion has been raised among scholars about the pedagogical implications of DE. Beldarrain (2006), for example, suggests that '*The rapid growth of online distance*

education worldwide has prompted the need to revise delivery structures and re-think pedagogical practices that were once appropriate.' (p. 140). Later on, other scholars like Anderson and Dron (2010), for example, criticised the classifications solely based on technology and called for a pedagogical one. According to them, there are three generations of DE based on pedagogical dominance. These generations are: the cognitive-behaviourist pedagogy; the social-constructivist pedagogy; and the connectivist pedagogy of DE. Each one has its own characteristics. The first one is characterized by the new behaviour or changes in behaviours that can result from the learners' response to the stimuli; meanwhile, the third generation 'connectivist pedagogy' focuses on the construction and maintenance of connections related to current and flexible networks that are sufficient to be applied to emerging and existing problems. connections related to current and flexible networks that are enough to be applied to existing and emerging problems.

The second pedagogical generation of DE, the social-constructivist pedagogy (the one relevant to this study) was developed mainly from the work of Vygotsky and Dewey. It is defined by Anderson and Dron (2011) as follows:

> *Social-constructivist pedagogy acknowledges the social nature of knowledge and of its creation in the minds of individual learners. Teachers do not merely transmit knowledge to be passively consumed by learners; rather, each learner constructs means by which new knowledge is both created and integrated with existing knowledge* (pp. 84 -85).

Nevertheless, Anderson and Dron (2011), in their discussion of the pedagogical generations of DE, do not separate them entirely from a technological one as implied by the following argument:

> *In an attempt to define a middle ground between either technological or pedagogical determinism, we've previously written (Anderson, 2009) about the two being intertwined in a dance: the technology sets the beat and creates the music, while the pedagogy defines the moves* (p. 81).

My study is more in line with the underpinning principles of social constructivism because I am basing my epistemological conception on this specific theory of learning. According to this specific pedagogy, more concentration is placed on the interaction between and among students and teachers and the role of technology here is very dominant as it is used to create chances for synchronous and asynchronous interactions between teachers and students. It can be argued that features of social-constructivist pedagogy, as highlighted by Anderson and Dron (2011), can harmonize with the use of

learning strategies in DE, where the learners utilise strategies as a means to creating their own knowledge of the language. These strategies are vital in this study and will be discussed in details later.

2.6   The Differences between Regular Face-to-Face Learning and E-learning

In a conventional educational setting, teaching and learning would occur in a particular place at a particular time. *'However, in distance education the focal point of learning is no longer the classroom but has shifted to the home, or the workplace, or a study context'* (White, 2003, p.8) and while in synchronous distance settings a certain time is shared and agreed on, in an asynchronous learning situation there would be no set time. Hence, it can be argued that the two elements of place and time are particularly vital in distinguishing regular face-to-face learning from distance learning.

Holden and Westfall (2006) make some general comparisons between DE and the traditional forms of education. According to them, any DE system must include the following:

- *Physical distance between the student and the teacher*
- *An organisation that provides the content*
- *Part of a curriculum – learning must have an objective and therefore must have structure*
- *Learning measurement – which learning can be observed to have taken place (*p. 9).

Several researchers have implicitly referred to the advantages of DE compared with face-to-face classroom learning. Alfrih (2010) mentions the following advantages:

- DE is more flexible in time and place;
- The use of technological tools such as e-mails, the Internet, e-mail, mobile apps enable DLs to interact and have access to more resources and information;
- DE provides adult students with more chances of learning, as life for some is too complex and demanding to continue their traditional education.

Concurrently, Aljaber (2012), states that:

> *The use of distance learning has created a new realm of education. No more must students trek to the classroom lugging heavy textbooks at a scheduled time. Now, this new realm of education is delivered to students via the Internet in the comfort of their own home and at a more flexible time* (p.132).

These advantages seem logical, yet what needs to be noted in this sense and in relation to the context of the current research study is the idea that many Saudi students might not be used to this mode of learning. In line with this, AL-Qahtani and Higgins (2013) in their study in Umm Al-Qura University in SA investigated the effect of e-learning and classroom learning on students' achievement. They found that the physical absence of the tutor is seen as one of the disadvantages in e-learning contexts as students in this university are more used to a traditional learning approach.

Zhang et al. (2004) in their discussion of whether e-learning can replace classroom learning have presented a table which illustrates the pros and cons of e-learning in comparison to classroom learning:

Table 2.1: Traditional Classroom Learning Versus E-Learning. (Adapted from Zhang et al., 2004)

	Traditional Classroom Learning	E-Learning
Advantages	o Immediate feedback o More familiar to both educators and students o More motivating for students o Cultivation of a social community	o Learner-centred and self-paced o More flexibility of time and location o More money saving for learners o More available to global audience o Access to knowledge is unlimited o Archival capability for knowledge reuse and sharing
Disadvantages	o Instructor-centred o Time and location challenges o More expensive to deliver	o Immediate feedback is not possible in asynchronous e-learning o The instructors' needs for more preparation time o Not comfortable for some learners o More potential frustration , anxiety and confusion

The table above shows that although e-learning has several advantages, its disadvantages seem to outweigh those of the classroom context. These seem to be related to some necessary aspects of learning such as the provision of feedback which in distance learning cannot always be immediate. Other factors may be related to the technical side of things which require increased preparation time from teachers; meanwhile learners may show signs of discomfort and even frustration. Zhang et al. (2004) research suggest that e-learning is still in its early stages and further uncertain issues need to be investigated.

They conclude that e-learning cannot replace traditional classroom learning, at least not with the less motivated students or those who might be intimidated by technology (Zhang et al., 2004).

Other researchers have focused on the ways of communication in each mode of education and the different challenges this may entail. White (2003), for example, argues that some of these challenges faced by students in a DL environment are more apparent than in face-to-face classrooms. One of these challenges as raised by White (2003) is how to maintain enough learner contact and ongoing interaction. This issue is common in all forms of distance learning and is closely related to students' participation in the distance environment. White (2003) admits that some students are reluctant to participate in group or collaborative work even in some face-to-face classrooms, yet the situation is more complex in distance learning because the tutor is not physically available to encourage students and to deal with casual queries and concerns as they arise.

In line with White's views on the challenge of distance learners' interaction, Clarke (2008) goes on to explore how the learner, in some distance learning environments (e.g. those programmes where the two ends cannot see or hear each other), might be affected by the lack of face-to-face communication:

> *In face-to-face communication you can see the facial expression of people, hear the tone of the voice and listen to the words used. In e-learning you only have the written words to communicate through and this notoriously leads to misunderstanding* (p.6).

Clarke (2008) also points out that the traditional learner has more chances for informal chat with peers and the tutors in the corridor over their views, whereas the e-learner might need to seek other means of communication like the use of e-mail to get in touch with his peers and tutors. Accordingly, DLs would perhaps need to be more self-sustained than traditional learners and being self-sustained, as suggested by Clarke in this context, is to be an independent/autonomous learner. This matches this study's initiative to find out whether the tutors in the DLLP encourage their distance learners to be autonomous. White (2004) additionally points out to the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) which could provide the learners with better chances of interaction and collaboration through the use of computers. However, the advent of technology could also place further demands on learners and require them to obtain certain skills in relation to that.

Working in a DE environment does not come without its difficulties for the online tutors as well as the learners. Hauck and Haezewindt (1999) report on tutors' perspectives on their role in an online-based project. The tutors identified that there is a need to manage multiple roles including that of a facilitator, guide and coordinator in an attempt to adapt to the demands of this new context. Furthermore, those tutors felt that they needed to develop strategies and had to adapt their teaching styles to support and encourage their learners to develop a more effective role in line with online learning.

White (2003) refers to the greater workloads of tutors as more time is required throughout the different stages of designing and planning an online course. Significant time is also spent on teacher-to-learner communication when responding to student enquiries and problems, as well as orchestrating discussions. While tutors need to access the course site regularly to attend to its different functions, there is often the expectation that e-tutors need to be readily available at all times. Laurillard (2002) argues that in traditional place-based settings, formal mechanisms have been developed to protect tutors, for example, office hours, timetables and appointments are set and tightly kept. Similar measures need to be taken and applied in online environments to clearly and fairly define and maintain tutor time-commitment and workloads.

It is perhaps fair to accept that both learning situations, distance and face-to-face, have their share of advantages and disadvantages and that it is a matter of minimising the disadvantages of each mode of education if it were to be deemed effective. In their discussion of effective learning for distance learners, Briggs and Sommefeldt (2002), for example, suggest that managing effective learning for distance learners is similar to acknowledging learners' needs in the conventional learning setting, yet a strong infrastructure is needed in the former situation. The following are some of the components that have to be included in this infrastructure as suggested by them:

1- Preliminary assessment of skills.
2- On-course tutoring to support learning. (Briggs and Sommefeldt, 2002, p. 69)

Zhang et al. (2004) also argue that in order to create an effective online learning environment, suitable pedagogical methods should be integrated to improve system interactivity and to engage learners in a better way.

In the following sections, I will discuss DL and how this is practised in non-Arab contexts and Arab countries and then focus on DL in Saudi Arabia (the country where this study will be conducted).

2.7   The Role of Technology in Distance Learning and Teaching

Online learning in the past was commonly described as being passive, using traditional teacher-centred approaches due to the one-way transmission of information. Text-based technology was perhaps the main technology used in DE during the 1980s (Bates, 1993). However, the vast growth of technology has brought about great progresses in online education, prompting changes in practicing pedagogical e- learning. Moreover, the use of enhanced technology systems and media became essential to the success of online courses. The most broadly used media, as suggested by Weller (2002) included computer assisted learning (CAL), audio and video, virtual worlds, course delivery systems. As a general term, e-learning, has come to be used synonymously with computer assisted learning in more than one way. In many situations, advanced learning technologies, which make use of multimedia and networked technologies, tend to be linked with e-learning. Based on learner needs and preferences of distance learners as well as the intended learning outcomes, e-tutors can decide which technological methods should be applied to reach satisfactory results in distance learning programmes (Procter, 2003).

Acknowledging the role of technology in DE is not to be neglected. This role is clearly manifested in communication between the students and their e-tutors. It is argued that SA needs to make the most of the advantages of applying and using modern communication tools to deliver DE (Altowjry, 2005). Altowjry (2005), moreover, found that many Saudi workers and those who live far from major cities, which include universities, are eager to study through the Internet from their homes; he suggested that the Satellite used for broadcasting television programmes can be perhaps better be used to provide DLs with chances to use high-speed Internet connection that will facilitate their online learning.

In their discussion of communication tools in distance language learning, some scholars such as White (2003) points to two types of communication tools used in distance learning; synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous DL is based on technologies that allow 'realtime' communication, such as the use of telephone or chat rooms. According to this type, both time and opportunity for learners are controlled, yet this system can be motivating because it allows the distance learners to feel less isolated and enable them to

acquire energy and inspiration from the learning group (White, 2003). Another scholar, Salmon (2003) agrees with White's discussion of this type of communication and points that synchronous conferencing can be set up on the Internet and as well as using the text chat sessions that everyone can join in; it allows real time communication where both educators and learners are online at the same time and they speak or write to each other directly. On the other hand, the asynchronous type of communication includes learning opportunities that the learner is free to access at any time such as: video, CD-ROM, e-mails and computer conference discussions. According to this type of delivery, the learners have the flexibility to access the course content and to communicate anytime and from different places (White, 2003).

Each tool of synchronous and asynchronous of DL has its own advantages and disadvantages. The following are some of the advantages and disadvantages of each tool as presented by (Algarni, 2014):

Table 2.2.: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Synchronous and Asynchronous DE. (Adapted from Algarni, 2014)

The Advantages of **Synchronous** DE	The Disadvantages of **Synchronous** DE
o It offers the students personalized learning chances. o The spontaneity that takes place in a regular classroom environment is restored.	o Different time zone might sometimes create scheduling problems for participants. o Technology failure which may result in session interruption or delay.
The Advantages of **Asynchronous** DE	The Disadvantages of **Asynchronous** DE
o More flexible as students can join a class at any time/any place. o The time zone problem does not exist as the learners can correspond. o Allows the incorporation of a variety of technologies.	o Lack of immediate feedback. o Lack of social interaction. o Feeling of isolation and frustration among the learners. o The needed technology is sometimes costly.

The reason behind choosing this specific study to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of the two different methods is owing to its relevance to the current research study. Alqarni's (2014) study was conducted in one of the Saudi universities to identify the relationship between the challenges faced by female students and their perceptions of these challenges in the distance learning classrooms which use video conferencing technology. This identification helps me as a researcher to be aware of the

challenges that might emerge in distance language programmes and helps in understanding the reasons behind preferences and choices of the most suitable mode of delivery. This choice relies on the objectives and requirements of each distance learning programme. As this study is conducted in one of these programmes in a Saudi University, both types of communication are deployed by e-tutors and learners as clarified in the documents of this programme. This combination of both synchronous and asynchronous is called 'multi-synchronous' by Mason (1998b) as cited by White (2003).

In summary, it can be concluded that the evolution and rapid development of technologies during the twenty-first century had played a great role in the field of education, enriching, in particular, the learning-teaching process in distance learning situations.

2.8   Distance Learning in Non-Arab Contexts

This section will shed light on DL programmes in some non-Arabic contexts. Initially, it is necessary to correct the misconception that, DL using new technologies (e.g. personal computers, the Internet, and the World Wide Web) is a new form of education. On the contrary, DL has been around for more than 100 years in Europe (Imel, 1998) as discussed in section 2.4. Ravenscroft (2001) supported Imel by stating that, '*The notion that 'electronic learning' is a recent initiative is a popular misconception*' (p. 133). In England for example, correspondence was used as a means to provide learners with instruction as early as 1840 and in Germany in Berlin, Gustav Langenscheidt and Charles Toussaint founded a school in 1856 for language teaching by correspondence (Holmberg, 1986).

Distance education has developed in most parts of the world, so the intention here is just to provide some snapshots. In Australia, for example, video conferencing is employed in the Curtain University to reach remote students in Western Australia and to provide Business Studies classes for students in Singapore; hence with a focus on accessibility and availability (Valentine, 2002). In other countries, the value of DE is correlated with financial motivation; places like Beijing, Jakarta, and South American countries like Argentina and Brazil use this mode of learning to save money on physical building spaces (Bollag and Ann as cited in Valentine, 2002).

Other countries with huge populations, like China and India, adopted DE to serve the huge number of students who wish to continue their higher studies. In China, for example,

the Chinese higher educators began to use the Internet in 1999 to provide DE, so as to meet part of the demand for higher education and the extensive education needs of the country (Li, 2009). By the same token, the Indian Higher Ministry provides DE for the Indian students. Today, China and India have the broadest networks of DE institutions and open universities in the world (Carter, 2009). On the other hand, Holden and Westfall (2006) argue that DL first appeared in the United States more than 120 years ago, i.e. 20 years earlier than Europe.

Knowing the origins of DL in non-Arab countries enables Arab researchers to compare between the programmes in Arab countries and those in other developed and developing countries. This might provide a chance to understand such experiences and promote needed changes to meet the challenges of Arabic contexts. There are, therefore, important lessons that can be learned by investigating the factors that influence the application of DL in Arab countries like Saudi Arabia. The sections below aim to provide the readers with more details about the context of this study.

2.9   Distance Learning in the Arab World Context

As this study will be conducted in an Arab Country, it is perhaps essential to give an idea of the context and the circumstances that surrounded the development of DE in the Arab World. DE was initially introduced in the Arab World towards the end of the 20th Century when most of the Arab Countries were liberated (Al-Shammari, 2008). Hence, it is noticeable that DE was initiated later than its equivalents in some developed countries. Great efforts have been made to improve distance education in tertiary level in the Arab world, over the last two decades; many higher education institutions and universities have provided distance, open and virtual education programmes. There are three functional modes of DL institutions in Arab countries: dual mode, single mode, and virtual mode (Ibrahim et al., 2007) and are classified as such depending on the types of programmes provided. These three modes along with examples of each are classified as follows:

1. Dual mode universities are institutions that provide on-campus programmes as well as off-campus programmes. The Distance Education Centre of Juba University in Sudan and the Open Learning Centres in Egypt (1989) are examples of this mode of DL.
2. The single mode DE universities have the single function of DE and all their activities are to this end. The Higher Institute for Continuing Education, Tunisia

is the first example of such universities. Al-Quds Open University (1991), Arab Open University (1999), and the Open University in Libya (2004) are other examples of this mode of universities.

3. The Syrian Virtual University (SVU) represents the first online university in the Arab region. It was established in 2002 with the aim to bring European, Americans, and other international universities to the students' home to enable them to study from their own countries with no need to travel to study abroad (Ibrahim et al. 2007).

Drawing on the examples provided in this classification, Egypt was the pioneer in implementing DE in the Arab World in 1989 when the Supreme Council of Egyptian Universities allowed the implementation of DL in some universities, such as Cairo, Assiut, Ain-Shams and Alexandria (Egyptian Universities Network, 2003). The second Open University known as the Arab Open University was founded in Al-Kuwait in 1999 and its main campus is located in Kuwait, but it has branch campuses in other Arab countries like Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. It basically aims to provide higher education to every capable Arab citizen wishing to pursue his/her higher education (Mohamed, 2005).

Furthermore, to enhance DL in Arab world, the Arab Network for Open and Distance Education (ANODED) was established in 1997 in Egypt, Cairo; it includes 60 institutions working in distance education. This network conducts some training and conferences in distance education and the services provided are promising in terms of supplying the Arab world with required human resources to lead the field (Alsunbul, 2002).

Distance learning is being progressively adopted in Arab regions as in many other developing countries for several reasons (Alfrih, 2010). One reason is the rise in the number of people who require higher education and are aspiring for better jobs to run better lives and raise their social status. Moreover, there are those who would like to have better, further and equal opportunities to be able to join the universities in order to enhance their knowledge and improve their skills (e.g. women, disabled people). Further reasons include the shortage of resources (e.g. funding, teaching cadres, space) to provide on-campus learning as well as the shortage of universities in Arab countries. The geographical distribution of people in most Arab c hinders these countries to establish new universities nor to create branches in each area (Alfrih, 2010).

Unfortunately, the status of DE in the Arab World has been recently negatively affected by political issues and lack of agreement among governments (Alsunbul, 2002). Indeed, this view tends to be true and the situation seems to be deteriorating in the last few years with the convergence of what has been known as the 'Arab Spring' which some might argue denotes political turmoil rather than positivity and hope. To improve the status of DL in the Arab World, some scholars such as Alsunbul (2002) suggested that there must be co-operation and co-ordination between the Arab regions and the international organisations and universities on how to run and operate effective distance education programmes in the Arab World. More details on the challenges facing DE in the Arab region will be described in section 2.11 of this chapter.

2.10 Distance Learning in Saudi Arabia

Distance education in Saudi Arabia started in 1961 when the country introduced a system called 'intisab' (external studying mode) Algarni (2014). The system involves students registering with a university but pursing their studies off campus. As technology was not yet in its prime, students would only be able to study using hard copy materials in preparation for one overall exam, usually administrated on campus at the end of the academic year. With the introduction of new means of technology, another form of DE was developed in Saudi Arabia using the CCTV in tertiary level. This method, as Alqrani (2014) cited from (Almohaissin and Shawat, 2008) gained popularity in the 1970s when gender segregation was required; this implied that male instructors were only allowed to teach female students through CCTV. This way of teaching still occurs in some Saudi universities, yet recently with the rapid development in information and telecommunication technology application education, policy makers in Saudi Arabia have started to implement Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in its education system. The Internet has tremendous implications for ICT in Saudi Arabian universities, particularly in developing e-learning (Alturise and Alojaiman, 2013).

Prior to presenting an overview of DE in Saudi Arabia in this section, two crucial matters are to be taken into consideration; the size of the country and its population.

1) According to SAMIRAD (Saudi Arabian Market Information Resource), The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies about four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula. It occupies a mass land of approximately 2,250,000 square kilometres.

2) In regard to the Kingdom's population, and according to SAMIRAD, by 1974, the population was just over 7 million. By 2006, a dramatic growth in the population was noticed reaching 23.6 of Saudis and non-Saudis. Currently, nearly half of the Saudi population is aged under 20.

The reason behind highlighting these facts about the size and population of Saudi Arabia is to show the significance of DE and why the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) thought of incorporating this mode of teaching and learning in its system of education. In relation to the kingdom's geographical area, it can be pointed out that not all regions of a country of this size would have access to facilities of higher education. Algarni, (2014, p. 67) refers to the issue of the size of SA when he says that *'Saudi Arabia is quite large and has several communities that are isolated from the main population hubs'* which necessitates the significance of DE education for those who live in remote areas.

On the other hand, the government is experiencing higher education institutional capacity issues due to the ever-increasing number of high school graduates. There is an increasing demand for places in colleges and universities because many high school students are graduating from secondary school with increasingly high percentages (Alsaeid, 2011). Furthermore, Alsaeid, (2011, p. 34) adds that *'At present, the KSA higher education system can accommodate only 75,000 of its 200,000 high school graduates on campus'* which points to the escalating pressure that Saudi HE is experiencing. Hamdan (2014, p. 313) also describes that '*Many high-school graduates were unable to find places at the national universities and approximately 100,000 are currently studying abroad on scholarships at higher education institutions in such countries as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada.'*. So, as previously highlighted in chapter 1, to solve the problem of overcrowding in Saudi universities, the MHE adopted the provision of degree programmes through the DL system with the belief that '*Online learning offers the prospect of expanding the total number of students who can be enrolled in Saudi universities without actually requiring increases in the physical capacity of the universities and associated facilities'* (Hamdan, 2014, p. 313).

Other recent studies (Aljabre, 2012; Algarni, 2014) in DE in Saudi Arabia point to further benefits of DE in Saudi Arabia:

- DE creates a new realm of education for Saudi students; education is conveyed via the Internet to students' homes to study at a flexible time in the comfort of their own homes.

- It helps to overcome the shortage of female faculty members as DE can help by enabling females to be taught by male instructors.

- It extends learning to those who are disabled.

- DE provides the Saudi students with other learning options that might outfit their learning styles away from the traditional classroom.

- Online approaches of teaching provide Saudi students with the visual learning opportunities that they might prefer and this novel mode of teaching is hoped to make the students more independent.

This last factor is potentially related to the aim of this study which, through the investigation of this specific programme, aims to find out whether the teaching methods employed by the e-tutors encourage the distance learners to be more self-directed or not.

In addition to these studies, which indicate some benefits of DL in Saudi Arabia, other research studies have been conducted in the field of DL and e-learning to evaluate the current programmes. These studies ranged from PhD theses to MA theses, or journal articles. Examples of some of these studies are:

- Altowjry (2005) conducted a study which aimed to illustrate the advantages of using telecommunications technologies as a way to incorporate the distance learning method in Saudi higher education system. It was found that delivering DL by utilising new learning technologies and to have access to the Internet and its information resources at any time could be of great help for DLs. These advantages were presented to professors and educational administrators in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia who needed to be aware of the benefits of such a method as online learning.

- Al-Sheri (2010) conducted a study to examine the current and future developments and challenges of e-learning in SA. The study explores the views of 30 senior academics with previous experience in the field of e-learning in Saudi universities involved with e-learning programmes, and the National Centre of e-learning in the Kingdom. These participants are considered as decision makers in their respective organizations. The researcher concludes after two weeks of

interviews with the participants that the rapid growth of e-learning in SA is resulting in many challenges. To overcome these challenges there must be a clear vision and strategic planning among all decision makers involved with prospective e-learners to make these programmes more effective. Moreover, Al-Shehri suggested that further studies should be conducted on Saudi e-learners to find out their perceptions and what they understand about e-learning.

- Alfrih (2010) conducted the first study in Saudi Arabia which investigates the role of academic libraries in supporting DL in the country. The findings revealed that DL is a substitute for traditional teaching approaches focusing on completely automated techniques by implementing e-learning via the Internet; however, the academic libraries lack the rules and principles which permit DL stakeholders' rights to be supported and served. In his discussion of this topic, this study can be considered a useful reference for those interested in DE in SA as it includes a comprehensive overview of this mode of teaching and learning in the country.

- Al-Dosari (2011) conducted a study at King Khalid University, Abha, KSA. This study examined the future of on-line English language teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia through a web-based technology system. The researcher concludes from this study that although e-learning in the Kingdom is growing rapidly, there are still some problems with e-learning in Saudi universities, one of which is related to the teachers who are not well trained and have no experience with e-learning software. He suggested that more research needs to be conducted in Saudi universities to have more effective and competitive online learning environments. This study's results are very useful in helping the EFL educators to explore and decide whether this mode of learning would work as an effective module in future university programmes in English departments and institutions in Saudi universities.

1. Alenezi, (2012) aimed to investigate the faculty members' perceptions of e-learning in higher education in SA. Some factors such as age, gender, level of education and teaching experience were considered in investigating these perceptions. The study's results showed that gender perception had the strongest influence on the faculty members' perception of e-learning amongst other factors; it was found that females were more positive to e-learning than males. This result might be beneficial to this study which is conducted with females only.

- Alrashidi (2014) reviewed literature on distance education, e-learning, and education in SA with the hope to show the efficacy of employing learning technology in the country and its role in promoting effective distance education. The author also discussed the benefits of distance education for Saudi females and how it helps them to pursue their higher education.

These are some examples of the studies which investigated and evaluated DE in Saudi higher education. To the best of my knowledge, no study has investigated the role of the e-tutors in promoting DLLs' autonomy in such an educational environment. It is hoped, therefore, that this current study will add some value to this area of research in Saudi Arabia by offering a framework which researchers and programme organisers may wish to develop or adapt to their institutions' needs and purposes.

2.10.1 Online Education Institutions in Saudi Arabia

As mentioned above, the government of Saudi Arabia is aware of the significance of education and it has spent millions of dollars on it; for example, the 2010 budget allocated $36.5 billion to education (Aljabre, 2012). Of course, distance education and learning is part of this budget. As a result, the experience of introducing e-learning and DE in SA has become one of the prominent and most propitious initiatives in the Arab region (Al-Fahad, 2009). Thus, the MHE realized the significance of online learning and established the Saudi National Centre for E-learning and Distance Education and by 2013, nearly all undergraduate programmes in several Saudi universities were well equipped to integrate online learning (Hamdan, 2014). Main universities have demonstrated recent developments in Saudi distance education and some have employed web-based instructions via Web CT or Blackboard. Examples of some of these are:

1) King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU) opened the Deanship of Distance Education in (2004) to offer DE programmes leading to Bachelor's degrees in Arts, Humanities, Economics and Administration. The most innovative technologies were provided to support the instructors and learners in the distance education programmes. Computers, networking, multimedia, and virtual classes called CENTRA are examples of these technologies. By 2010, the university launched the first Master's distance learning programme in Saudi Arabia (Algarni, 2014).

2) A second example is Imam Muhammad ben Saud Islamic University (IMSIU) in Riyadh, where the Deanship of Distance Education was established in 2007. Both

male and female distance learners in this university can get their Bachelor's degrees in many subject areas. The Internet is used to transmit live lectures (Algarni, 2014).

In addition to these universities and institutions which provide distance learning programmes, the MHE has been keen to encourage the sharing of experiences and to import/assign specialists and consultants to evaluate and run e-learning workshops and training to improve the quality of this mode of education in SA; Tony Bates is one of these consultants who talks about the experience of King Fahad University:

> *King Fahd University in Dhahran has been working closely with [University of British Columbia] UBC in Canada since 2003, with staff from King Fahd University visiting UBC for workshops a few times over this period. The use of e-learning at King Fahd University for Oil and Petroleum, for instance, had become widespread, both to support classroom teaching and in a hybrid mode, with a mix of reduced classroom time and online learning (para. 3, 2009).*

In short, DL in Saudi has been, as seen in this section, discussed by many scholars, some of them like Al-Fahad (2009) view it as a leading experiment in the Arab World, while others like Alfrih (2010) believe there is a still a lot to be done for DL to be effective. This study will provide its own vision and its own evaluation of the distance programme under study.

2.10.2   Saudi Women and Distance Learning

In Saudi Arabia, as aforementioned, DE began with the intisab system (see previous section). This system allowed female students to pursue their higher studies. There were no female (campus-based) institutions at that time so this system started in King Saud University with only four female students in 1961 (Algarni, 2014). In this system, female students do not attend on-campus classes; they only come to the university at the beginning of the term to obtain the printed materials and they are expected to study at home on their own with no tutor help provided. They then return to university at the end of the term to take the final exams.

Between the years 1979 and 1988, a fairly few number of women's colleges were initiated, and both the Intisab study system and campus-based courses continued to provide the Saudi female students with more chances to pursue their higher education (Algarni ,2014). Algarni (2014) states that the government worked on expanding

women's higher education by providing the Intisab system for those with specific circumstances such as living far away from the university campuses, family conditions and work commitments. By 2004, more than 65,000 females enrolled in 70 female colleges throughout the country (Algarni, 2014).

Bachelor degree programmes in Saudi universities continued through the intisab system until recently when most universities shifted to 'online distance education' courses for both bachelors and master's degrees to replace the Intisab system (Alqrani, 2014). The new DE technology has a role in changing these degree courses into the DE mode as pointed out by Alqrani (2014):

> *Universities have made great efforts in improving these courses by using new distance education technologies and improving the current technologies and seeking advice from the best experts in the field of distance education field nationally and internationally* (p.66).

Moreover, and in line with female distance education in SA, AL Lilly (2011) appreciated the effort of the MHE in integrating the Internet in its educational system, as the MHE established a National Centre for E-learning (NCEL) and Distance Education in 2007. This e-transformation, as anticipated by Saudi literature, has some advantages for Saudi females. Some of these studies, as cited by AL Lily (2011) are those of Al Muhasian and Shawat (2008) and Mehana (2009). Al Muhasian and Shawat (2008) highlight the significance of online learning methods in helping the Saudi females to study while managing their domestic responsibilities. It also helps in solving the problem of mobility in reaching university campuses as Saudi women are not allowed to drive cars. In addition, Mehana (2009) agrees with this finding by suggesting that the incorporation of the Internet into university education *'can save women the trouble of having a private male driver or depending on a male family member to drive them to the university'* (p. 94).

To conclude this section, two points are to be taken into consideration:

- Due to this segregation between male and female in university campuses, this study is conducted with only female tutors.
- The distance language learners will not be part of this study for many reasons that will explored in detail later.

2.11 Challenges with DL Programmes in the Arab World

Over the past two decades, the Arab world has witnessed a noticeable growth in the field of distance higher education. This significant progress, however, does not come without its challenges. Mohamed (2005) points out in a study conducted on distance higher education in the Arab world that:

> *Although there is growing interest in the potential of distance education to solve some of the educational challenges, distance higher education in the Arab region needs to invest a great deal of effort to become equivalent to its counterpart in developed countries. no evidence that either dual mode universities or single mode universities have any procedures for ensuring the quality of distance higher education programs* (p. 6).

The Arab Open University (AOU) for example, as postulated by Mohamed (2005), utilizes the materials and facilities which have been developed in international, high reputation universities and avoids developing its own programmes. Similarly speaking, the Syrian Virtual University (SVU) also totally depend on Western universities' materials instead of developing its own educational materials; this results in no development among Arab expertise in creating new technologies and in developing materials that suit their distance learners. Although the delivery systems of both SVU and AOU are not the same, their policies are identified as similar; therefore, they both suffer from the same enrolment constrains (Mohamed, 2005).

Comparing these two universities with Qudus Open University (QOU), Qudus Open University is identified as one of the few universities that has, although it is still in its early stages, worked hard to develop quality policies for its programmes, it has also initiated a quality control department (Mohamed, 2005).

Alsunbul (2002), another scholar who studies the challenges of distance education in the Arab world, identified some issues that negatively affect the development of distance education in the Arab world. These issues are focused around these factors: the vision problems, political issues, information technology, instructional materials, quality assurance, teaching staff, students' habits, students' support services, and cost consideration. Alsunbul (2002) presented and discussed these factors, yet he believes that the success and the failure of any distance learning programme in the Arab world heavily relies on how well quality control and assurance systems are accounted for:

> *The issue of quality assurance in the Arab countries stems from the fact that universities which adopt the distance education mode have undertaken no*

effort to establish national standards to assure the academic quality of all processes conducted by the university, particularly with regard to the course materials and their relevance to the Arab world context (p. 73).

From the distance learner's perspective, there are some challenges hindering the majority of Arab students from enrolling on DL programmes. For example, it was found that registration and study fees can be unaffordable for some students (Mohamed, 2005) and although it might be cheaper for governments to provide high school graduates with opportunities for distance learning, the case is different for the learners themselves when it comes to funding their own studies. Therefore, it is uncertain whether the Open Universities can accommodate all people of the Arab countries (Mohamed, 2005).

In addition, there are doubts about the nature of the practices of distance education programmes in the majority of Arab societies, where it is seen as a mere *'process of teaching and learning by correspondence and not an innovative approach to instruction'* (Mohamed, 2005, p.6). This results in the undesirable development of this mode of learning in the Arab world that can be seen on the policy of education towards this specific mode of DE followed by some countries (Mohamed, 2005).

Given that distance education is relatively new to the Arab students and that it is still poorly planned may lead to leaving its graduates not only in financial debt but without accepted qualifications. In this regard UNESCO stated that:

> *Two attitudes have emerged in the market place towards the qualifications earned within the framework of such programs and institutions. One could be labelled as "pure market value" and considers the competencies earned without consideration of their source. The other… requires authentication of the qualifications through recognition by the State's authorities or through accreditation of the institution and program by an internationally recognized body. The two above mentioned attitudes have left a number of "graduates" from these "on-the-side" providers with heavy bills and no recognized qualifications.* (UNESCO, 2002, p. 10)

To overcome the uncertainty appearing with the application and the concept and of DE in the Arab region, Arab countries need to exert more efforts to ensure the quality of such programmes. Mohamed (2005), for example, calls for '*developing a quality assurance framework for distance higher education would be helpful in guiding those responsible for implementing such models in the region, and it would be a major step towards attaining accreditation of such institutes and their programmes by internationally recognized bodies*' (p.7). Developing such a framework should be viewed as a starting

point of an ongoing comprehensive process that effectively supports these programmes to produce the desired results (Mohamed, 2005).

In line with these previous studies of the situation of distance programmes in the Arab World, the framework of this study is hoped to be beneficial for those involved in distance language programmes in Arab world.

In the previous sections, the definitions, theories, role of technology, and a detailed description of DL in non-Arab, Arab and Saudi contexts were provided. The focus in the next section will now shift to the role of the tutors in DE in general.

2.12 The Role of the Tutor in Distance Education

With the vast development of education and the appearance of new types of education, the term 'tutor' appeared alongside the traditional terms of 'teacher and instructor' and is perhaps used interchangeably to refer to the same role. In relation to the context of this research study, which is a DL one, the word 'tutor' proposes different designations such as: 'e-tutor' (Cosetti, 2000; Denis et al., 2004); 'e-moderator' (Salmon, 2003); 'online tutor' (Cornelinus and Higgison, 2001); 'online tutor-facilitator' (Cox et al., 2000) and finally O'Neil (2006) refers to 'online-instructor'.

The term 'tutor' has been defined widely by many specialists and organizations. The Centre for Studies in Advanced Learning Technology (CSALT) at Lancaster University, for example, provided quite a comprehensive definition of the process: '*Tutoring/moderating are aspects of teachers' work which engage managing and animating interactions with learners, particularly with respect to their participation in networked learning activities*' (2001). Meanwhile Salmon (2003), more specifically identifies the role of e-moderator as the one who '*is promoting human interaction and communication through the modelling, conveying, and building of knowledge skills*' (p. 4). It is noticeable from these definitions and from the relevant literature that the term 'tutor' started to change and perhaps evolved into 'e-tutor' to name or indicate the person who carries out the tutoring activities online.

This current study will use the term 'e-tutor' to refer to those teaching English to distance learners as part of the DLLP. According to the context of this study and from my own experience, the e-tutors in this study do not usually meet their students except on the final exam day when they attend the university physically.

Before presenting the roles of online tutors, it is worth pointing out that there is a general agreement among researchers that the roles of the tutors in online and DL contexts is different from their roles in the conventional classroom or face-to-face situations. Cosetti (2000) argues that the traditional knowledge needed by the university tutor is not enough to be used by the e-tutor, because interacting via the online environment is totally different. White et al. (2005) support Cosetti's opinion and believe that: *'Tutors who work within distance education differ markedly from their classroom counterparts in terms of the roles they assume, the ways they interact with students and the attributes and expertise required of them'* (p. 83). This view was launched 30 years ago when education theory had shifted to support the constructivist theory of learning, in which the role of the university professor changed from 'sage on the stage', or expert, to 'guide on the side', or facilitator (King, 1993).

It has been argued that there are many differences in terms of roles and perspectives between traditional teachers and online tutors. McVay-Lynch (2002) states that there are five basic roles of the traditional teacher, namely question and answer sessions, case studies, classroom discussion, assessment and, role-playing, whereas these roles are supposedly repeated in the virtual learning environment (VLE) through the use of discussion boards, e-mails, and virtual classrooms. Many researchers support McVay-Lynch's view and agree that the online tutor's role is more complicated as it requires that the tutors need to be more skilful to promote their student's learning experience in a more effective and organised manner (Packham et al., 2006). An online tutor needs, for example, to be aware of many technical skills, such as the use of the discussion forums, e-mails, text-chat facilities, video conferencing tools, and with synchronous and asynchronous activities (Packham et al., 2006). These kinds of activities can be crucial in any online learning environment, as they tend to encourage knowledge-sharing among all those who involve in this specific learning environment such as learners and e-tutors, and learners and other learners.

The literature reveals that many studies have been conducted to find out the tutor's perspectives about their roles in classroom contexts, but very few in online and DL contexts. Al-Asmari (2013), for example, conducted a classroom-based study to collect the teachers' opinions and perspectives regarding their learners' LA in the classroom. Al-Asmari (2013) describes the teachers' roles as 'a *facilitator and counsellor as they help students to take the responsibility by setting their own goals, planning practice opportunities, or assessing their progress'* (p. 1). Packham et al.'s study (2006) however,

is more relevant to this study as the focus is on analysing the tutor's roles and perspectives concerning their learners' management of learning the foreign language online.

While there are many models available to assist teachers and tutors in the online environment, Salmon's (2013) model of teaching online perhaps offers the most useful guide to new tutors. From a learner perspective, there are three stages of development a learner can proceed through which can be taken into consideration; absorbing and understanding the basic facts, creating rules and procedures to practice these facts, and finally developing skills to use this acquired knowledge as easily as required. From a tutor's perspective, it is important to provide the suitable vehicle for learning at every stage to match the content requirements and the learners' needs (Salmon, 2013). This would be of interest with regard to my own study, which will indicate some of the perceptions of the participating e-tutors in my study in relation to their roles in the DLLP, including whether their roles are in line with any particular model such as that of Salmon's.

The following is a table comparing some of the classifications of roles made by some pioneers in the field.

Table 2.3: Roles of E-Tutors

The term	Collins and Berg (1996)	Denis et al. (2004)	Goodyear et al. (2001)
Facilitator	X		
Helper/Assessor	X	X	X
Promoter	X		
Participant	X		
Resource provider		X	
Technologist		X	X
Designer			X
Researcher			X
Manager/ Administrator			X
Advisor/Counsellor		X	
Metacognition Facilitator		X	
Process Facilitator		X	X
Content Facilitator		X	X

It is noticeable from the above table that some roles are similar and are overlapping across the three sets, while others are different. It is indeed hard to generalise the sets of roles among all learning environments because each context has its own scenario.

In this current study, the role of the e-tutors in the studied context will be clear after the empirical study is made to find out which roles the tutors are actually assuming, and which they might adopt as DL tutors to facilitate the process of language-learning at the chosen institution. Doing this, I will keep in mind, as a researcher, that *'The role of the distance language tutor also differs from that of other distance tutors because of the nature of language learning'* (White, et al., 2005, p. 84).

With a focus on the role of the tutor in relation to learner autonomy, it is suggested that in the outdated modes of teaching, the main role of the teacher is the supplier of knowledge (Tudor, 1993) whereas teachers encouraging learner autonomy need to perform their role otherwise. Some scholars like Hurd, et al. (2001) and Benson (2009) often argued that the role of the teacher is very crucial to develop their learners' autonomy. In other words, *'a teacher is required to create a classroom learning environment that is supportive of learner autonomy'* (Al Asmari, 2013, p.1). This will be possible if the teacher adopts a role that is more of a facilitator's and counsellor's, as aforementioned by Al Asmari (2013), while guiding their students to become more responsible of their own learning and to encourage them to have a role in planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning. In their discussion of the same topic in regard to the role of the tutors, Barfield et al. (2001) suggest that the students can not behave autonomously until their teachers create a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted. However, it can be argued that the creation of such a culture in the education context would require an autonomous teacher as a prerequisite. Many scholars have highlighted the significance of developing teachers' autonomy and its relation to learners' autonomy. Lamb (2008), for example, postulates that the two are "inextricably interwoven". Lamb cites two scholars' definitions of teacher's autonomy that manifest this relationship. The first is that of Thavenius (1999) who states that:

> *Teacher autonomy can be defined as the teacher's ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning. An autonomous teacher is thus a teacher who reflects on her teacher role and who can change it, who can help her learners become autonomous, and who is independent enough to let her learners become independent (p. 160).*

Meanwhile, Little's (2000) definition shows that teachers can only develop learners' autonomy if they themselves are autonomous:

> *...the development of learner autonomy depends on the development of teacher autonomy. By this I mean two things:(i) that it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they*

themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner; and that in determining the initiatives they take in the classroom, teachers must be able to exploit their professional skills autonomously, applying to their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that apply to their learning (p. 45).

These two definitions of teacher autonomy, cited by Lamb (2008), have identified the significance of teacher autonomy in fostering autonomy in learners. Pedagogically speaking, although these definitions as well as the suggestion of Barfield et al. (2001) are meant for classroom teachers, they could be applied to the tutors in this distance language learning programme who need to be autonomous themselves to be able to encourage their DLs to become autonomous learners. However, in the context of SA, Al-Asmari (2013) argues that this characteristic is not available in classroom teachers in conventional language teaching and learning and students are often not allowed or do not have the chance to reflect upon their own learning, analyse or evaluate their learning experience; nor are teachers expected to create such a culture in the education context. One possible explanation for this is perhaps to do with the teachers' own learning experience, which may reflect Little's (2000, p. 45) suggestion that teachers *'themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner'*, given the traditional methods they encountered during their education. Another possibility is the constraints on educational institution in SA, which quite often do not allow teachers autonomy or where teachers are simply not given the opportunity to foster an autonomous environment. It would be interesting to see if that is the case for the e-tutors in the context of this study and whether they are autonomous in any way regardless of their personal educational backgrounds and despite controls and constraints.

2.13 Learner Autonomy (LA): Conceptions and Definitions

One of the main objectives of this study is to investigate from the tutor's perspective the concept of LA within a DLL context at the chosen university. The following review then has multiple foci. Initially, some fundamental definitions of the term LA in language learning and other terms related to it will be presented in this section. Then, the first sub-section will focus on LA within DLL context. Later, the second sub-section will present how learning strategies are related to LA in a DLL context.

Etymologically, the word 'autonomy' is originally a Greek word (autonomia) and it is divided into two parts: auto (self) and nomos (law) to mean self-law or self-rule

(Zembylas and Lamb, 2008), yet defining LA in general is not an easy task for any researcher. This is due to many factors:

1) Definitions of LA are problematic because it manifests itself in diverse ways dependent on its purposes, its principles and the context in which it is exercised (e.g. spatial, cultural, temporal, etc.) (Raya et al., 2007; Lamb, 2015).

2) No single definition of learner autonomy is accepted, because its defining characteristics overlap and disagree (Andrade and Bunker, 2009).

3) There are differences in terms of its roots, e.g. psychology, pedagogy, politics and philosophy (Dixon, 2011).

4) Educationalists and linguists have not succeeded to reach a consensus of what LA really is (Yongqing, 2013).

In addition to these factors related to the difficulty of finding a suitable definition of learner autonomy, researchers also point out to the problem of the abundance of related notions such as independence, self-regulation, self-management, self-direction, self-instruction, learning to learn and learner development (Raya et al., 2007). These and other related notions have been interpreted variously by different researchers and have caused some disagreement among language researchers about their specific meaning and their relation to language learning. Benson (2001), for example, pointed to the confusion arising from differences in the use of autonomy and self-directed learning in both fields of language and learning adult education. Lamb and Reinders (2005) highlight overlaps between the terms 'learner independence' and 'learner autonomy'. Furthermore, Holec (1981, p. 4) suggests that the adjective "autonomous" should be used when talking about the learner while "self-directed learning" focuses on the learning process. This implies that autonomy is an ability of the learner and that the learner has the option to exercise this ability (his/her autonomy) or not and to choose to what extent it should be exercised. Moreover, being autonomous is necessary in order to carry out self-directed learning although an autonomous learner does not have to carry out self-directed learning at all times.

Another researcher, Lamb (2005), adds that two traditions are to be mentioned when language learner autonomy is defined. These two traditions were revealed from his close examination of relevant literature of researchers who are well-known in this field such as Benson (2001, 2003), Voller (1997), Dickinson (1987), Pemberton (1996), Sinclair (2000), and Smith (2003). The two traditions emerged from developments in self-directed

learning and are respectively: *self-regulati*on and *self-management*. According to Lamb (2005), *self-management* is aimed at enabling the learners to manage their own learning, to make choices from different learning activities, and to monitor and evaluate their learning, whereas the second tradition of language learner autonomy which he called *self-regulation* aims to enhance the outcomes of learning through the identification of the successful learning strategies (more discussion of these strategies will be provided in section 2.13.2). These traditions of language learning autonomy related to learners' self-regulation and self-management and their relation to self-directed learning, as proposed by Lamb (2005), will be focused on in this study to find out whether the DLs, from their e-tutors' perspectives, are able to self-manage and self-regulate their learning of the language in this programme.

In a similar vein, other researchers have pointed to other terms often used together with autonomy including *self-instruction* and *self-direction* (Dickinson, 1987). "*Self-instruction*" is used when the learning takes place without the control of a teacher, whereas "self-direction" goes a step beyond self-instruction and describes the learners' attitude towards their learning task, in which the learner would need to take charge of all the decisions. A final step in this developmental process would be "Autonomy" which is when the learners are asked not only to be responsible for their decisions of learning but also for implementing them in the learning process. An autonomous learner therefore does not need to rely on a classroom, a teacher, or a textbook, but is able to act independently of them (Dickinson, 1987).

To conclude the discussion of these terms related to autonomy in the fields of adult education and language learning, I thought it might be useful to cite Benson's (2006) opinion in this regard:

> *Most people now agree that autonomy and autonomous learning are not synonyms of 'self-instruction', 'self-access', 'self-study', 'self-education', 'out-of-class learning' or 'distance learning'. These terms basically describe various ways and degrees of learning by yourself, whereas autonomy refers to abilities and attitudes …The point is, then, that learning by yourself is not the same thing as having the capacity to learn by yourself* (p. 1).

In this study, the term "autonomy" will be used to indicate both the learners' ability to have control over their learning of the language from a distance and the role of the tutor in encouraging them to have such a control.

Thus, after discussing the factors affecting the definition of language learner autonomy and the other related terminologies that might cause confusion among researchers in this field, I will in the following present some definitions of the term. I have selected some fundamental definitions as reflected in perspectives of foreign language learning (FLL) as well as DLL.

The most fundamental definition of LA is the one developed by Holec (1981) as being '*the ability to take charge of one's own learning*' (p. 3). For Holec, LA is an ability and a responsibility. Many scholars have, in one way or another adapted Holec's (1981) definition to form their own definitions. Littlewood (1996), for example, produced his definition in light of Holec's definition. According to Littlewood (1996), *'the autonomous learner is the one who has the independent capacity to make the choices which govern her actions'* (p. 427). From my perspective, Littlewood did not greatly develop the definition, it seems that he has used synonymous terms to those used in Holec's definition, where 'ability' is replaced by 'capacity' and 'to make the choices which govern his actions' replaces Holec's (1981) '*to take charge of one's own learning'*. Their ideas are therefore consistent.

Furthermore, Little (1991, p. 4) defines the term as:

> *a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. This capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts.*

It is noticeable that Holec's and Little's definitions covered two key dimensions of autonomy (ability and psychology), but underestimated the third basic dimension of autonomy which is control (Benson, 2011). As this study focuses on the learners' control over their learning, it seems fundamental to cite the definition of Benson (2011), who defined autonomy as 'the *capacity to take control of one's own learning'* (p.58). This definition was selected because it denotes the term 'control', and the main purpose of this study is to find out to what extent the learners, through this distance programme, are able to have control over their learning processes. In light of this definition, Benson (2011, pp.92-120) discusses three levels of control:

- *Control over learning management;*
- *Control over cognitive processing;*
- *Control over learning content.*

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The Figure below illustrates these levels, showing a cyclical and ongoing process between the different levels.
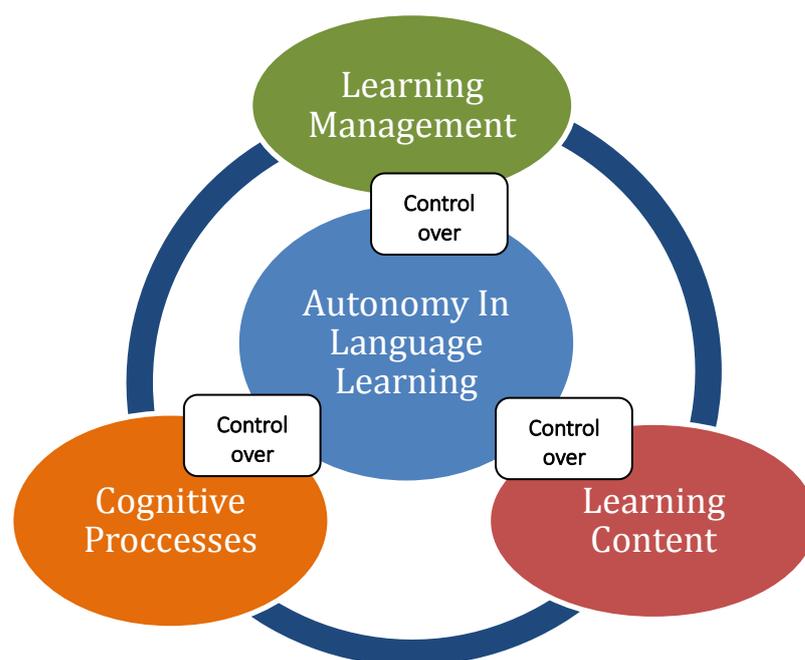
Figure 2.2: Dimensions of learner control as adapted from Benson (2011).

These three levels are interrelated, as suggested by Benson (2011), where control over learning management includes '*planning, organisation, and evaluation of learning*' (p.92), while control over cognitive processing relates to purely cognitive capacities such as attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge to enable learners to manage their learning and to have control over the learning content. The third level of control is concerned with control over 'what' is being learned and 'why' it is being learned. These three levels of control can be interdependent, and are therefore very beneficial to understand the learners' willingness to become autonomous language learners. In this definition, Benson feels the need to connect LA with behaviours, in order to identify this with the exercise of control.

During the data analysis and discussion in this study, each level of Benson's framework will be referred to. Hence, it can be argued that this will serve as the conceptual framework of this study. According to Wellington et al. (2005) a conceptual framework aims to '*relate your research project to the issues raised in previous work, in such a fashion as to demonstrate the need for and importance of your contribution*' (p.196). Of the same token, Hammond and Wellington (2013) put forward more benefits of a conceptual framework '*a conceptual framework may provide a general orientation to a*

topic using a mix of published literature, personal knowledge and speculations on the kind of relationships that might emerge in the main study' (p. 31). As the focus of this study is to explore tutor perspectives on how to help learners gain control of their learning, Benson's levels of control classification is arguably fundamental.

The following sections will discuss LA in relation to DE, language learning and learning strategies.

2.13.1 Learner Autonomy and Learning in Distance Education

The relationship between DE and LA has been discussed widely in the related literature. According to Benson (2001), the idea of LA was initially introduced into DE in the 1970s, through Moore's (1972) transactional distance theory. According to this theory, DL is seen as a pedagogical space between the degree of course structure, chances for learner-teacher interaction, and the degree of LA, as more transactional distance (i.e. less structure, less interaction) leads to more LA. Moore's transactional theory (1972, 2007) is also cited in Andrade and Bunker (2009) as including three main variables: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy (see section 2.5 for a definition of each one of these variables). In this study, these three variables will be highlighted to find out if they are taken into consideration by the tutors and policy-makers in this specific distance language learning programme. The study will, for example, investigate the degree of meaningful interaction between the tutors and their learners (dialogue); how the teaching programme is structured and delivered through means of communication (structure); and whether the learners in this programme, from their tutors' perspectives, are able to create their own learning plans and to evaluate their learning programme (learner autonomy). The meaning of LA, according to this theory '*involves the learner's ability to create a learning plan, find resources that support study and self-evaluate'* (Andrade and Bunker, 2009, p. 48). These three components of LA (planning, finding resources and evaluating) are relevant to this study and will be discussed more broadly in the following section.

Other studies highlighted the importance of the context of learning as a crucial factor in the development of LA (White, 1995/1999). White (1995), for example, pointed out to this context and argued that '*A self-instruction context for learning does not automatically equate with learner autonomy, but autonomy may arise and develop within the learner as a response to the specific demands of a self-instruction context'* (p. 209).

To sum up this sub-section, it is appropriate to quote the definition of the term as cited by researchers in the DL field. White (2003), for example, pointed out in her definition of LA that '*The meanings ascribed to the concept of learner autonomy within distance education are related to discussions of control, self-directed learning, independence, and collaboration*' (p. 150). This study will investigate the e-tutors' understanding of the meaning of autonomous learning in this distance teaching context and how these e-tutors perceive themselves as helping their learners to become more independent and in control of their learning and whether they are aware of their learners using any strategies as mentioned in White's (2003) argument above (more discussion of these strategies are identified in the next sub-section).

Salmon (2003) distinguishes between five stages of online learning that a tutor should bear in mind when structuring and organizing an online activity. The following is a summary of these stages as adapted from Salmon (2003, pp 28-50)

Stage 1 – access and motivation: the key issue of this stage is the ability of e-moderators and students to gain a quick and easy access to the system, so this stages aims on exposing the participants to the platform and enabling them to be successful technology user;

Stage 2 – online socialization: this stage involves another important role for e-moderators as they need to create an ideal climate of sharing and exchanging ideas among their learners based on respect and support;

Stage 3 – information exchange: The e-moderator at this stage needs to make sure that each participant is sharing and is having a role in the online learning process. Furthermore, e-moderators have to help the learners to work more independently and enthusiastically at this stage;

Stage 4 – knowledge construction: At this stage, the learners start to interact more effectively with each other to promote their knowledge construction, and the e-moderator has to encourage such online interaction and try their best to build and sustain their learners' groups;

Stage 5 – development: This last stage entails that the online learners have to be responsible for their own learning. The critical thinking and the ability to challenge are crucial skills that needed to be developed by these learners to be able to have more control over their learning.

These five stages demonstrate the ways in which different aspects of learner autonomy will gradually develop over the process of learning within an online environment. In this study, I will try to identify which of these stages are applied by the tutors of this programme.

2.13.2 Learner Autonomy, Distance Language Learning, and Language Learning Strategies

In the previous sub-section, the focus was on the relationship between LA and DE. The main focus of this section is the relationship between LA and distance language learning (DLL) and on how learning strategies are related to LA in a DL context.

The relationship between autonomy and the learning and teaching of a language at a distance has not been discussed widely in the related literature. This relationship is complex according to Hurd et al. (2001). White (2003) also argues in her discussion of the relationship between learner autonomy and distance language education, that LA has been known as a central and problematic concept in distance language learning for a long time. She goes on to add that much debate focuses on the means that the distance language learner needs to develop his/her capacity for autonomy, as both a learner and a user of a target language.

Hurd et al. (2001) investigated LA in relation to DLL and examined the skills and strategies required by a sample of distance learners learning Spanish Diploma at the Open University to achieve successful outcomes; they highlighted the significance of the context of learning as a key factor in the development of LA. Other studies (Vanijdee, 2003; Hauck and Hurd, 2005) focused on the relationship between the DL environment and issues of autonomy, independent learning, control, and self-directed learning, and confirm that this relationship is dependent on many factors. Some of these factors are related to the role of the e-tutor and course writers in promoting learners' autonomy. More studies by White (1995, 1997) compared the strategies deployed by distance and face-to-face learners in their learning of the target language (TL). White's studies concluded that the DLs use metacognitive strategies in their language learning, and specifically self-management strategies, more than face-to-face learners do. The use of these strategies is expected to be reflected in the tutor's role, and it is connected to the teachers' encouragement of learner control and autonomy in this specific programme.

A review of literature on learning strategies is of importance in this study because one of its research questions is to find out whether the tutors themselves are aware of the suitable learning strategies their learners should use to enhance their learning of the foreign language. This review revealed that researchers could not reach an agreement of what a strategy is; as pointed out by Wenden (1991, p. 18), *'researchers in second language acquisition have not been able to come to a consensus regarding what a strategy is'.*

Nevertheless, the classifications emanating from some well-known researchers are cited to provide some idea of such classifications, e.g. O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Wenden (1991), Oxford (1990), and Benson (2011). O'Malley and Chamot (1990), for example, developed one of the most influential classifications in the field, in which strategies are classified into three main categories: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies (see Figure 2.3 below). According to them, metacognitive strategies involve '*thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring the learning tasks, and evaluating how well one has learned*' (p. 137). These strategies are the ones used by learners in the self-management of their learning (Benson, 2011).
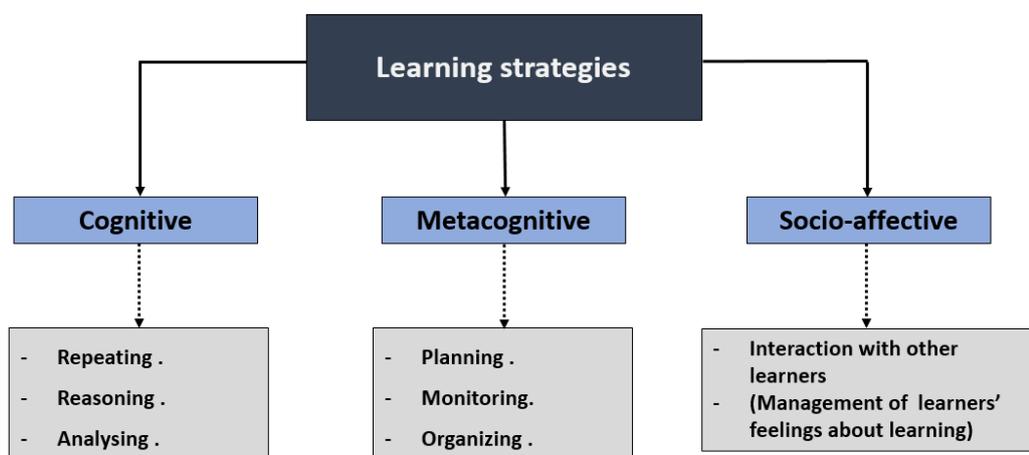
Figure 2.3: Learning Strategies Classification as adapted from O'Malley and Chamot (1990).

Another scholar is Wenden (1989), who differentiated between metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive knowledge refers to the learner's knowledge of aspects of his/her learning, while metacognitive strategies (e.g. planning, monitoring, and evaluating) refer to general skills through which the learner manages, directs, controls, and guides the learning. Wenden (1998) defines three kinds of metacognitive knowledge (as cited in Flavell, 1985, p.94) as: person, task, and strategic knowledge. She defines and gives examples of each kind as follows:

- Person knowledge: is overall knowledge about human factors acquired by learners to facilitate learning.
- Task knowledge: is defined by Wenden (1998) as including three features: i) learners' knowledge about the purpose of a task; ii) learners' knowledge about the nature of the task, e.g. to be able to understand the differences between being able to learn to read is different from being able to learn to write; iii) learner's information about the task's demands, e.g. how could they learn in general.
- Strategic knowledge: is general knowledge about learning strategies, e.g. general knowledge about how and when to use them.

Benson (2011) suggested that Wenden (1995) was the first researcher who introduced the notion of "metacognitive knowledge" into the literature on autonomy in language learning. As this study is focusing on identifying, from the tutors' perspectives, the learning strategies that could help the DLs to have more control over their learning, Wenden's (1991 and 1998); classification of these learning strategies is taken into consideration in the discussion of the research findings.

Moreover, Oxford (1990) developed her own classification of learning strategies comprising of direct and indirect strategies and constructed a tool to measure learners' use of these strategies, known as "the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" *(SILL)*. Direct strategies are mental processing of the foreign language, while indirect strategies are divided into three categories: metacognitive, social, and affective (Oxford, 1990). In his comment on these indirect strategies developed by Oxford, Benson (2011, p.97) states that '*these indirect strategies, rather than strategies in general, are the potential components of autonomy, because they are concerned with control over the learning process rather than control over language or learning materials'*. Benson's last statement corresponds with the main aim of this study and it will allow me, as a researcher, to investigate whether the learners in the DLLP were able to have more control over their learning process. Hence, the focus is on the indirect strategies of Oxford, particularly the metacognitive ones.

In relation to a student's metacognition, many researchers have conducted related studies to find out the most used learning strategies. White's (1995, 1997, and 1999) studies are examples of these studies. White found out throughout these comparative studies that DLs use metacognitive strategies (principally self-management ones) four times more than classroom students in their learning of the same foreign languages. Another study

was carried out by Lamb (2003) to discuss self-regulation and self-management strategies in relation to LA in language learning. According to him, self-regulation aims to improve the outcomes and processes of learning by identifying the successful learning strategies, while self-management aims to enable the learners to manage their learning by planning their goals, making choices from various activities, and finally monitoring and evaluating their competence. As indicated by Lamb, this second tradition is particularly suitable for language learning programmes located outside the classroom. As this current study is dealing with how well students manage their learning with the help and support of their e-tutors, Lamb's view of self-management strategies will be adopted.

In the Saudi context, some studies have been conducted in this field such as those of McMullen (2009), Aljuaid, (2010) and Alkubaidi (2014). McMullen (2009) who investigated the use of language learning strategies by Saudi EFL students in order to improve their writing skills claims that little research has been conducted and published in regard to Saudi EFL students and their use of learning strategies. This claim might have been true during the time that research was conducted but this is no longer the case as further studies have been conducted since in Saudi universities in this field. One of these studies is Aljuaid's (2010) who employed Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for language Learning (SILL) to investigate the frequency of language learning strategies use among a sample of Saudi university students majoring in English. This study concludes that these students used metacognitive strategies with high to medium frequency, while the memory strategies were used with low frequency. Aljuaid (2010) hopes that the findings of this study will contribute to language learning strategy research both in Saudi Arabia and in the wider Arab region.

Moreover, Alkubaidi (2014) investigated the link between writing tasks and writing strategies employed by Saudi undergraduate students whose major is English in King Abdul-Aziz University. One of the study's research questions explores the most common writing strategies used by Saudi students when writing an essay. The study's results revealed that Saudi learners prefer '*before writing strategies*' than '*during writing strategies*' and '*reviewing writing strategies*' (p.83). Further results also revealed the lack of correlation between the writing strategies employed by the students and their learning style preferences.

To sum up, this section has presented a concise idea about the relationship between the basic elements of this study and concluded with examples of relevant research conducted

in the Saudi context. It is hoped that my own research study will provide further insights significant for the TESOL community in Saudi Arabia to further understand this specific field of research.

2.14   Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has presented discussions on some of the fundamental concepts relevant to the research study namely, higher education in SA, teaching and learning English in SA, and women's education in SA. It also discussed various theories and definitions of DE in general; it then discussed the differences between face-to-face learning and e-learning. The role of technology in DL and DE was then discussed followed by an overview of the status of DL in the non-Arab context, Arab World, and in SA. An overview of Saudi women in DL contexts is provided followed by challenges with DL programmes in the Arab world, and then description of the roles of the e-tutors was presented. Next, the definition of learner autonomy was presented. The chapter ends with a discussion of the relationship of LA, DE and language learning strategies.

In relation to the context of this study, research of DE in Saudi Arabia has referred to the high school graduates' needs to pursue their higher studies and join the tertiary level of education as main reasons of incorporating this mode of education. As seen above, the Arab context of DL/DE is not yet well organized if compared with non-Arab contexts (specifically British and American); these latter contexts are generally adopted in teaching English at a distance in Arab countries. Trials have been carried out to imitate the systems of distance language teaching in British and American universities, yet, many reasons, as indicated by Alsunbul (2002), make it hard for Arab systems to adopt the non-Arab one in DL/DT. Therefore, distance learning programmes should be designed and developed to address and meet the specific needs of the context within a particular country. A key issue is related to ensuring the necessity of providing the Arab world with quality learning experience; it seems that the need to develop frameworks that focus on quality assurance for distance higher education institutes and programmes and to establish accreditation policies is urgent.

The growth in technology and new tools of communication and media enable economically efficient, appropriate and effective learning provision to be available to a

widely spread student body. These developments facilitate interaction between learners and providers and also have an impact on the materials of both face-to-face and distance learning, as well as on learning and instructional styles. Such innovative developments should not only enhance but also complement and extend existing provision of learning opportunities.

In the final part of this chapter, the concept of autonomy and its relation to distance language learning and teaching has been defined. As seen above, this concept is widely defined and this study will aim to understand the meaning of autonomy in this context. The chapter also discussed the relationship of autonomy to language learning strategies and how these strategies might help in promoting learners' autonomy. Moreover, as this study focuses on the e-tutors' role in encouraging their distance learners to have control over their language learning, this chapter has highlighted this role in related literature. This study will investigate the role of the e-tutors in this specific programme and will compare it to related literature.

3   Introduction

This study aims to develop a framework for e-tutors to support their distance language learners to manage and control their learning of English as a foreign language during their enrolment on the university's distance language earning programme (DLLP). This study is an attempt to address the following research questions:

Overarching Question:

- What are the perceptions of e-tutors about teaching and learning processes in the context of DLLP?

First Question:

- What are the e-tutors' perceptions of their roles in the DLLP and how can these roles be enhanced?

Second Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, what role do distance language learners play in their own learning in the context of DLLP?

Third Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, which learning and teaching strategies may enable the learners to become more autonomous?

Fourth Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, which aspects related to the DLLP challenge or support the e-tutors in their role in this Programme?

This chapter is structured as follows: Firstly, I will present the research philosophy, and then I will review some of the research approaches that underpin the research methodology, focusing on the nature of each methodology used in social research. The chapter also presents an overview of research methods used in qualitative research and justifies the selection of case study as the chosen approach of the study. The research design and process of the study as well as the research sampling are also described. Issues related to data collection and data analysis are explained for both the pilot and the main study. I will also discuss the ethical issues of this research and, in the last section, the strategies employed for establishing the trustworthiness of the data collected are reviewed.

The first sections will initially discuss my choices along with the justification for selecting the methodological approach in this study. My choice of the appropriate approach for this study was affected by some major factors which are respectively;

1- The most appropriate methodological approach to answer my research questions;
2- My epistemological and ontological position as a social researcher;
3- The type of data that suits this study and approach.

First of all, I found it essential to start with my position (philosophy) as a researcher.

3.1 Research Philosophy

According to Burrell and Morgan (1979), '*All social scientists approach their subject via explicit or implicit assumptions about the nature of the social world and the way in which it may be investigated*' (p. 1). Similarily, Wellington (2015) points out that there are '*differing beliefs in the nature of reality (ontology) and the way in which we acquire knowledge of it (epistemology)*' (p. 6). These two main philosophical elements of knowledge and their relation to truth are widely discussed by many researchers such as: Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007); Blaikie (2000); Matthews and Ross (2010); and Wellington (2015). My epistemological and ontological assumptions were influenced by my position as a social researcher; therefore, I completely agree with Sikes' (2004) view of knowledge as '*socially constructed, subjectively experienced and is the result of human thought as expressed through language*' (p. 20).

For further clarification, I found the discussion of Matthews and Ross (2010) helpful for understanding these two terms. They view ontology as '*the way the social world is seen to be and what can be assumed about the nature and reality of the social phenomena that make up the social world*' (p. 23), while epistemology means '*the theory of knowledge and how we know things*' (p. 23). The following table provides the truth/knowledge positions of the above defined theories (ontology and epistemology) in accordance with Matthews and Ross's (2010) argument:

Table 3.1: Ontological and Epistemological Positions as Adopted from Matthews and Ross (2010)

Ontological positions:	Epistemological positions:
1) Objectivism: affirms that the social phenomena which constitute human's social world do not exist on their own.	1) Positivism: this epistemological position affirms that knowledge of social phenomena is based on human's observation, not on subjective understandings.
2) Constructivism: affirms that the social phenomena that constitute human's social world are real when they are constructed, reviewed, and reworked by social actors.	2) Interpretivism: this epistemological position prioritises a human being's subjective interpretation and understanding of social phenomena.

The above table helped me as a social researcher to differentiate between positions undertaken by quantitative and qualitative researchers. Furthermore, the process of reviewing the related literature helped me to understand that constructivism and interpretive approaches are in practice interrelated, because researchers adopting such positions rely on people's perspectives and interaction with reality to understand the phenomenon under study.

I also realise the conflict between the different schools of thought. For example, while positivists *'believe in objective knowledge of an external reality which is rational and independent of the observer'* (Wellington, 2015. p. 26), interpretivists believe that reality is a human construct, and the researcher's aim is to find out perspectives and common meanings and to develop understandings of the situations (Wellington, 2015).

In the context of this study, the focus is on the role of a social group (e-tutors) played in a social institute (DLLP), and my role as a researcher is to explore their perceptions. The main aim of this is to develop a framework to support the e-tutors in their job and help their DLLs to have a control over their learning of the foreign language in the DLLP. This aim can be accomplished by understanding the methods these e-tutors believe they adopt while they are engaged in the experience of learning and teaching a FL in the DL programme as well as understanding how they believe learning and teaching can be enhanced. Such an understanding will be based mainly on the views and perspectives of the study's participants and on my interpretation of the relevant data. This interpretation

will be affected by my epistemological and ontological position as a social, qualitative, subjective, interpretive, and insider researcher.

In summary, my job as a social researcher according to this view is to interpret the e-tutors' perspectives and views through the data tools used in the study. I understand that the role of the insider researcher is critical and care must be taken when interpreting the participants' views, perspectives, and opinions to avoid any bias. (More details will be given later in the validity and reliability section).

3.2   Research Approaches

In his book 'Educational Research: Contemporary issues and practical approaches', Wellington (2015) states that research paradigms, types or approaches include labels which imply opposite poles (e.g. positivist/interpretive; experimental/naturalistic; case study/survey; and qualitative/quantitative). Yet, in actual research as suggested by Wellington (2015) a mixture of these paradigms may occur, such as survey and case study work or a collection of quantitative and qualitative data. For the sake of this study, however this mixture is not appropriate as a qualitative case study approach seemed to be more suitable as will be illustrated later.

Several methodology scholars have variously described research approaches. Bryman (2008), for example, states that, research can either be quantitative or qualitative whereas other researchers argue that approaches to research can be qualitative, quantitative or mixed (Punch, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007). As this study is a qualitative one, I decided to present the distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches as discussed by Bryman (2008) who states that this distinction is clear-cut and straightforward. This will enable me to justify my own choice. This distinction is shown in the table below:

Table 3.2: The Difference between Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches (Bryman, 2008)

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Principle orientation to the role of theory in relation to research	Deductive; testing of theory	Inductive; generation of theory
Epistemological orientation	Positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological orientation	Objectivism	Constructionism

In order to clarify my understanding of the qualitative approach, I will highlight its definition, its characteristics, and the reasons behind choosing it over other approaches. I will start my discussion by exploring the ways of which this approach has been defined widely by different researchers. Matthews and Ross (2010) define it as *'methods that are primarily concerned with stories and accounts including subjective understandings, feelings, opinions, and beliefs'* (p.142). Meanwhile, Hammond and Wellington (2013), provide a more concise definition of the qualitative approach as the: *'methods or approaches that deal with non-numeric data rather than numbers'* (p. 173). Hennink et al. (2011) state that it is not easy to define qualitative research; according to them, it is an approach which helps the researcher to conduct and choose from some common research methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and observations which enable him/her to examine people's experience in detail.

These definitions, from my perspective, emphasize the fact that qualitative approaches deal with words, feelings, opinions, experiences and beliefs of the participants, not numbers and Figures as in quantitative approaches. This is an important reason for choosing this approach for this particular study. A qualitative research as pointed out by Denscombe (2007) is categorised as:

> • *The use of text and images as their basic data (rather than numbers);*
>
> • *An interpretive approach that regards knowledge as socially constructed;*
>
> • *A concern with meanings and the way people understand things;*
>
> •*An interest in patterns of behaviour, its cultural norms and types of language*
> (p. 333).

In line with this discussion, Hennink et al. (2011) provide a similar point of view when they highlight that qualitative research is useful when used to explain people's beliefs and behaviour, and this approach is most suitable to answer questions starting with 'why' and 'how'. Most of the questions in the data collection methods used in this study started with 'why' and 'how' as the aim is to explore, in depth, the participants' perceptions. (Details of these methods will be described in detail in section 3.5 of this chapter and subsequent sections).

Thus, I decided to choose this approach for this study because as I mentioned earlier, my job as a researcher is mainly focused on interpreting my participants' views. Accordingly, I visited the site of my study (English Language Institute at the chosen university) to conduct my research; I used more than one method to collect my data. During the analysis of my data, I became more aware of the participants' perspectives in relation to the areas

I was investigating. Indeed, these led me to reorganise my research questions, as they were initially constructed as three sets of questions with each set including a range of 2-3 questions. As the analysis process went on, and after long conversations with my supervisor and my colleagues, I found that these questions needed to be reconstructed into one overarching question followed by four main questions (see section 1.5 in Chapter One). This also matches Creswell's (2007) view, which justifies changing research questions in order to increase the researcher's understanding of the problem: '*Our questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem'* (p.43). As a result, I found this approach very appropriate in conducting this research and addressing the relevant research questions.

Having discussed the difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches and justifying the reasons for selecting the former as the basis for this study, the aim of the next section is to discuss the case study approach.

3.3   Case Study Research

Providing a simple and straightforward definition for case study can be challenging. Definitions in the literature have included holistic description as well as detailed explanation. Creswell (2007), for example defines case study research as '*a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information'* (p. 73). Denscombe (2010) points out that the defining characteristic of case study is '*its focus on just one instance of the thing that is to be investigated*' (p.52). Hammond and Wellington (2013) define a case study as '*an example of something- a unit of analysis-in which the something could be a school, person, a political system, a type of management and so on, depending on the particular interest of the researcher and the field in which he or she works'* (p.16).

Some of the early definitions of case study in the literature would perhaps include those provided by one of the leading researchers of case study research, Robert Yin. Yin (1984) initially defined the term as 'an *empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident*', *and in which multiple sources of evidence are used*' (p. 23). By 2014, Yin elaborates on this definition by not only focusing on the scope of the case study, as is clear from his definition above, but also focusing on the

features of the case study. In this regard he adds that '*because phenomenon and context are not always sharply distinguishable in real-world, situations*' (Yin, 2014, p, 17), relying on multiple sources of evidence needed to obtain data in a triangulation fashion is a significant characteristic of a case study.

Other researchers such as Benbasat et al. (1987) have also recognised and listed some of the key features of case study:

1- *Phenomenon is examined in a natural setting.*
2- *Data are collected by multiple means.*
3- *One or few entities (person, group, or organization) are examined.*
4- *The complexity of the unit is studied intensively.*
5- *Case studies are more suitable for the exploration, classification, and hypothesis development stages of the knowledge building process; the investigator should have a receptive attitude towards exploration.*
6- *No experimental controls or manipulation are involved.*
7- *The investigator may not specify the set of independent and dependent variables in advance.*
8- *The results derived depend heavily on the integrative powers of the investigator.*
9- *Changes in site selection and data collection methods could take place as the investigator develops new hypotheses.*
10- *Case research is useful in the study of "why" and "how" questions because these deal with operational links to be traced over time rather than with frequency or incidence.* (p. 372).

These definitions clearly point to the difference between case study research and other approaches. Gray (2009) explains that the difference is in the degree of focus and the aim of the research. The surveyor for example would gather data from a large sample and thus ask standardised questions suitable for large, representative samples of individuals, whereas the researcher who adopts case study approach would explore various areas from a particular group of individuals and aims to provide in-depth analysis for the various phenomena (Cohen et.al., 1985). In other words, the aim is to explore the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon and investigate meanings and uniqueness that individuals and individual contexts may create.

The case study was selected as an approach for my study drawing on Hinkel's (2005) view that '*when we want to understand how a specific unit (person, group) functions in the real world over a significant period of time, a case study approach may be the best way to go about*' (p. 196). Hence and with reference to this study, this is a case of

investigating a group of e-tutors' perceptions of their roles in a particular DLLP course in a Saudi higher education institution.

3.3.1 Case Study Classifications

Case studies can be classified into three different types (Yin, 2003); exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. Tellis (1997) points out that an exploratory case study allows the researcher to conduct the fieldwork and the data collection steps before identifying and developing the research questions/hypotheses; the aim *is* to help identify and develop them. A descriptive case study requires a descriptive theory to be established prior to embarking on the investigation and provides a thorough description of a particular phenomenon in a particular context. An explanatory case study would focus on data related to cause and effect relationships with the aim of explaining the effects which resulted from certain causes.

Furthermore, Yin (2009), mentions that the design of the case study can also vary from a single case design where it is about a single organization like a hospital to a multiple case study design allowing the researcher to focus on more than one case. Furthermore, six different methods, as identified by Yin (2003), can be used in the context of case study to collect the data: direct observation, participant observation, interviews, documents, archival records, and physical artefacts. Two of these suggested methods, Interviews and documents were used in this study.

Meanwhile, Stake (2000) identifies three other types of case study; instrumental, intrinsic and collective. A case is 'instrumental' if it is conducted with the aim of reaching some generalizations whereas it is 'intrinsic' if the aim is to further understand a specific case; the case is often selected because of how interesting it is in itself and not for the purpose of representing other cases. The 'collective' case study is the third type which combines

In light of the above discussions, the methodology of the study in hand falls firstly, under Yin's (2003) exploratory categorisation where as an educational researcher I aim to explore the e-tutors' perspectives in a particular distance learning setting by using the research questions to decide the framework to be used and the data collection instruments to be applied in the research. Secondly, in line with Stake (2000) it is an intrinsic case study designed for the purpose of further understanding this particular case, and lastly as this study is a descriptive account of an educational programme, in this case the DLLP at

a Saudi higher institution, it is therefore a story-telling case study as pointed out by Bassey (1999).

3.3.2   Case Study Research Critique and the Issue of Generalizability

Collecting and analysing case study data, just like other qualitative research, is a very laborious activity (Miles, 1979) and calls for extensive efforts to ensure that data is systemically comparable. Yin (1981) however, responds to such critique by arguing that there are ways in which this problem might be addressed and suggested the following three: building explanations, tabulating meaningful events, and distinguishing note-taking from narrative writing; the first two methods, in particular were used during the data analysis stage of this study.

Moreover, in case study, the access to the settings is a demanding part of the research process (Denscombe, 2010). Sometimes researchers face the problem of withdrawing the permission to complete the study. In my case this problem did not occur as I am one of the staff members in the place of the study; most of them know me and were very helpful.

In addition, it is not easy for case study researchers to achieve the aims of the study without any effect from their presence (Denscombe, 2010). To solve this problem, I have tried my best to avoid bias and I allowed the participants to freely express their views, opinions and to spell their complaints without any interference from my side. A lack of rigour in case studies can lead to equivocal evidence or biased views, which may influence the findings and conclusions.

Campbell (1975) argues that it is unethical to use the single case study method in educational research as he believes that it is lacking 'the control'. It is worth noting that, reference to control suggests an experimental research paradigm which was inappropriate for my research study.

Finally, one of the most common criticisms targeting the case study approach is the generalisability issue; this means whether the research findings obtained from one case can be generalisable to other cases. Several researchers have argued against such criticisms and suggested solutions to overcome the challenge of generalisability in case study research. Three solutions to the problem were suggested by Bryman (1988). Firstly, the case study researcher can seek the case which is typical. Secondly, the researcher may study additional cases to the main case which will strengthen the researcher's chances to

generalise the findings. Finally, 'team research' has been suggested which involves the investigation of several cases by more than one researcher.

Stake (1995) argues that the real aim of case study research (particularly in educational research) is not generalisation but what he refers to as *particulization*; this means that a particular case can be selected with the purpose of understanding the case itself in detail (what it is and what it does) and not primarily for how it is distinguished from other cases. Wellington and Szczerbinski (2007) consider this issue from another perspective and argue that even if we cannot always generalize from case studies, it is possible to relate one case study to another and learn from it; this to them is seen as more important than being able to generalize from it. With the study in hand, there is no attempt to generalize from this case and also the exploratory nature of this study, does not lend itself to the generalisability factor. The aim of the study is developing a framework for this particular context. No generalization from the findings of this study are made and I am fully aware that further work would be needed to test this framework in this and other contexts before it could be generalized.

Furthermore, this approach as, pointed out by Denscombe (2010) is criticized in relation to the credibility of generalisation made from its findings. Therefore, it is difficult to generalise from a single case. To overcome this, researchers focus rather on increasing the validity and credibility of the research. From my perspective, this can be accomplished by using a range of data collection methods. (More details will be given later in the credibility and trustworthiness section). This approach to collecting data is described as 'triangulation'. According to Bryman (2012, p. 717) triangulation is '*the use of more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked*'. Moreover, in an attempt to overcome this obstacle (the inability to generalise), the use of *'detailed description and skilful reporting'* is intended to increase the *'relatability'* factor as suggested by Hammond and Wellington (2013, p.20). As a researcher, providing a detailed account of the case was one of the steps taken in the current research.

3.3.3 The Justification of Using Case Study Approach

This approach was chosen for this study owing to the advantages it has over other approaches. Yin (2009) states that this approach has the strength to assist researchers to investigate the elaborate phenomenon in the natural setting. Denscombe (2010) argues

that the case study approach helps the researcher to examine the studied phenomena or the real-life situation. It also allows the researcher to gain an in-depth picture of relationships and processes within the phenomenon. Therefore, the case study approach is far more common in qualitative studies than in quantitative ones.

Based on the above, I decided that the single-case study method is the most suitable choice for gathering data for this research, because the purpose of the study is to examine the tutors' role within a specific context. I am required to gain a deep understanding of the processes and relationships within the boundaries of the phenomenon, to discover reality. This is also the appropriate choice with an inductive philosophical world view of research.

In addition, case study proposes a more flexible process and is not prescribed, as action research is. I deemed that within this phenomenon a variety of research methods' data sources can be used, such as semi-structured interviews, the reflective journal, and document analysis.

In my study, the chosen university developed a distant learning language programme; the programme is a complicated environment which involves learners and tutors. Since tutors play a basic role in this programme, I decided to study their role especially when I noticed from the literature review that very few studies are conducted in this field in SA. Studying in depth their strategic behaviour with the limited timeframe of a PhD will be achievable by using case study approach.

Finally, it is worth noting that case study as a research methodology was not the only methodology I examined to assess whether it was able to handle this study, but it was the strongest and most suitable with my aim of the study and its research questions.

Having described the case study approach, the main intention of the next section is to present the participants of this study.

3.4 The Participants of the Study and Sampling

As mentioned earlier, this study adopts the position of a qualitative study. The 'purposive sampling' method is adopted. The choice of this method aligns with what Creswell (2003) explains: *'the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites … that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research*

question' (p. 185). Creswell adds that this method of sampling is different from the random sampling which includes a large number of participants which is classically used in quantitative research. Furthermore, I was also inspired with Matthews and Ross's (2010) detailed exploration of different approaches to sampling (e.g. random sample, quote sample, snowball sample, purposive sample, and theoretical sample). These approaches depend on the researchers' research questions, the nature of collected data, whether the data are quantitative or qualitative, and the methods of data collection the researcher decides to use (Matthews and Ross, 2010). As the emphasis here is on the 'purposive sample' I will provide its definition and how this sampling approach helped me as a researcher to conduct my study. Purposive sampling is defined by Matthews and Ross (2010) as *'a sample of selected cases that will best enable the researcher to explore the research questions in depth'* (p. 154). They add that this type of sampling is linked with small, in-depth studies and with research design that relies on qualitative data gathering. It focuses on the investigation and interpretations of the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Accordingly, as this study is a qualitative one, and as it is aiming to explore and interpret the e-tutor's experience of teaching English as a foreign language in the DLLP, along with their perceptions about their role in this specific programme, I consider my sampling purposive because my intention was to choose only those who teach in the distance language learning programme DLLP in my own workplace.

The English language Institute (ELI) has approximately 200 female English language tutors, but only 35 of those tutors are recruited to the distance language learning programme. Hence, these 35 were the tutors targeted to participate in this study because this study aims to find out the role of the e-tutors in encouraging their DLLs to have control over their learning process. The actual procedures of data collection started on the 2nd of December, 2013. I contacted the coordinator of the distance learning programme at the ELI at the university from England by e-mail. My view is that e-mails are very effective in research; therefore, I decided to email before I travelled to Saudi Arabia for several practical reasons; the first was to make use of the time and start the process immediately as I was not yet sure at this stage when in December 2013 I would be travelling. The second reason was that I believe it is easier and less time-consuming to send one email to all the targeted participants at the same time instead of actually approaching each participant individually at the actual site; of course the aim was only to familiarise them with the study and seek their tentative consent, as I planned to later meet

with them in person in order to clarify what they would be involved in. Also through email, each tutor was able to see that other tutors (copied into the same email) had been approached to participate in the same study, therefore reassuring them that they were not the only one, which might offer encouragement to take part. In addition, e-mail is a flexible tool and means of communication so the tutors could open and read these e-mails at a time that was convenient for them. Finally, all e-mails and any follow-up e-mails were automatically clearly dated and the e-mail with its attachments was available to the tutors and myself at all times.

In my first e-mail to the coordinator, I explained that I needed help and support in relation to my research study. I attached one copy of both information sheet and informed consent form for the coordinator's information and records (see section 3.7 for details about the ethical procedures). This step was taken while I was in Sheffield before beginning my field work in Saudi Arabia. The coordinator fortunately replied to my e-mail and sent me all the e-mail addresses of the e-tutors who were involved in the distance English language learning programme (a total of 35 from a wide range of nationalities). I e-mailed all 35 e-tutors, attaching the information sheets and asking for their initial consent to participate in this study (see Appendix 4 for a copy of the information sheet sent to the participants). Initially, I only received two replies from a total of 35 tutors.

I therefore re-sent a gentle reminder e-mail and by the 11th of December, 2013, fourteen e-tutors had accepted to participate in this study.

I decided to consider these fourteen e-tutors as the selected sample as I believed that their direct involvement in this DLLP together with the type of data collection methods I had decided on (e.g. qualitative/in-depth interviews and reflective journals) would be sufficient to ensure that I would have rich data to achieve the study's objectives. The characteristics of the fourteen participants were each different in relation to their nationality and years of experience; this would prove valuable to the study to gain a wide and diverse range of teacher perspectives. The ELI has teachers from different countries; this study's participants were a mixture of nine different nationalities (see table below). The participants' real names have of course been changed into pseudonyms and it is worth noting here that the participants cannot be identified by nationalities and length of experience because the ones here are just a sample of many who would have similar nationalities and years of experience. Further ethical issues will be dealt with in section 3.7 of this chapter.

Table: 3.3: Details about the Teacher Participants

Participants	Nationality	Regular Teaching experience	E-tutoring experience
1. Sheren	Pakistani	14 years	4 years
2. Celine	Indian	8 years	2 and a half years
3. Cathy	British	10 years	2 and a half years
4. Maryam	Tunisian	18 years	3 years
5. Diana	Egyptian	23 years	5 years
6. Rana	South African	14 years	8 years
7. Liza	Egyptian	22 years	5 years
8. Nadia	Egyptian	20 years	3 years
9. Noor	Egyptian	18 years	3 and a half years
10. Juliette	American	20 years	One and a half years
11. Faten	Saudi Arabian	12 years	One and a half years
12. Ruba	Egyptian	25 years	4 years
13. Huda	Saudi Arabian	3 years	1 year
14. Amal	Malaysian	30 years	5 years

It is worth pointing out once again that e-tutoring for these teachers would be considered an additional job; in other words, each participant would be simultaneously involved in regular classroom teaching and e-tutoring.

3.5   Methodology and Data Collection Methods

Bryman (2008) defines a research method as *'simply a technique for collecting data'* (p. 31). It can involve a variety of instruments such as a self-completion questionnaire, a structured interview, or participant observation. Crotty (2003), on the other hand, views a research methodology as a description of the research design and researcher's choice of methods to be used in order to obtain the desired findings; it provides a rationale for the choice of methods and explains how these methods are employed. Silverman (2010) provides a detailed description when he states that a methodological approach refers to: '*the choices we make about appropriate models, cases to study, methods of data gathering, forms of data analysis, etc., in planning and executing a research study'* (p.436).

My simple definition of methods and methodology is that the former encompasses the techniques and tools that are used to achieve the target research aims whereas the latter is the overall design of a study including the philosophical ontological and epistemological underpinnings described earlier in section 3.1 in this chapter.

In order to answer this study's questions and to meet its aims and objectives, the case study approach was selected as aforementioned. The case study approach allows the researcher to use "triangulation by procedures". Schwandt (2007) presents a comprehensive definition of "triangulation" as '*a means of checking the integrity of the inferences one draws. It can involve the use of multiple data sources, multiple investigators, multiple theoretical perspectives, and/or multiple methods.*' (p. 298). In this study, three data collection methods are used: document analysis; reflective journals; and semi-structured interviews. The following sub-sections provide more details about the nature of each method, the research process for each one as well as the organisation and analysis of the data collected through these methods. The focus is on presenting the process of analysing each tool separately and explaining how the knowledge and the data gained from each tool helped with moving to the next data collection method and finally creating the holistic understanding of the studied phenomena in order to address the research questions. I decided to describe the analytical process in detail in this chapter rather than it being part of the discussion chapters because I thought that it would be clearer, especially given that there were several methods, which involved complex analytical processes.

3.5.1 Document Analysis

This first data collection method is aimed at providing further information about the context of the study (the distance language learning programme, which is mainly directed by the Deanship of e-learning and distance education at the chosen university) and to provide validity to the other two data collection tools. According to Yin (2003) '*For case studies, the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources*' (p. 87). Corbetta (2003) added that documents are any type of substance that includes data or textual information around the examined concept. Such documents usually exist independently of the researcher's actions. They are often produced for different purposes other than those mentioned in the literature. The use of them will help the researcher to create the required cognitive understanding of the studied phenomenon. Corbetta (2003) summarizes the benefits of using documents in research studies as following:

- Documents as a source of evidence are a non-reactive technique as the researcher can collect and use information independently without the need to interact with other humans as is the case in the interview or observation methods;

- Documents usually include important information about the past and the background of the studied phenomenon or context;
- Documents are usefully cost-free methods, as the researcher does not often need to pay any expenses to access or store them.

I would add that the accessibility to such a method is much easier as it is affordable and the researcher can save them in a specific secure space where he or she can access them as needed. From the perspective of Patton (2002), documents would generate some limitations in terms of the data accuracy and completeness. However, I would argue that, in this study, document analysis has not been used as the main source of evidence, but it has been used as a supportive method to associate with the information which is collected, or to bridge the gap in offering the official perspective of the University. Like other elements in the qualitative approach, the analysis of documents can be used, as suggested by Flick (2009), as a stand-alone method or as a complementary strategy to the other methods including interviews or ethnography.

According to Daymon and Holloway (2010), documents are vital in qualitative research, not only because they are easy to access and not costly, but because at they are rich with information that differs from what a researcher may find via interviews or any other qualitative methods. The analysis of documents allows the researcher to identify what others think about the same issue but from different angles.

3.5.1.1 The Process of Data Collection and Organisation of the Documentations Data

The use of documents was important, not only to understand the background of the studied case and the programme but also to identify how the stakeholders of the programme and university understood the role of the e-tutors and what regulations and rules were introduced to shape the e-tutor role.

This Distance Learning programme in this study's case began in 2005. It is run by the Deanship of E-Learning and Distance Education. Its programme is offered by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. CENTRA, is the virtual class room system where all lectures through the Internet and the e-learning management electronic system are presented. Moreover, through documents I was able to access the following:

1. The functions of the Commission of Distance Education (summary);
2. First DL meeting Agenda;

3. Distance Learning Teachers' Job Duties (Fall 2012);

4. Distance Learning Teachers' Job Duties (2nd semester 2013);

5. External and Distance Learning Affairs Unit;

6. Assessment techniques;

7. Teaching and assessment techniques;

8. Technical Support contact numbers;

9. Weekly Plans;

10. Official website of the University.

Of course I had to seek the required permission from the authority before I accessed or gained any of the documents listed above. It is important to mention here that I experienced a critical challenge during the document selection stage as I had to ask myself throughout the process what I should consider and what I should eliminate. The answers to such questions were not easy bearing in mind that the documents were available in different text formats, namely website information as well as printed documentary information. Hence, I had to have a strategy in terms of selection to avoid an overload of information, whilst at the same time addressing the needs of the study. I found that the best strategy to follow was that the selection and the analysis of the documents should be carried out systematically and efficiently. In other words, I would initially review the document (generally exploring and recording its content), and then the decision to keep the document for more in-depth study would be made before the detailed content analysis was carried out based on its relevance to my research questions.

Once I obtained all the documents electronically, I created a hard copy of each document and then I created a 'document description form' (see Table 3.4) which helped me in classifying the documents and simplifying the process of the analysis later. I gave a code for every document (e.g. D1, D2, D3 and so on), which was recorded on the form. The form helped me not only to organise the documents but also to create an initial idea about what I should focus on. To simplify the review of the documents, a list of tentative headings was produced as part of the document description form; this was more like a checklist to help me organize/classify them more easily and not for analysis purposes. The themes which were identified following the content analysis of the documents will be described in the following sub-section.

Table 3.4: Document Description Form

Document Description Form	
Document code	D1, D2…etc.
Type of document	
Date of issue	
Author (to whom the document belongs)	
Date of document review	
List of tentative headings • The contextual background of the case and the programme • The rules and regulations to support e-tutoring • The stakeholders' role in supporting teaching and learning process • The role of the e-tutor as it was identified by the documents	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Researcher remarks	
Level of confidentiality	

3.5.1.2 The Process of Content Analysis of the Documentations Data

As I reviewed the literature to understand how content analysis can help in finding themes, I came across the work of Kulatunga et al. (2007) who argue that content analysis comprises four approaches, namely: "word count", by counting the frequency of the identified words; "conceptual content analysis" which focuses on identifying the existing concepts or themes that can be examined in a text or sets of text; "relational analysis" which considers the relationships between the concepts inside the text; and "referential content analysis" which concerns the principal meaning of the text examined and text interpretation as based on the researcher's judgment. I decided on the second option, "conceptual content analysis" which focuses on identifying the main themes (issues) and associates them with extracts where possible and as needed. I created a printed (hard copy) of each document and I went through them line by line searching for any possible codes. I then gathered the codes underneath themes. As a result of the analysis, I could identify the following themes:

1. The programme establishment and development;
2. The structure of the university and the programme;
3. The characteristics of the course in terms of length, timing and learning materials;
4. The method of communication between learners and e-tutors;
5. Training and further development.

It is important to note that the first three themes extracted from the documents were used to create the background to this thesis in order to facilitate an understanding of the context as well as the structure and the character of the programme, whereas the last two themes were the ones integrated with themes extracted from the interviews and reflective journals to form the study's 'general themes', as will be shown in section 3.6 in this chapter.

3.5.2 Reflective Journals (RJs)

Reflective journals (RJs) as suggested by Phelps (2005), *'are a form of personal narrative and, as such, provide potential to present one's own adaptation to the environment and the emergent nature of action and knowledge'* (p.40). He adds that the use of reflective journals may help the educators to understand the complexity of learning and teaching (Phelps, 2005, as cited in Halabi, 2015). Phelps (2005) also assures that *'Reflective journals, more specifically, provide scope not only for gathering research data but also for promoting learning and change'* (p. 37). Another scholar, Constantinou (2009) discusses the value of RJs for teachers *'reflective thinking is a vehicle that can help teachers to progress from a level where they are mainly guided by intuition to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and self-inquiry'* (p. 4).

Dunlop (1984) states that in education experience, feelings and emotions are significant and when professionals are asked to reflect on their experience, they should take into account their feelings and emotions. In addition, Goodson and Sikes (2001) demonstrate that *'[RJs] also help with analysis and interpretation, in that it can jog memory and indicate patterns and trends which might have been lost if confined to the mind'* (p.32). In this respect, Schon (1995) argues that in educational research, exploring reflections of the studied phenomenon-related events is vital. Accordingly, a few scholars including Marshall and Rossman (1989), Marefat, (2002), and Faizah (2004) posit that reflective journals are useful qualitative data collection methods used in the education setting to help the participants reflect on:

1. What knowledge participants hold about the studied phenomenon;
2. How the participants did in regard to the studied phenomenon;
3. How the participants demonstrate their feeling and motivation.

These concepts underpin the aim behind using this tool as I was careful to offer my participants an opportunity to reflect on their actual role as e-tutors in the DLLP. Using RJs would allow the tutors to reflect on their feelings, skills and conceptions of e-tutoring-

based issues. The e-tutors were also asked to reflect upon their experience with the learners and in particular how they thought their distance learners could take control over their learning, whether they were allowed to, and what methods the e-tutors used to enhance their learners' self-management skills (see Appendix 6 for a copy of the reflective journal form; details of how this was used and analysed will be explained in the following two sections). The aim of using the RJs was intended to provide the e-tutors some space to reflect on their distance language sessions to enable them to form a clear picture from their own perspectives of what was going on in these sessions and to gain the required awareness of some of the main issues in distance foreign language learning experiences (Halabi, 2015).

3.5.2.1 The Process of Data Collection Using the Reflective Journals (RJs)

The first draft of the reflective journal was designed immediately after I had completed the examination of the distance learning and autonomous learning literature. The issues which seemed critical were formulated as questions for the RJ to allow participants to reflect on them according to their experience. I started the RJ document with a descriptive introduction to demonstrate clearly to the participant the aim of the RJ and the tutors' expected role in relation to using. In addition, contact details were provided in case any further clarification was needed (see Appendix 6 for a copy of the RJ along with its introduction). Data from the reflective journals were later used to form the basis of the SSIs' discussions which were fairly open-ended (details on this method will be provided in subsequent sections of this chapter in 3.5.3).

The actual procedures of the administration of the reflective journal started as soon as the fourteen e-tutors accepted to participate in this study (by 11th of December, 2013 all 14 had returned their consent forms). I asked three of those fourteen e-tutors to complete the RJ as a pilot study to explore how the e-tutors would react to this specific data collection tool and more specifically to identify any weaknesses in the structure and to improve them before the actual RJ process started. According to Neuman (2000), carrying out a pilot study can improve the reliability of the research because it allows the researcher to try one or more drafts before applying the final version in the actual situation. Pallant (2001) claims that the pilot study is a crucial stage in the research journey because it helps the researcher ensure that the instructions, the scale items, the language, and the questions used in the data collection methods are all clear and easy to understand.

The pilot revealed that completing the reflective journals was a hard task for the tutors and that they were struggling with them. All three tutors had never been through the experience of writing any reflective journals related to the DLLP; this was their first experience to be requested to reflect on their DT experience and they needed more clarification on how to complete them effectively. I believe this is expected as many scholars have studied the problem of participants struggling with reflective journals. Lai and Calandra (2007), for example, found that three major factors contributed to their pre-service teachers' responses to reflective journals: *'little knowledge of reflection and reflection writing'; 'lack of specific requirements and guidance'; and 'disconnection between theories and field experiences'* (pp. 73-74). In line with this and in order to make completing the RJ easier, I needed to think of some supportive tools for the participants which were to be discussed with them when I would meet them on my field trip.

As soon as I travelled to Saudi Arabia on December 30th, 2013, I started the practical RJ data-collection procedures to pursue the progress of this specific data collection method in person. When I arrived, I met the tutors personally at the ELI (the place of the study). We had extensive discussions over the content and the design of the RJs and I mentioned that I would be using an electronic tool to help follow up and facilitate the process. Sweeny (2010) points out to the significance of using instant and text messaging technologies, and goes on to stress their prominent role in sharing information, socializing, and structuring communication. I thought, therefore, of emphasizing this very basic role of technology in my data collection process. Furthermore, many recent research sites such as *CM Research* (2014) emphasised in their research (Mobile Technologies for Conducting, Augmenting and potentially Replacing Surveys: Report of the **American Association for Public Opinion Research** (AAPOR) Task Force on Emerging Technologies in Public Opinion Research) the role of new technology devices in conducting research by stating that:

> *The emergence of mobile devices -- with a host of integrated features including voice, photography, video, text, email, GPS, apps, and others -- has opened the door to a new generation of measurement tools for those who study public opinion, attitudes and behaviors as well as other sociological phenomena'* (p.3).

Based on these ideas and keeping in mind the role of technology in this research, plus knowing that "WhatsApp"[1] is the world's fastest growing messaging platform, I Initiated a WhatsApp group ,after getting my supervisor's permission, to ease the communication between me and my participants and to enable my participants to post any enquiries they might have to facilitate their replying to the RJ questions , and I would post reminders and notes through this as well (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: WhatsApp for the E-Tutors

Through WhatsApp, '*I raised some issues mentioned in the journal script such as 'learning strategies', 'the obstacles of teaching in distance contexts', 'the actual role of the tutor'* (Halabi, 2015, p.806). In addition, I allowed my participants a chance to interact freely with each other and with me. The coordinator also thankfully volunteered to send the e-tutors an e-mail to encouraging them to help me in my data collection by completing the attached RJs and sending them back to my e-mail address (see Appendix 7 for a copy of this e-mail). Despite these efforts, however, the outcome was not satisfying as their interaction was still insufficient. I reached the conclusion that the use of WhatsApp at this stage of data collection was not effective enough as the participants did not take the idea of using WhatsApp seriously. This is perhaps due to the idea that this application is more likely used informally amongst people in Saudi society rather than for academic purposes. Also the participants were still struggling with the completion of the journals. I therefore decided to offer alternative supportive tools to help the participants. These tools encompassed: a) providing them with guidelines for the reflective journal; b) initiating a yahoo group.

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[1] WhatsApp Messenger is a cross-platform instant messaging application that allows iPhone, BlackBerry, Android, Windows Phone and Nokia smartphone users to exchange text, image, video and audio messages for free.

Regarding the guidelines, some scholars like Tsang (2007) recommend that participants should be provided with a guideline on how to write a reflective journal to help them in their task. Tsang borrowed the ideas from Fulwiler (1987, p 392) to explain the language features of her journal entries. These features are:

1- When you write your journals, use first person pronoun "I".

2- Write in a conversational style.

3- As a journal writer, I urge that you be creative, narrative, and argumentative.

4- Experiment with your writing.

Thus, I constructed guidelines to help the participants in their task of replying to the reflective journal (see Appendix 8 of a copy of RJ's guidelines). By January 2014, the refined form of the reflective journal along with its guidelines was sent again to all participants via e-mail. Moreover, Abednia et al. (2013) have suggested that the task of the writing journals could be more fruitful if the following conditions are created by the researcher; firstly, clarifying the nature and purposes of writing reflective journals; and secondly, asking teachers to share their journals. I therefore adopted this second suggestion in my reflective journal process. I initiated a yahoo group to enable the participants to develop a collaborative reflection on their teaching experience. The main idea behind initiating this group emerged from my intensive readings of the relevant literature. I found out that many researchers were utilising the technological developments in this field. Many online resources of communication are available nowadays such as e-mails, blogs, forums and wikis.

Kear et al. (2012), for example, conducted a study about the experiences of new tutors and learners in using web conferences in distance education contexts. They stressed, in this study the importance of eliciting tutors' views via an online forum by stating that *'tutors' immediate impressions were captured and it allowed the tutors to share and comment on each other's experiences'* (p. 956). This study showed the value of this web-based social software in facilitating communication with participants especially in a distance teaching context.

Another study was conducted by Crowe and Tonkin (2006) who posited that blogs are new web-based technology that could be used as both teaching and learning tools to *'enhance student learning in higher education through reflective journals for individual, collaborative learning activities, learning diaries during internships and postgraduate*

research and forums for debate' (p. 2). Rourke and Coleman (2009) discuss in their study the philosophy of using blogs to enable a reflexive and collaborative space in which students can discuss and reflect on their experience while completing their arts industry Internship. They examine in this study the use of blogs for interactive, collaborative reflective practice. Prior to the above studies, Brooks and Watkins (1994) stressed the role of collaboration in the academic research field *'By moving researchers from the role of objective observers into a collaborative relationship with research subjects, they share in rather than control the production of knowledge'* (p. 8).

Thus, these studies as well as the idea of collaboration among the e-tutors motivated me to think of a suitable web-based online tool to develop collaboration among the participants with a view to generating richer data. Accordingly, and with the approval of my supervisor, I initiated this yahoo group (see Figure 3.2). I chose this particular web-based tool because I am not competent with the usage of blogs in this context, and because this tool could provide the same functions as blogs. The Yahoo group was hoped to give my participants a chance to enhance their understanding of the reflective journals though exchanging thoughts and perspectives on this data collection method.

Figure 3.2: The Yahoo Group

These tools were helpful in enhancing the participants' understanding of this specific data collection method and the 14 participants returned their RJs by the end of February, 2014 (see Appendix 9 for a copy of one of the participants' reflective journals)

In conclusion, despite the challenges I faced with the RJs' data collection process, it was an interesting experience. Both myself and my participants enjoyed and learned from this experience because it was a new one for most of them. Their willingness to share and the supportive tools used were very helpful. This was manifested in one participant's

reflection (Dr. Nadia) who has previous experience with RJs and who offered to present any needed help.

This section has described the procedures undertaken with the participants in conducting this specific data collection method. The next section focuses on the analytical process used with the collected RJs.

3.5.2.2   The Process of Data Analysis of the Reflective Journals (RJs)

According to Wellington (2000), the nature of data collected from RJs is qualitative, this refers to their nature as participants tend to present them in a written narrative form. Because of this, Wellington proposed that the researcher should use qualitative analytical processes which allow him/her to extract the themes and the values implied in the data.

The purpose of using RJs in this study was to learn about the tutors' experiences, emotions, opinions and perspectives in relation to the DLLP. All RJs collected from the 14 participants were collected into one Microsoft Word document. I was very precise in terms of transferring the actual words of each journal entry as they were presented. Once I had transferred all the answers to one Word document, the process of data analysis started. I used thematic analysis as the main data analysis approach. According to Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis is useful because it provides the researcher with the opportunity to organize different types of information systematically; it allows the researcher to understand and interpret data gathered on people, events, situations, and organizations more accurately and sensitively. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic method of analysis is *'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data; it minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail'* (p. 79). In the same vein, I adopted Braun's and Clarke's (2006) framework of thematic analysis, which helped not only analyse the data, but also organize and present the data with rich descriptions. They suggested six stages which a researcher needs to follow systemically when he/she uses thematic analysis, these steps being:

1. Make yourself familiar with your collected data. In order to accomplish this step, a researcher is required to carefully read the transcript data and then re-read it until he/she feels that they became familiar with the data. They recommended that the researchers should take notes of their initial understanding and ideas.
2. Form initial codes: coding means highlighting important and critical issues raised from the entire data unique titles. In other words, the researcher needs to extract

important information from the raw data considering the aim of the research. Boyatzis (1998) states that reliable codes are those that capture the qualitative values of the studied issue.

3. Search for themes: from the initial codes created in the earlier stage, a researcher needs to start searching for the possible themes and gathering all data underneath its related themes. Boyatzis (1998) sees that themes simplify patterns extracted from the entire data; those themes should describe the possible maximum interpreted aspects of the studied phenomenon.

4. Evaluate the created themes: the researcher needs to re-evaluate if the themes he/she suggested in step (3) correspond to codes extracted in step (2)

5. Naming the themes: when the researcher completes the performances of codifying and initially suggesting themes, he/she can start giving names to each theme that clearly represent the collected data.

6. Producing the report: before completing the report, the researcher should be aware that once the report is produced the final opportunity for analysis and modifying the themes is over. Hence, before taking this step a researcher should be sure that the themes include the entire codes extracted from the entire data and in turn the codes must represent the entire data. (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The analysis process started immediately once the RJs were submitted. Ongoing analysis was carried out until reaching the 'saturation stage', where all the emergent ideas and themes started to be repeated (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps, I started the analysis by carefully reading the journals which were stored as a soft copy on my personal computer. Being stored on Word document allowed me to use comment's feature to record the codes (the most recurrent utterances) (see Figure 3.3):

They would ask me to repeat if they were not sure. They enjoyed translating words to make things clearer to others too at times. This assured me that they're on the right track and we're moving together. They explained what "Tears" are in Arabic as we were dealing with feelings in that unit. They enjoyed the present perfect and past simple in particular and gave me a variety of instances where they knew the difference in the usage of the two.

Comment [B53]: Arabic is an important issue

Comment [DA54]: Translation

Comment [DA55]: It has been mentioned again

Comment [DA56]: Feeling

Figure 3.3: Comments on Word Document

It is perhaps worth noting that during the RJ analysis, I did not need to translate the data because participants used English to communicate their perspectives and opinions via the

journals. It was decided to use English language as a medium of communication mainly for two reasons: firstly, this study is conducted with participants who speak fluent English language because they are English language teachers and instructors and have been for many years; secondly, most of the participants are in fact native speakers of the English language. In addition, there was no need to perform any transcription because data were recorded in written format.

Once the previous step was completed, I used Microsoft Excel Document to start the coding (see Figure 3.4)

	A	B	C	D
1	Annymous	Question	Quote	Code
2	H K 1	1	Teaching distance learning students is a little challenging,	teaching in DL could be a challenge
3	H K 1	1	very good experience.	Experience is very good
4	H K 1	2	listening exercises was the most challenging part of the lesson	listening exercises is critical
5	H K 1	2	Listening exercises are challenging due to technical facilities on students' end	the influences of technical facilities on listening exercises

Figure 3.4: Coding on Microsoft Excel Document.

As can be seen in the above Figure, an Excel sheet was created with a column specified to insert all the codes which were extracted from the RJ documents. Codes are described by Miles and Huberman (1994) as:

> *Tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information complied during the study. Codes usually are attached to "chunks" of varying size words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. They can take the form of a straightforward category label or a more complex one (e.g. metaphor)* (p. 56).

Once the coding step was completed, I began to extract the initial sub-themes by reviewing the codes and then classifying them underneath overall themes:

D	E	F
Code	sub - them	Overall them
teaching in DL could be a challenge	Challenges in DL	the challenges of teaching in the DLLP
Experience is very good	Feeling about the experaince of teaching	The influnace of feeling on the role
listening exercises is critical	listening exercises is challening	Chanlleging exercises in DLLP
the influences of technical facilities on listening exercises	listening exercises is challening	technical facilities and exercises in DLLP

Figure 3.5: The Coding Sheet and Extraction of Themes and Sub-themes

I then revisited the RJ documents to assure that all the possible codes were extracted and all the possible sub-themes and overall themes were titled correctly. It is important to stress, at this point, codes and themes were all driven by the data and no interpretation from my side was provided. My position was to assure that, before finalizing the last set of main themes, overall themes were revisited and reformulated to avoid duplication and overlapping. Ultimately, the final themes which emerged were recorded and categorised around the following three main themes:

1. The teaching environment of DLLP;
2. The issues that impact on the e-tutor's role
3. The challenges of teaching in DLLP

Underneath each of these main themes, different issues were indicated by the participants and were identified as sub-themes as shown in the table below:

Table 3.5: The Themes, Sub-themes of the Reflective Journals

1.   The Teaching Environment of the DLLP
1.1 Technical support
1.2 Required Communication Skills
1.3 The Role of The University in Supporting the Programme
2.   The Issues that Impact on the E-Tutor's Role
2.1 The Role of the Learner in the Teaching and Learning Process
2.2 The Teaching-Learning Methods
2.3 E-Tutor and Learner Relationship
3.   The Challenges of Teaching in DLLP
3.1 Technical Challenges
3.2 Challenges with Exercises
3.3 Using Arabic in Sessions

It is worth noting that all these issues (appearing as sub-themes in the table above) were considered when the interview questions were designed in order to investigate them in more depth.

Once the analysis process of the RJs was completed and the themes were identified, I went back to the literature to compare my themes and to move to the next step of designing the interview questions.

3.5.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

A third method used to collect research data in this study was semi-structured interviews (SSIs). Hammond and Wellington (2013) define interviews in general as *'conversation between the researcher and those being researched, variously termed participants, subjects or simply 'interviewees''* (p. 91). According to Wellington (2000, p. 71) *'Interviewing allows a researcher to investigate and prompt things that we cannot observe. We can probe interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives'.* Bryman (2008) points out that the semi-structured interview is a flexible method which allows a researcher to investigate and clarify issues which emerge during the interview immediately. According to Creswell (2009) in the semi-structured interview setting, the interviewer is not required to have the full script for the interview questions, but at the same time, he or she needs to have the required knowledge and skills to follow up the main questions with other questions to clarify issues. I therefore decided that this method of generating data was useful for my study because it would allow me to interact face to face with the tutors and examine their perspectives closely. This method was used in addition to the RJs which encouraged them to think more deeply about what they were doing, and this also made it easier to explore their perceptions in the interviews, otherwise they may have struggled in the interviews to reflect on their role, given that on the whole they had little experience of that.

3.5.3.1   The Process of Data Collection in the Semi-Structured Interviews

As it was impractical anyway to interview all e-tutors involved in the DLLP, it was decided to interview the 14 e-tutors who completed the RJs. The participants were informed that they would be interviewed when their consent to participate in the study was first sought at the start (see Table 3.3 for details about the teacher participants in section 3.4 of this chapter).

The semi-structured interview questions were formulated with reference to the views/themes that emerged from the RJs. The aim was to further explore and expand on some of the most vital issues which were recurrent in the findings of the RJs. The study's research questions were also considered when designing and constructing the interview questions. After the questions were formulated on the above mentioned bases, they were sent to my supervisor to get his approval. He suggested some modifications on some of the questions., so the questions were refined (see Appendix 10 for a copy of the interviews' questions). There was some flexibility with the order of the questions depending on the flow of the conversation during the interview and it was also expected that there would be follow-up questions. As with the RJs, all interviews were conducted in the English language because all participants were fluent English language speakers.

Two pilot interviews were conducted before I started the interviews for the main study. Similar to the process undertaken for the piloting of the RJs, the purpose was to ensure that the instructions, the language, and the questions were all clear and easy to understand and to identify any weaknesses in the structure before applying the final version in the actual situation. No substantial changes were made to the questions and according to two interviewees in the pilot, all the questions were clear. After finishing the final draft of the interview questions, I directly approached the participants and arranged a specific schedule with their names and the timing of each interview. The interviews took place in the place of the study (English Language Institution) at the university. I struggled on the first three days of the interviews as there was no specific quiet place to conduct the interviews, because the participants have shared offices. I used to wait in the corridor for the tutors. The Institute's Vice-Dean tried to offer some help and suggested that I could use the lounge. It was not a good place however, as many teachers, students and workers kept on coming in and out of the lounge. On the fourth day, the coordinator of the DL programme offered her office; she was really helpful as she allowed me to use her PC as well.

The first interview took place on the 17 of April, 2014. This interview was conducted with the coordinator of the programme (Liza). I was a bit tense and anxious at the beginning of the interview, because apart from the earlier pilot interviews, this was my first experience of actual face-to-face interviews. Moreover, my concern was that this was one of the main data collection methods which was perhaps expected to yield the most in depth data and most relevant to the research. Nevertheless, the interview went smoothly, my questions were distinct and direct and the interviewee was helpful and thoughtful.

Other interviews subsequently went smoothly according to the schedule set up earlier. The entire interviews lasted for two weeks. At the beginning of each interview, the participant's consent for recording was confirmed. I used two recording machines to record each interview to avoid failure. I assured the confidentiality of the interviews by showing them the ethical form and the information sheet which I obtained from the University of Sheffield.

Although the questions were more or less similar for each interview, each had its own experience and circumstances. Each interview took approximately between 45-60 minutes depending on the interviewee's understanding of the questions and her desire to talk more about the raised issues. Moreover, some participants were more excited than others during the interviews. One participant, for example, was very interested in the topic and she was looking forward to the improvements in this programme:

> "If there is a meeting point we can meet together because actually we have a problem in our system if there is a researcher like you, for example, I expect you to come with a result, a solution to our problem, we are in one side and they in other side. We are under the name of distance learning but what we actually do is very far from distance learning. There must be a meeting point between theory and practice." (Liza: SSI)

Her words were quite intriguing and we spent a longer time in the interview. I was enthusiastic about my work and I recorded daily all my first impressions and feelings about each interview. It was a tiring, exhausting experience where I used to stay in the Institution from 9:00 a.m. till 6:00 p.m. daily. Not all tutors were prompt enough to come on time; I had to wait sometimes from three to four hours for the tutor before conducting the interview. This is perhaps because it was a very busy time of the year for the tutors in the Institute; it was the last two teaching weeks at the university, so they were really busy with completing the curriculum and getting ready for the final exams. What made matters more challenging was that most of the participants were foreigners and they were arranging to go back to their countries immediately after the exams. Unfortunately, some of the participants sometimes forgot about or neglected the interview appointment, so I would on many occasions wait the whole day, only for the interview to be cancelled at the end.

In general, although it was an exhausting experience, it was a valuable and interesting one from which I have learned so much as a researcher. Here is a summary of the techniques and lessons that I gained from this interesting experience. I initially learned

that the punctuality of the researcher is very important; otherwise the participants would lose confidence in me as a researcher. I was very careful to create a friendly atmosphere during the interview and give the interviewees space to express themselves. I was aware that it was my responsibility to provide the interviewees with more explanation if they struggled with any question during the meeting and was very cautious not to underestimate any information given by my interviewees; it might be of great importance to my work. I was patient and tried not to panic when the participant did not show on time. I also made sure during the interview to respect the participant's opinions and views even if they contradicted mine, as part of trying to be objective and unbiased. Furthermore, I respected the cultural variation of my participants and did not indulge them in useless conversations. I also ensured that I would get back to my participants when my results and analysis were done to show how they were a vital part of this study. Practically speaking, I made sure to have good quality recording machines and microphones to avoid any potential accidents and loss of this valuable data, effort and time.

3.5.3.2   The process of Data Analysis of the Semi-Structured Interviews

The process of analysing the interview data was divided into two stages: firstly, transcribing and generating the initial codes, sub-themes, and main themes for each interview; and secondly, generating themes and sub-themes from all the interviews. The process of the analysis adopted here is similar to that used in the analysis of the RJ data.

3.5.3.2.1   Transcribing and Generating the initial Codes, Sub-Themes, and Main Themes for each Interview

This first stage of the process began by transcribing the interviews from audio recorded files (with a length between 45 min and 1 hour and 15 min per interview) into a typed Microsoft Word document file. The total number of the transcript words reached 546,989 words all collected in one document. A code made from the first initial of the participant's first name (pseudonym) and the number of the interview was used to identify who it belonged to. By the end of August, 2014, I had completed the verbatim transcription of all 14 interviews.

Once the transcription process was completed, the analysis stage started for generating the codes, sub-themes, and main themes from each individual interview. As with the RJs, I used thematic analysis, one of the most common methods employed to analyse

qualitative data, and followed Braun's and Clarke's (2006) framework for consistency (see section 3.5.2.2 The process of data analysis of the RJs). It is important to note that the following steps were carried out systematically with each individual interview at this stage:

Becoming familiar with the data: During this stage, I listened again to the interview recordings, and at the same time read and re-read each interview transcript individually to create a clear understanding of the possible meanings and conceptions embedded in the conversation. Such a step is vital because it helped me to engage more extensively with the data. I was very careful to keep myself away from leading the data; rather I let the data lead itself to generate the possible themes and sub-themes.

Creating initial codes: I would define the coding process as the process of extracting interesting and unfamiliar ideas and conceptions out of the raw data using systematic methods. In this research, I went through each interview line by line and word by word in order to create a set of codes for each interview that summarized the participants' perspectives. Being stored on Word document allowed me to use the comment's feature to leave notes (see Figure 3.6):

Figure 3.6: The Transcript with Initial Coding

Searching for sub-themes: Once the previous stage was completed with the 14 transcriptions, I used Microsoft Excel Document for the coding process; I started to

collect similar codes from each interview underneath potential sub-themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential sub-theme together (see Figure 3.7):

	Question's number or	The qutataion	The code	The sub theme	The main themes	Note
1	Question's number or	The qutataion	The code	The sub theme	The main themes	Note
2	tell me about your exp	it was okay, it was fine	RJ experiance is accepted	Tutor's refection on RJ expearince	RJ experience	
3	Ibid	it was very clear	RJ quality	Tutor's refection on RJ expearince	RJ experience	
4	Ibid	it didn't take me long to fill it in and the qu	RJ questions were able to reflect th	Tutor's refection on RJ expearince	RJ experience	
5	How long have you be	As an e-tutor, for almost I think two and a h	Length of E-tutoring	The teaching experience's length	Tutor 's experience with DLLP	
6	what do you think abo	think any kind of teaching is challenging, nc	likewise other teaching types dista	feeling about DL	Tutor 's experience with DLLP	
7	Ibid	with all the facilities that are made availabl	Tech facilities improves teaching ar	technological tools help DL	The role of technological tools in DLLP enviroumen
8	Ibid	with so many resources that are available o	Many resources such as Adshare fac	technological tools help DL	The role of technological tools in DLLP enviroumen
9	Ibid	So it (facilities) makes things all the more e	facilities simplify the process of tea	technological tools help DL	The role of technological tools in DLLP enviroumen
10	Ibid	students over here have realised they find	Students' attitudes toward learning	technological tools are need suggested	The role of technological tools in DLLP enviroumen
11	Ibid	blend of both is always the best, partly regi	Mixing traditional teaching and reg	the relationship between traditional and	Tutor's feeling about online teaching
12	Ibid	So that is really, I think—I have a feeling th	Communication and cooperation bi	online learning suggests cooperation bet	learners' role in the program
13	Ibid	Right now, the very word LMS, it petrifies tl	The current technology and words i	Technological tools can help in improving	The role of technology in facilitating learning in DLLP
14	your colleauges menti	Absolutely, because we have a lot of learne	Learners in DLLP are catered by the	Tutor's conpcet of learners in DLLP	learners' role in the program
15	Ibid	So it's always good to show them somethin	Learners would need to use Arabic	Other tools used by tutors to support lea	The role of tutor in supporting learners
16	Ibid	Just your voice and book and all gets a little	Tutors can use different visual aids	Other tools used by tutors to support lea	The role of tutor in supporting learners
17	Ibid	teaching in DL can be challenging but then i	the process of teaching in DL progra	Teaching in DLLp can be a challenge	The tutor's concepts of DL
18	What the autonomous	Self-learning? Okay, to an extent I think the	Learners in DLL are expected to be	SL is an indepenet learning	The tutor's concpets of SL
19	Ibid	like whenever I have a session with them, l	The process of session involve senc	Technological tools help tutors perform	Tutor's role in the DLLP
20	Ibid	If you want you can refer to them, alright, a	Tutors need to have the preparatio	Tutors can face the pressure of the progr	The role of the tutor in the DLLP
21	Ibid	To an extent, they're definitely more self-r	Tutor thinks that students are indp	SL is an indepenet learning	The tutor's concpets of SL
22	Ibid	They do need a teacher. For sure they do, a	Learners need teacher and at the sa	the nature of the tutor and learner role ii	The learner's -tutors relationship in the DLLP
23	Tell me about your rol	I think I'm a blend of all, of all. You can't ali	the role of the e-tutor is a mixture	the e-tutor is a bridge	The role of the tutor in the DLLP
24	Ibid	That's it—basically I construct a bridge bet	the role of the e-tutor is a connecti	the e-tutor is a bridge	The role of the tutor in the DLLP
25	Ibid	you have to keep switching roles as you're	Tutor does not have one specific ro	The e- tutor needs to keep switching	The role of the tutor in the DLLP
26	How can you different	I'm relying entirely on my voice, entirely or	The skills of sounds and expression	Sound skills are vital for e-tutor	The skills of e-tutors in DLLP
27	Ibid	So I have to be well- rested because the gir	Being ready and well rested in imp	Tiredness influence on tutors' interactio	Tutors ' skills in the DLLP
					tutor based challange	
28	Ibid	You know, sometimes it's not easy. Someti	Tutors tiredness can be a challenge	Tiredness influence on tutors' interactio	tutor based challange
29	Ibid	yesterday I had my last class, so as soon as	Tutors need to be aware to the sou	Tiredness influence on tutors' interactio	tutor based challange
30	Ibid	They should know that I'm very keen on tea	The tutor should show that they are	Tiredness influence on tutors' interactio	Tutor –based challenges
31	Ibid	the way I can distinguish the two is like son	Face to face interaction between st	The difference between traditional and	Environment –based challenge
32	How much control do	Learning strategies to an extent but evaluation and content, it's all a bit chalked out for all of us as teachers. So none of	us have it actually, since it's given to us from the Dea
33	Ibid	Students have a tendency of following you	Students are tending to be spoon fe	Tutor's role to enhance learner's self-con	Tutor –learner relationship
34	Ibid	So I have to actually tone myself down, low	tutor should listen to their student	Tutors should be open to their students'	Tutor –learner relationship
35	Have you ever use Ara	You'd be surprised I do. I've picked up a lot	Arabic is used as required and, the	the use of Arabic can be needed	Arabic use in the DLLP
36	Ibid	When I talk to my level one students, I mak	Speaking to level one students requ	tutors' skills involve understanding the l	Tutor's skills in the DLLP
37	Ibid	So it's very important to grade your languag	Tutor should know how to grade th	tutors' skills involve understanding the l	Tutor's skills in the DLLP

Figure 3.7: An Example of Excel Sheet.

Reviewing the established sub-themes: my duty at this stage was to check again if the sub-themes worked in relation to the codes extracted earlier and the entire data set in order to start generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.

Defining the major themes: this stage involved grouping all of the sub-themes under broader themes and making sure that the themes and the sub-themes of each interview were checked and created correctly.

Producing a written report: this was the final step of the thematic analysis which, from my perceptive, was the last chance for me to look for more data or possible themes in the individual interviews. According to Braun and Clarke, (2006), in this stage, the researcher is allowed to tell the story of her data to be able to convinces the readers, thus she/he needs to select vivid extracts that capture the essence of the issues to be demonstrated, and the analysis of these data need to related to the study's research questions.

These steps were carried out on a one by one basis with each interview. The next stage was the attempt to turn the themes and sub-themes generated in the first stage into final and main themes identified for the SSIs as a data source.

3.5.3.2.2 Grouping the Themes and Sub-Themes from across all Interviews

In this stage, I needed to integrate and compare all the themes and the sub-themes which emerged from the total set of data to identify the major themes and sub-themes for the SSI. This stage was very important because it would help me refine the specifics of each theme as well as the complete picture the analysis portrayed by generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

After using Excel sheets to present the codes, sub-themes and main themes of each interview based on thematic analysis, I started reading the Excel sheets again with attempts to join the similar sub-themes of the same themes together from each interview. Initially, I tried to electronically arrange my data by copying the sub-themes and themes from each interview Excel sheet on to a new word document, then I coloured the similar main themes with the same colour using the different colours available in Microsoft Word, 2010 (see Figure 3.8):

The sub theme	The main themes
Tutor reflecting on RJ experience	RJ experience
Tutor reflecting on RJ experience	RJ experience
The value of the RJ experience	RJ experience
Topic-based challenges	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
The value of the RJ experience	RJ experience
The experience's length	Tutor 's experience with DLLP
Tutor's concept of DL	Tutor 's experience with DLLP
The environment- based challenges	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
technology-based challenges	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
technology equipment -based challenges	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
Learner's -based challenge	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
Learner's techniques -based challenge	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
The environment- based challenges	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
Learner attitudes -based challenge	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
Tutor's based challenges	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
The environment- based challenges	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
The environment- based challenges	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
Tutor's opinions about the programe activities	Tutor 's experience with DLLP
Tutor's opinions about the Grammar activities	Tutor 's experience with DLLP
Grammar activities tools	Tools used to complete program- based activities
Tutor's skills to deliver reading and listening activities	Tutor's role in the DLLP
SL concept	The tutor's concept of SL
Pregame -based challenges	Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP
Tutor's strategy to enhance learner's SL	Tutor's strategy to enhance SL in the DLLP
Learning material sources	material sources in the DLLP
Tutor's strategy to enhance learner's SL	Tutor's strategy in the DLLP

Figure 3.8: Example of Electronic Colouring of the Data.

Following this, in a separate Word document, I gathered the same main themes (same colour in the previous document) along with their sub-themes (Figure 3.9):

1-Challenges experienced by tutors in the DLLP (theme)

The environment- based challenges
Topic-based challenges
technology-based challenges
technology equipment -based challenges
Learner's -based challenge
Learner's techniques -based challenge
Learner attitudes -based challenge
Tutor's based challenges
Pregame -based challenges

2-Tutor's experience with DLLP
The experience's length
Tutor's concept of DL
Tutor's opinions about the Grammar activities
    Tutor's reflective on the program
    Tutor's reflective on the program
    Tutor's concept of DL
DL component and SL are related

Figure 3.9: The Same Colour Themes and their Sub-Themes.

By the end of the third interview, however, I found that conducting the analysis on the computer (through Excel and Word documents) was a daunting and confusing process for me owing to my preference of working with hard copies rather than with soft copies especially if this work is about classification and data discrimination. Thus, I printed the sub-themes and the main themes of each interview. I used A3 pages to consume fewer pages, to have more space as the excel sheet of each interview is quite large, and to pull together data from each interview in one or two pages at most. After printing was completed, the following procedures were followed:

1)   I gathered the printed versions of all documents in one ring binder starting from interview 1-14 successively;

2) Using different colours of highlighter pens, I started to highlight all the similar main themes of each of the interviews with the same colour (see Figure 3.10):
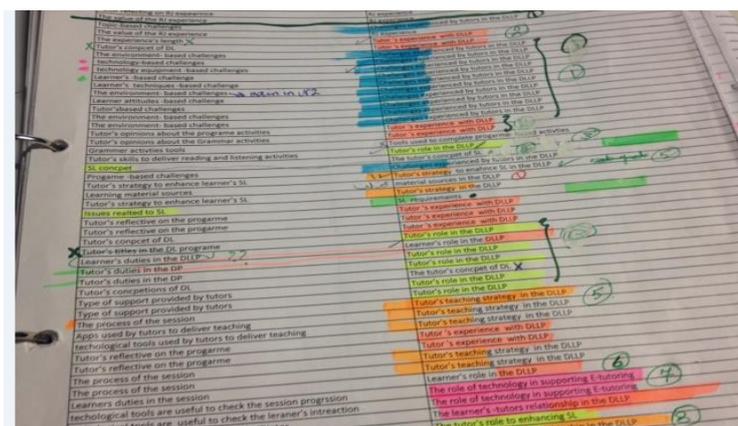
Figure 3.10: An Example of a Hard Copy Print of Coloured Themes.

3) I then searched for similar sub-themes of the main themes in the 14 interviews;

4) I next created a table containing three main columns: Themes, sub-themes, and quotations;

5) I pulled out all of the quotations relating to similar sub-themes which existed in the main Excel sheets of all interviews and added them to this table marked by the number of each interviewee;

6) Some new main themes emerged from across all the interviews, so I developed another table for the new main themes and sub-themes;

7) Similar to the step taken with the previous table (step 5), I added all the related quotations from all interviews.

8) In this last step of analysis I joined the two tables into one table ending up with *six* main themes. Each main theme includes some basic sub-themes and each sub-theme is divided into related components.

To end up this section of analysis, the following list showcases the final, revised themes of the SSIs:

1. The role of the e-tutor in the DLLP
2. The role of the learner in the DLLP (from the e-tutor's perspective)
3. Issues influencing the development of autonomy in learners
4. The challenges experienced by e-tutors in the DLLP
5. The role of the DL Deanship in supporting the teaching-learning process

6. Improvement required for better practice

These were further divided into the following sub-themes and components as shown in Table 3.6 below. It might be worth noting that the SSIs, which explored participants' views in depth, generated the most themes and sub-themes in comparison with the other two methods (documents and RJs):

Table 3.6: The Themes, Sub-themes and Components of the Semi-Structured Interviews

1. The Role of the E-Tutor in the DLLP

1.1 The E-Tutor's Duties in the DLLP

- Preparation
- On-line Communication
- Assessment and Evaluation
- Searching for External Information Resources

1.2 The E-Tutor's Credentials in the DLLP

- Tutors' Experience
- Tutors' Skills

1.3 The e-Tutors' Teaching Strategies in the DLLP

- Running the Session
- Promoting Specific Skills (Questioning and Critical Thinking)
- Allowing their Learners to have Control over their Learning.

2. The Role of the Learner in the DLLP (From the Tutors' Perspective)

2.1 Differences between Distance Learning Sessions and Regular Classes

2.2 The Learner-Tutor Relationship

- The nature of the relationship
- The learners' cultural concerns

3. Issues influencing the development of autonomy in learners

3.1 The e-tutors' understanding of distance language teaching (e-tutoring)

3.2 The e-tutors' understanding of self-directed learning (SDL)

3.3 The e-tutors' conception of autonomous learners

3.4 Developing the required learning strategies

- Revising
- Cooperating with peers

4. The challenges experienced by e-tutors in the DLLP

4.1. Programme based challenges

- The philosophy of the programme (exam-oriented programme)
- Curriculum related issues

- Communication methods (no visual and oral communication)
- Time-pressure issue

4.2. Institution culture based challenges

- Institution structure
- Institution regulations

4.3. Technology- based challenges

- The system failure
- Lack of technical support
- Lack of face to face communication tools:

4.4. English language skills based challenges

- Learner's level of proficiency
- Speaking and listening practice
- Grammar exercises

4.5. Methods of education-based challenges

- Self-learning
- Spoon feeding method

4.6. Learner- based challenges

- Training
- Learners' attitudes

4.7. Tutor-based challenges

- Training
- Tutors' attitudes
- Perspectives of teaching and learning

5. The role of the DL Deanship in supporting the teaching-learning process

5.1. Providing administration support and follow up (including checking attendance of both tutors and the students)

5.2. Providing training

5.3. Providing the information technology infrastructure

- Network, information systems including: Centra and Agenda

6. Improvement required for better practice

6.1. Curriculum based improvement

6.3. Training-based development

6.2. Technological infrastructure development

This section concludes the presentation of the process of descriptive data analysis from the third data collection method (SSIs) by describing the way under which the themes of this specific method were constructed.

The following section will describe the role of the researcher in the development of the final themes that emerged from the study's data, generated through the three research methods.

3.6   The Role of the Researcher in Developing the Study's Themes from all Data Sources

Having presented the themes generated from all three data collection methods; the aim was to finally integrate all the main themes and their related sub-themes from the three data collection methods and present a final list of 'General Themes' for this study. This section presents my experience in the development of this process.

As described earlier in this chapter, the three data collection methods namely, Document Analysis (DA), Reflective Journals (RJs) and Semi-Structured Interviews (SSIs) were conducted separately to gather the data needed for this study. Five themes were extracted from the DA as described in section 3.5.1.2; the first three themes were used to create the background for the reader of this thesis to understand the context as well as the structure and the character of the programme and the last two themes were integrated into themes extracted from the SSIs and RJs. The themes generated from the RJs have been used to formulate some of the interview questions after they were compared with the current literature; these were three main themes with three sub-themes under each theme (see section 3.5.2.2). Meanwhile, six main themes with several sub-themes emerged from the 14 SSIs (see section 3.5.3.2). The following table is a reminder of the main themes that emerged from each of the data collection tools.

Table 3.7: The Themes of the Study's Three Data Collection Methods

DA Themes	RJs Themes	SSIs Themes
1. The programme establishment and development	1. The teaching environment of DLLP	1. The role of the e-tutor in the DLLP
2. The structure of the university and the programme	2. The issues that impact on the e-tutor's role	2. The role of the learner in the DLLP (from the e-tutor's perspective)
3. The characteristics of the course in terms of length, timing and learning materials	3. The challenges of teaching in DLLP	3. Issues influencing the concept of autonomous learners
4. The method of communication between learners and e-tutors		4. The challenges experienced by e-tutors in the DLLP
5. Training and further development.		5. The role of the DL Deanship in supporting the teaching –learning process
		6. Improvement required for better practice.

☐   Used to describe the background, context and structure of the programme
▨   The integrated themes extracted from Documents, RJs and SSIs

Having presented the themes generated from the three data collection methods; the following Figure shows the final list of the general themes of this study. This list is a summary of all the previous main themes and their related sub-themes pulled together from the three tools of the study and finalised into Four General Themes. It is vital to note that the repeated themes (in the Table above) were integrated to make it easier for the reader to understand and myself to present and discuss the themes when addressing the study's research questions. The Figure also showcases the relationships between the four general themes and the four research questions:

Figure 3.11: The Research Study's General Themes

The following sections will discuss the ethical considerations of this research study.

3.7 Research Ethical Considerations

According to Bryman (2008), in research including in the field of educational studies when a researcher interacts with human participants, ethical principles need to be taken into account. Creswell (2009) identifies some ethical issues that arise during the different stages of research. Those issues are summarised in Table 3.6 below.

Table 3.8: Ethical Issues as Identified by Creswell (2009)

The research stage	The possible ethical consideration
Identifying the research problem	• The focus will be on issues that will benefit the persons being studied.
Formulating the questions	• The research's purpose must be indicated to the respondents, and ambiguity of purpose must be avoided.
During the data collection	• The privacy of the participants must be protected • The collected data of the research is kept undistributed after the study
Data analysis and interpretation	• Protect the anonymity of respondents • Protect their roles and any incidents occurring in the project; • Consider the required period of time for keeping the analysed data, and the best method for destroying it once the research is completed; • Ensure that participants were recruited to participate actively in the generation of data;

	• Ensure the accuracy of the interoperation.
In the writing-up stage	• Ensure that clear language is used and that participants cannot suffer any harm during or after the production of the report

Denscombe (2010) argues that every researcher is responsible for and must avoid and lessen the possible risk of harm to participants through collecting the data. Participant information must be secured and protected in a way that saves them from any possible harm in the future.

Therefore, I was very careful to maintain the confidentiality of the participants as I was the only person who listened to and transcribed the participants' recorded interviews.

In accordance with the University of Sheffield's Code of Practice on Research Ethics, and with the above discussions, I considered relevant ethical issues throughout the different stages of the study. Such issues include seeking permission and informed consent, keeping anonymity and confidentiality, and ensuring participants' well-being. Other considerations were related to research quality, reliability and validity, trustworthiness and authenticity. The following sub-sections elaborate how the different ethical considerations were applied in my study.

3.7.1   Seeking Permission and Informed Consent

(Gray, 2009) postulates that researchers have to '*compose a proposal or research protocol*' (p. 81) when they tend to embark on a research study so it could be evaluated by a relevant ethics committee. Consequently, my ethical application was sent to the ethical committee of the University of Sheffield through the School of English Language to be signed and approved. In my application, this research's aims and the way of conducting it were explicitly presented. The ethics committee approved my proposal and I was granted permission to proceed with my research in the chosen context. (See Appendix 11 for the research ethics approval letter). Access to the institute in KSA was negotiated and approved by the Dean of the English Language Institute before the start of the study. Being a former staff member at this University which was also funding my studies made it easier to approach the Dean of the ELI; nevertheless, I exerted no influence on the decision to allow me to collect data from this context, nor did the university influence me as researcher in what I hoped to achieve from this research. The

nature and purpose of the research was explained to the Dean and she was made aware that further consent from the participants would be sought on an individual basis.

Neuman (2007) assures that it is important that researchers *'never coerce anyone into participating; participation must be voluntary at all times'* (p. 51). Accordingly, researchers need to request their participants to sign a written consent form prior to their participation to be able to share and to understand that there would be no negative implications if they did not wish to participate (Wellington and Szczerbinski, 2007). Accordingly, recruitment of the English e-tutors was done on a voluntary basis as each participant was given an information sheet was asked to return it to me after reading the sheet and signing it in order to demonstrate their willingness to participate (see Appendix 4 for a copy of the information sheet sent to the participants). The information sheet had full details about the project's purpose. The participants also were given a chance to clarify any issues related to the study before agreeing to take part in it. Consent was sought initially through email before I travelled to the site of the study (see Appendix 5 for the participant consent form) so forms were signed electronically and sent back to me by email as an attachment. However, once I was in SA and met the participants in person at the university, each participant was invited to confirm their consent by signing two hard copies of the consent form and a copy of this form was retained by them.

3.7.2   Anonymity and Confidentiality

According to Willig (2013), a case study research is sensitive to issues of anonymity and confidentiality as it describes the participants' social events in a particular institution. Thus, the identities or institutions of the participants need to be changed by the researchers so they would not to be recognised (Flick, 2006). In this study, the chosen institution's name was not revealed and it was referred to throughout this research as 'the higher educational institution in Saudi Arabia' and interchangeably as 'the university'. Although this was not specifically requested by the university itself, it was a decision I made as a researcher to further anonymise the participants of this study as staff members from this university. Therefore, any description that would perhaps help identify the institution was avoided (e.g. logos and specific titles were eliminated from documents used in the study). Most importantly, when describing the institution as the context of this study (see section 1.3 in Chapter One), special care was taken to avoid it be recognised, for example, certain dates were approximate and with numbers a range and rough estimates rather than specific numbers were given. This was meant to give the readers a general idea about it as a HEI

and not mislead them in any way. The DLLP in this university was also described but could not be identified because distance learning programmes were introduced and developed in several main universities in different provinces of SA not just in the chosen university of this study. The online systems referred to in the DLLP were similar and identical to the online systems used in the other Saudi universities' distance learning programmes.

For the sake of the participants' anonymity, as explained in the information sheet and the participants' consent form, I changed the participants' real names into pseudonyms. This hides the participants' identity and allows them to express their views more freely and securely. The use of pseudonyms rather than numbers or codes, as suggested by my supervisor, makes it easier for the reader to relate to the participants as people. Moreover, the participants cannot be identified by nationalities and length of experience because they are just fourteen of the total number of the e-tutors on this programme who also have similar nationalities and lengths of experience.

In terms of confidentiality of the research data, researchers need to make their participants aware of the storage and access of the data (Gray, 2009). Hence, my participants were reassured that all collected data would be only accessed by me, my supervisor, and the examiners. They were also informed that all recorded files will be totally destroyed after I complete this study.

3.7.3 Avoiding Harm

In social research, it is unacceptable to harm participants (Bryman, 2012). Neuman (2007) argues that '*Social research can harm a research participant in several ways: physical, physiological, and legal harm, as well as harm to a person's career, reputation, or income*' (p. 51). Furthermore, research is considered unethical, as posited by Flick (2006), if the participants are put under stress and anxiety when participating; hence, Willig (2013) assures that '*the researcher needs to take responsibility for the effects that the study is having on the participant*' (p. 109), and adds that the particiapnts should be permitted to withdraw from the study immediately if they experience any form of discomfort.

Based on these studies, I was aware not to cause my particiapnts any harm during the conduct of this study. They were informed in the consent form that they are free to withdraw from particiapting in this study anytime without giving any reason. They were

also assured that the purpose of this study is to share their perspectives and experience of teaching in this specific programme and their confidentiality and anonymity are closely considered.

It is worth mentioning that the various nationalities of the participants sometimes posed an issue during the data collection phase. This might be due to the fact that some participants are non-Saudis and felt embarrassed to speak frankly. I know this from my experience of teaching with tutors recruited from other countries. Such tutors usually feel uncomfortable to discuss their troubles and concerns openly with strangers, because they might sometimes panic about losing their jobs` if they complain or speak frankly. This was noticed in relation to various aspects of our meetings and discussions about their on-line teaching experience, especially with those whom I was meeting for the first time. I assured them that their names would be anonymous and tried my best to make them feel secure about speaking up. This reassured them and consequently, the participants' replies to this question were more open.

3.7.4   Research Quality

Litman (2012) explains that good research requires honesty and well-designed evaluation criteria. Researchers should be able to carefully evaluate sources of information and identify possible errors, limitations and contradictory evidence. According to Seale (1999), *'quality is an elusive phenomenon that can't be pre-specified by methodological rules'* (p.7). Hence, each research has its own criteria of evaluating its quality, especially if different research paradigms and different research methodologies are taken into consideration.   In this regards, Hammersley (2007) argues that *'some writers have tried to apply what they see as traditional quantitative criteria, such as validity and reliability, to qualitative work'* (p.288). He adds that

> *…it is not possible for researchers to make their judgements transparent, in the sense of fully intelligible to anyone, irrespective of background knowledge and experience. Indeed, there are limits to the extent to which these judgements can be made intelligible even` to fellow researchers, because of the situated nature of judgement* (p.291).

In line with this view and in my attempts to make fair judgements on my chosen methodology, I discussed at an early stage of my study to the potential methodology that would be most appropriate, along with the most suitable methods. This discussion included, in addition to my supervisor and colleagues, those to whom I presented my

work in international and local conferences. In 2012, for example, I presented a paper at 'the Eighth School of Education Research Students' Annual Conference', at Leeds University. This was my first presentation experience ever, and my work was in its early stages. Then in the same year, I presented my tentative work at the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) in Florida, USA. This conference was called 'International Forum for Women in E-learning 2012'. Such presentations in these and other conferences were of great support to me as I had the chance to discuss my methodology with other researchers and I gained a lot of experience and support. I also had the chance to have a look at others' work and the various methods conducted in their studies. However, I later realized that humans are inconsistent in their judgment of what constitutes quality. This was highlighted in Matthews and Ross' (2010) discussion of what is called 'replicability', where the researcher needs to ask the question: *Can my results be replicated by other researchers using the same method?* In their answer to this question Matthews and Ross (2010) explained that this replicability might work with some natural sciences, yet it is not applicable with social sciences because people (researchers, participants etc.) are different; no social researcher would expect the same results from the same method.

In sum, Punch, (2005) uses the terms trustworthiness and authenticity as equivalent to validity and reliability and recognizes them as principal criteria to evaluate research. I found these criteria to be the most commonly recognised criteria in qualitative research, and I decided to take them into consideration in my study. In the following section, more details are presented about what validity and reliability, trustworthiness and authenticity would mean.

3.7.4.1 Trustworthiness and Authenticity

According to Morse et al. (2002), *'without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility. Hence, a great deal of attention is applied to reliability and validity in all research methods'* (p. 14). Such a statement suggests that reliability and validity are considered key criteria that must be taken into consideration when evaluating methodological credibility. From Punch's (2005) perspective, reliability in quantitative research refers to consistency which suggests that the same instrument can be retested on the same participants but at a different time and that the same or similar results would emerge. For Denscombe (2010), validity is linked to the accuracy and appropriateness of collected data, whereas Bryman (2008) defines validity as an *'issue of whether an*

indicator (or set of indicators) that is devised to gauge a concept really measures that concept' (p.151).

In qualitative research it is believed that validity and reliability will be affected by the researcher's perspective, which may cause a series of biased results (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). Therefore, instead of the traditional criteria used in relation to quantitative research, trustworthiness and authenticity are suggested in qualitative research.

3.7.4.1.1   Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) replaced validity and reliability with the equivalent concept of "trustworthiness". According to them "trustworthiness" encompasses four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. They suggested a set of questions in relation to trustworthiness:

> *The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted? What criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive in this issue? (p.290)*

Bryman (2008) argues that credibility in qualitative research suggests that the findings can be reliable and that is why it can be trusted; the collected data can be relied upon and the researcher has the ability to understand and analyse the social phenomena in question. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Bryman (2008) argue that using triangulation methods can be helpful in qualitative research in order to enhance the credibility of the findings and establish the required trustworthiness. Denscombe (2010) explains that transferability refers to the researcher's ability to apply or relate the findings of research in one context to another similar context. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) using an "auditing" approach helps to achieve dependability and confirmability of empirical data. This can be achieved, for example, by recording interviews at all stages of the research to allow careful auditing at any time or by keeping careful records of the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that other peers could also help their colleagues and act as auditors.

3.7.4.1.2   Authenticity

The authenticity criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is aligned with the interpretivists' thinking about judging the quality of a qualitative study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), authenticity consists of five criteria, as follows: *fairness*, which means that the research fairly represents the differing viewpoints of members (participants/stakeholders) in the same social setting; *ontological authenticity* is about members (researchers, participants and other stakeholders) gaining a better understanding of the area being studied; *educative authenticity* involves members (researchers, participants and other stakeholders) better appreciating the viewpoints of others in the same social setting; *catalytic authenticity* implies that research motivates the members' (participants'/stakeholders') actions to alter their circumstances; and *tactical authenticity* means the research empowers the members to act (researchers, participants and other stakeholders). Seal (1999) argued that this interpretation of authenticity implies a political stance in which research is seen as having the potential to empower participants.

In this study, I selected my data collection methods after deep investigation of the research methodology literature. Different types of studies, research and academic papers were reviewed to know the process of data collection and analysis and to identify the possible risks during the experience. As an insider researcher, I had to examine my own understanding of my position and articulate the relationship between myself and my colleagues involved in the study. I had to learn how to establish my own stance and boundaries so I would not impose on or interrupt my participants. Objectivity was attempted to the best of my ability to help avoid researcher bias particularly during the interpretation of the findings, though some element of this is inevitable. In addition, all reflective journals and semi-structured interviews were piloted and the related literature was consulted to examine the key issues in the field and to create a set of open ended questions congruent with those of a number of peer studies.

In addition, 'triangulation by procedures' was used in this study by using multiple sources of evidence and utilising three data collection methods (document analysis, Reflective journals and semi-structured interviews to enhance the credibility of research and ensure a level of trustworthiness. Moreover, the supervisor of this study acted as arbitrator of the research method and interview questions. Several meetings with him were conducted before the final choice of data collection instruments was approved as valid for this research.

Furthermore, variation of the participants' (e-tutors') backgrounds, age, experience and the length of teaching and e-tutoring experience, was helpful in ensuring that the research fairly represents the differing viewpoints of the participants in the same social setting and to gain a better understanding of the area being studied, ensuring *fairness* and *ontological authenticity* as mentioned by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

3.8   Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has discussed the methodology and approaches adopted in this study. I started with a presentation of research philosophy that highlighted the qualitative constructivist perspective as the bases of this research. Reading the relevant methodological literature about qualitative approaches helped me as a researcher to form a holistic picture and helped me to justify why I have chosen this particular approach for my study. More importantly, I was able to decide among other methods covered by this type of research that the case study approach is the most suitable for my study. As well as describing the case study approach there was a section about the generalizability issue in relation to it as an approach; no claims for generalizability are made in relation to this case study given its exploratory nature as a study and the aim to develop a framework for this particular DLLP context.

This chapter also has included a full description of the data collection methods including document analysis and reflective journals, which were specifically designed to allow the tutors in the DLLP to communicate their views regarding their role. To gain deeper understanding of the e-tutors' perspectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Ethical issues in my study around access, participants' rights and quality criteria been discussed in the final sections of this chapter. Next chapter will focus on discussing and presenting the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion: Addressing Research Questions One, Two and Three

4   Introduction

In chapter three, I described the research methodology and methods adopted in this study. The purpose of this chapter and the following chapter is presenting and discussing the

findings obtained from the study's data collection methods in relation to exploring the DLLP e-tutors' perceptions about the teaching and learning in this specific Saudi University. This chapter presents the data collected from the three data collection methods conducted to address to the first three questions of this study. Chapter Five will present the data collected from all data collection methods used in response to the last research question as illustrated in Figure 4.1. Chapter Six will then pull together these various responses in order to address the overarching question.
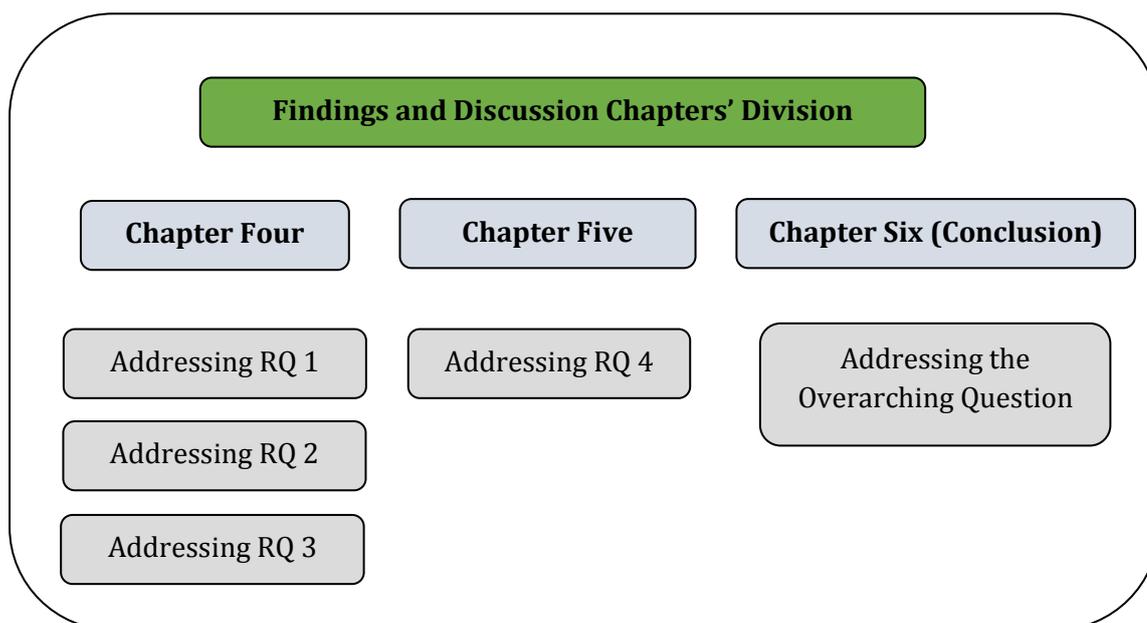
Figure 4.1: Findings and Discussion Chapters' Division.

The decision to present the findings and discussion in two separate chapters was based on long discussions with my supervisor and my colleagues as the best way of avoiding one long chapter. The first three questions of the thesis in fact focus on the e-tutors' perspectives on their own roles and those of the distance language learners in the context of the DLLP as well as the investigation of the teaching and learning strategies in relation to autonomous language learning. Meanwhile, question four was focused on the e-tutors'

perspectives on the educational context and how that supports and challenges the success of the DLLP. Once all research questions have been discussed and addressed, the 'Overarching Question' of the study will be addressed and serves as a summary for all the study's findings in the final chapter of this thesis, the Conclusion Chapter. As a reminder, the following are the research questions to be addressed and discussed in Chapters Four, Five and Six:

Overarching Question:

- What are the perceptions of e-tutors about teaching and learning processes in the context of DLLP?

First Question:

- What are the e-tutors' perceptions of their roles in the DLLP and how can these roles be enhanced?

Second Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, what role do distance language learners play in their own learning in the context of DLLP?

Third Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, which learning and teaching strategies may enable the learners to become more autonomous?

Fourth Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, which aspects related to the DLLP challenge or support the e-tutors in their role in this Programme?

Following this reminder of the research questions, the next sections of this chapter will be organised in accordance with research questions 1, 2 and 3 and I will attempt to address them by using the general themes generated from the study's data analysis as discussed and illustrated in the Methodology Chapter in section 3.6 and shown once again in the Figure below. The four general themes associated with the study's four research questions were finalised as follows:

<figure>

The Four General Themes from all 3 Data Collection Methods

1. The role of the *e-tutor* in the DLLP (**RQ1**)
2. The role of the *learner* in the DLLP (**RQ2**)   **Chapter 4**
3. Issues influencing the development of autonomy in learners (**RQ3**)

4. The challenges experienced in the DLLP and the support available in the teaching-learning process (**RQ4**)   **Chapter 5**

</figure>
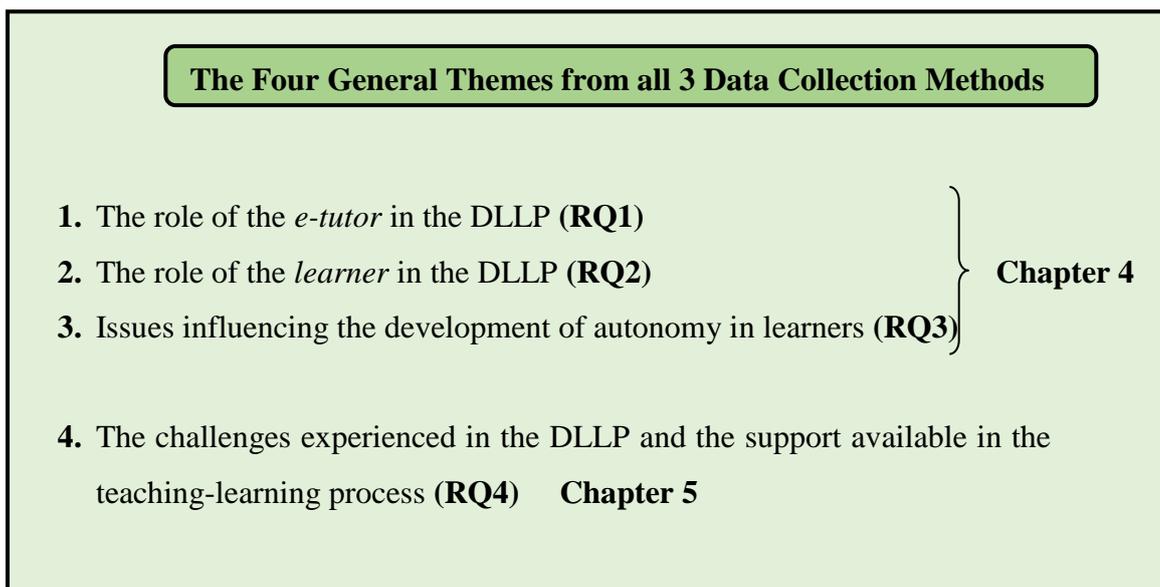
Figure 4.2: The Research Study's General Themes

Prior to the presentation and discussion of how the first three research questions of the study were addressed, I would like to clarify my experience in relation to this process in the following section.

4.1   The Role of the Researcher in the Presentation and Discussion of the Data

This section explores my role as a researcher in the presentation and discussion of the data. While presenting the participants' views, I kept in mind Wellington's (2015) advice that the presentation of the data obliges the researcher to be fair with the people participating in the study by giving them a platform or a voice; he adds that the researcher needs to be *"true to the data' and to make a faithful representation of the data collected, especially when presenting it and publishing it"* (p. 274). Accordingly, I have presented the participants' views as they are without any modifications or changes. Meanwhile, Wellington's (2015) vision that data and results are influenced by the researcher's perceptions and interpretations was also taken into account. Hence, I acknowledge that my voice will be there to interpret my participants' responses and to comment on their opinions and perspectives about their role as distance FL e-tutors.

In summary, during the analysis and presentation of the data, the following issues were taken into consideration:

1) As mentioned previously in the methodology chapter, the study's three data collection tools were conducted individually, yet the data generated from them were integrated and correlated during the analysis. Following the data analysis, it was realised that similar themes, sub-themes and related components emerged from the three tools. To avoid repetition during the presentation and discussion of the data, several of the themes and sub-themes were merged and integrated into one thematic framework as explained in section 3.6 in Chapter Three. I need to notify here that I planned my research to address the research questions but allowed the themes within that to emerge; therefore, I decided to formulate four final general themes to correlate with each of the four research questions (see Figure 4.2 above).

2) Adopting the approach of thematic analysis with my data helped in identifying some important issues that unexpectedly emerged during the data analysis process, such as the use of the Arabic Language in teaching English to DLs.

3) Most of the data are presented from the SSIs because the data which emerged from the SSIs were richer and more comprehensive than that collected from the other two methods. From the SSIs, it was obvious that the participants had more opportunities to express their experience and views about teaching in this programme. Furthermore, this method was enriched by building on themes identified in the other two methods.

4) With a large amount of data, I admit that, as a researcher, I was confused in many places with which data extracts I needed to choose to inform my discussion (see limitations section in the final chapter of the thesis).

In the following section, research question 1 of the study will be addressed through a broad discussion of the research findings.

4.2   Response to Research Question One

What are the e-tutors' perceptions of their roles in the DLLP and how can these roles be enhanced?

One of the main aims of this study focuses on the e-tutors' roles in encouraging their students to have control over their learning in this specific learning environment. With this aim in mind, and in addressing this research question, the e-tutors' role will be explored as perceived by the participants themselves through their voices, and this exploration will be organised according to the appropriate theme and sub-themes that

emerged from the data. Moreover, the participants' views will be compared with whatever is mentioned in literature.

This research question will be addressed by referring to *theme one*: **The Role of the E-Tutor in the DLLP**, (see Figure 4.2 above). In order to facilitate and clarify the presentation and discussion of this theme and its related sub-themes and components, I have created a figure that visually summarises the main themes and sub-themes as they appeared. I have done the same for each of the other two themes and their sub-sections in the following sections of this chapter. Figure 4.3 below illustrates the first theme with two related sub-themes and their components with the aim of addressing research question one of this study.
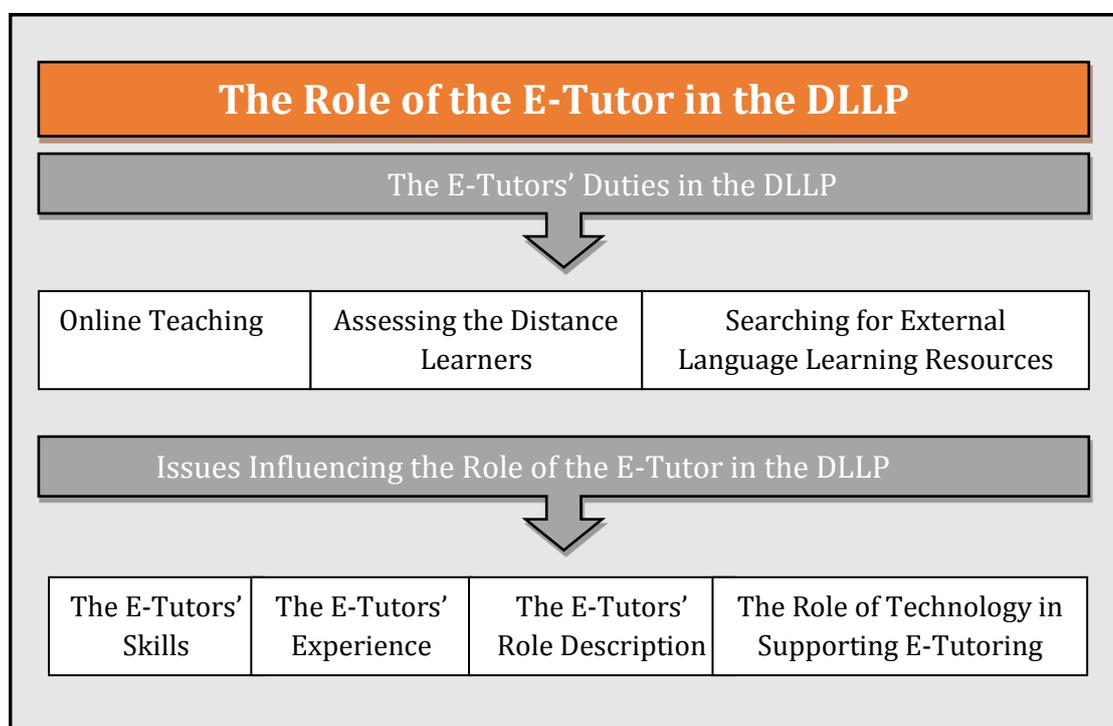
Figure 4.3: Theme One and its Related Sub-Themes and Components: The Role of the E-Tutor in the DLLP

4.2.1   The E-Tutors' Duties in the DLLP

This sub-theme includes three components related to the e-tutor's duties as emerged from the study's data: online teaching; assessing the distance learners in the DLLP; and searching for extra-curricular materials.

4.2.1.1 Online Teaching

The main purpose behind recruiting tutors from the ELI in this DL programme is to teach English from a distance, thus this duty has emerged as a substantial one and is counted as crucial. Distance teaching was highlighted years ago by some scholars such as (Moore 1972, 1997, 2007; Moore and Kearsley 1996) who mentioned that distance education occurred in an environment that has unique characteristics of separation and this demands unique teaching and learning behaviours. The participants were aware of this duty and its unique characteristics, and this was clear in their responses and their perceptions of their distance teaching in data which emerged from both RJs and SSIs.

From the RJs' data, most of the participants thought that although it is a challenging experience, it is a good and an interesting one. Sheren, for example, pointed to this in her reflective journal by saying:

> "Teaching distance learning students is a challenge, but overall a very good experience. Personally, I like teaching D learners because this is a very personalized way of teaching" (Sheren: RJ).

Diana added in her RJ that online teaching made her up to date with technology:

> "It is interesting to me as a teacher as I feel I am keeping up with technology" (Diana: RJ).

This duty of on-line teaching also emerged later in the SSIs' data, because, as mentioned earlier, the RJs contributed to the development of the SSIs' questions and the three data collection methods are complementary in nature. This can be seen in the formulation of the following question:

> MH: Some of your colleagues mentioned in the reflective journal that the teaching experience in such an environment is very interesting. Do you agree?

Reminding the participants of their responses to the RJs was done intentionally to ascertain how the study's methods are complementary. In response to this question Ruba and Amal mentioned other factors which impact their experience of online teaching:

> "It depends on the class and it depends also on the tools that you have, the distance learning tools that you have. We still do not have proper tools, you know what I mean, but if you have more tools where you can add interest to the class, I guess it will be much better." (Ruba: SSI).

"The best part of it was how to encourage students to be interactive through distance learning system, a distance learning system. It's not easy to because it's not a face-to-face class, so it is not easy to feel or to monitor how the students interact." (Amal: SSI).

Meanwhile, Catherine commented:

"I don't know about the word 'interesting'. It's not quite the word I would use. It's a good experience. I mean, the actual using technology in teaching, I think you know, is the way things are moving and—I don't know, this word 'interesting'—it's been useful. You get a sense of achievement when the students do pass and move on but there are lots of drawbacks" (Catherine: SSI).

The particpants views here show that different factors influence the ways in which they experience their duties and these include the students themselves (the class), technology, and the need to motivate the DLs e.g. to be more interactive, but the overall impression was that it was challenging yet useful.

4.2.1.2   Assessing the Distance Learners

The second duty which emerged from the data was related to the tutors' assessment of their DLs' performance in this programme. One definition of assessment is *'Testing/ evaluating student performance and providing feedback to students for grading purposes'* (Poe and Stassen, 2002, p. 36). As I understand from this definition, assessment can be related to students' final grades thus, it takes a summative form. Meanwhile, Evans et al, (2014, p. 296) state that *'Formative assessment is designed to aid learning by generating feedback information that benefits students during the learning process and leads to enhanced learning outcomes'*. Hence, this section will find out through the participants' voices their role in assessing their students in this learning environment and whether this role is seen as a summative assessor of learning or as a facilitator of learning through ongoing informal as well as formal formative assessment. Before presenting these data, I thought it might be helpful to initially and briefly present the assessment system of this specific course as collected from the programme's official documents and as cited in the file of Distance Learning Teachers' Job Duties:

Table 4.1: The DLLP Course Work and Assessment

Course Work and Assessment
o Give students 5 HW assignments; each worth 2 marks.
o Give 5 quizzes in the semester; total of 15 marks.
o Post 10 different discussion topics for the students to comment on; half a mark for commentary on each topic with a total of 5 marks
o The mark division of the semester course work will be as follows: **(10 + 15+ 5 = 30 semester work + 70 Final Exam = 100 marks)**

The reason behind presenting the details here is to illustrate to the readers the lack of the e-tutors' freedom in assessment approaches. I was interested in how much the participants are following this assessment system because I am aware from my teaching experience that tutors usually strictly follow whatever is officially assigned. I need to re-emphasize my position here which is to present my participants' views as they are. Therefore, the following question was asked with this position in mind;

MH: How do you usually assess your DLs in this programme?

Most of the participants' responses, as I expected, demonstrated strict following of both summative and formative assessment system presented above. The following are two extracts of these responses from the SSIs by Sheren and Cathy:

"For the evaluation system here, we have a hundred marks. It's a set system from the distance learning … We have four assignments then we have—every assignment stands for four months—then we have two quizzes. Every quiz stands for ten marks though then we take ten. Then we have their participation group activity on the forum. There we evaluate their forum participation" (Sheren: SSI);

"The evaluation is simply on their homework and homework assignments and quizzes and their participation in the forum. You know, they have a forum that they have to participate in it and in the final exam" (Cathy: SSI).

The findings also revealed that some of the participants talked about formative as well as summative assessments:

"I believe the students have so many formative assessments during one term; they have four homework and two quizzes" (Juliette: SSI).

This participant went on to highlight the value of sending back the students' mistakes with their marks:

"When the students see the marks—I usually send back their mistakes—so the student is kind of assessing how she's progressing through the course,

rather than assessing her abilities in a specific area or something, but it's how she progresses throughout the course" (Juliette: SSI).

The findings show that the tutors used both types of assessment; summative assessments were used at the end of a unit, chapter or semester to assess and evaluate how much learning students have gained and retained and these were used more strictly. On the other hand, formative assessment was used during instruction and throughout the learning process to help students learn the syllabus material.

Furthermore, Noor had the opinion about how stringent the programme was including assessment as she reflected on this in her answer to a similar question in the RJ:

"We are very tied to certain timings, materials, and assessment methods" (Noor: RJ).

These extracts represent most of the other participants' responses to this question perhaps indicating that the tutors do not tend to have authority or control over their students' assessment.

In addition to the tutors' strict following of the assessment system designed by the DL Deanship and their usage of both formative and summative (but mostly summative) assessment to evaluate their students, another basic issue that emerged from the data related to students' lack of computer skills that affected their ability to download their homework assigments, and which subsequently negatively affected their performance. This issue was raised by Cathy:

"they have to send homework assignments, they have to complete quizzes and the forum, and I think sometimes the lack of skills in—even computer skills—can affect their performance. So sometimes, for example, they have a homework assignment; I can see that they've downloaded the assignment and then when I come to correct, there are no attachments." (Cathy: SSI).

This issue of students' computer illiteracy is considered a major challenge, because as seen here it affects the DLs' assessment. This challenge will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five (this overlapping between themes emphasizes what I mentioned previously about how the themes and the sub-themes are complementary in this study).

On the other hand, the same participant Cathy went on to explain that it is her duty to provide her learners with complete exam instructions:

"I give them complete exam instructions. I give them all the instructions they need about the location, the timing, everything" (Cathy: SSI).

Similarly, her colleague Noor provided her learners with sample exams:

"Of course I have to write a sample exam. I have to send my students sample exams and questions. In the download centre I usually upload PowerPoint presentations, revision worksheets" (Noor: SSI).

Whether this supports or does not support the learners, autonomy is questionable as the learners totally rely on their tutors who, as was mentioned, 'give them all the instructions'. This suggests that the e-tutors here are spoon feeding their learners from a distance.

Overall, the participant's responses presented in this section largely suggest that they strictly follow the deanship's system; an evaluation system which does not give the tutors a chance to have any authority over their learners' assessment. This condition might raise the query that if the tutors do not have freedom in evaluating their students' level, would the distance learners, in turn, have any chance to evaluate themselves or their peers in this programme. In relation to the literature on learner autonomy, Lamb, (2003) for example, argues for language learners to have opportunities to monitor and evaluate their own competence in his discussion of self-regulation and self-management strategies. Poe and Stassen (2002) also argue that assessment in online learning should be of high value to the teaching/learning process and *'not [merely] another add-on which is of little use to instructors'* (p.36). On the contrary, the participants' methods of assessment seem to suggest that assessment in Saudi universities is based on a teacher-centred learning approach and that learners are passive receptors, as proposed by Abdulrahman (2007):

Our present education system indicates that knowledge should be disseminated by the teacher to students… To assess the effectiveness of this transfer of knowledge, assessment methods devised ranging from tests, quizzes, assignments, and examinations to project work, are all generally based on a teacher-centred learning. The student's function is thus reduced to one of passive reception. He listens, remembers, and repeats what has been presented to produce the desired outcome (p. 82).

Thus, the above discussion of the participants' views, and how these relate to previous research sheds light on their interpretation of the tutors' duty of assessing and evaluating their DLs and how this duty is reflected in how they perceive their roles and in their learners' lack of control over their evaluation.

In the following section, another e-tutors' duty, which is related to searching for external information resources will be explored.

4.2.1.3   Searching for External Language Learning Resources

Another duty which emerged from the data during our conversations about the role of the tutor is related to searching for external learning resources. It emerged indirectly through their response to this question:

> MH: Many of your colleagues again, in their reflective journal, mentioned the use of websites which they use to help their students in learning the language. Do you have any idea about such sources and if yes, can you tell me more about them please?

This question is another example of those questions which were based on the RJs' outcomes (as explained in section 4.1 of this chapter). In response to this question, the participants' responses varied as each participant thought of a different source. Liza, for instance, mentioned some web-sites that might help her learners:

> "The Internet is now full of educational websites like edHelper, like Smart Teachers, like Busy Teachers, and I also recommend, Busy Teacher, it's a very good one. There is also a very interesting listening website. This is ESL touch lab.com. This one actually is divided into three different levels: easy, medium and difficult, and it provides the audio track with the multiple choice questions. So we just play the audio and the students listen" (Liza: SSI).

This sounds encouraging because any language learning programme should provide its learners with external learning materials rather than limiting them to the assigned textbooks.

Liza's colleague Diana also tried to help her learners by guiding them to different sites:

> "I'm trying as much as I can to guide them to use different sites that will make their English language better, I have to be up-to-date. It's like this is giving me an insight" (Diana: SSI)

The extracts from the interviews so far seem to match some of those as revealed by the e-tutors' reflective journals. One example is that from Huda's journal entry:

> "I usually provide my students with extensive listening exercises from other websites and I upload tracks on download centre…" (Huda: RJ)

While the above responses focused on the Internet web sites, Faten thought of another way of making her learners learn more effectively:

> "Well, I don't know. I mean, first of all, what are the ways of making their learning more effective. I always advise them to read more, to go home and then check the book again and before reading to look at the questions posed in the book and I encourage them to write in the forum but they don't do much writing of course, to be honest. That's it, I think. Yeah, that's it" (Faten: SSI).

This participant did not guide the learners to any external resources as such but rather encouraged their extended use of language skills such as reading and writing as well as specific learning strategies as a means of developing their language learning. These findings suggest that some of the e-tutors were encouraging their learners to learn beyond the set lessons by pointing them to online resources or advising them to read and develop their reading strategies, all of which can help promote autonomous language learning.

In spite of these participants' understanding of the importance of providing the learners with extra learning resources, it is noticeable that only a few participants had managed to find extra resources. Many tutors seemed not to be interested and no reasons were mentioned by most of them for not providing resources. Liza, the coordinator, explained how she helped the e-tutors by recommending and suggesting websites that might help them to find extra materials.

> "Sometimes I guide the tutors. I give them—I just recommend or suggest the websites and they are free to use whatever suits their students, yeah… but I give the teachers actually a complete list and they can search for more, and they are not obliged to use everything" (Liza: SSI).

It can perhaps be argued that little provision of extra learning resources meant little development of learner autonomy.

Having discussed the ways in which the teachers' duties influence their role, I will now move on to considering the other sub-theme which emerged under the role of the tutor.

4.2.2   Issues Influencing the Role of the E-Tutor

In any language teaching programme, there are factors that affect the role of its tutors. This sub-theme unveils some of these factors including: tutors' skills, tutors' experience, and tutors' perception of their role as well as the role of technology in supporting this role. In the following each one of these components will be explored in detail.

4.2.2.1 The E-Tutors' Skills

This component has emerged as one of the factors that has an impact on the role of the e-tutors in this programme, which demands its candidates to have specific skills. To find out the skills which participants felt they needed, the following question was asked in the SSIs:

> MH: What skills do you think the e-tutor should have to be able to teach in the distance language environment effectively?

Most of the participants' responses were focused around one skill (computer skills); this focus was apparent in Liza's response, for example when she asserted that this is a main skill needed by the tutor:

> "The first and the main, major, important skill, is dealing with the computer. Computer skills; this is number one" (Liza: SSI).

Liza, as coordinator of the programme, went on to add that one of the major requirements when recruiting tutors in this programme was to have computer skills:

> "I only and usually accept the teachers who give distance learning classes, teachers who have computer skills—not expert users, but at least very good users" (Liza: SSI).

I think this sounds logical as the tutors in this programme will totally rely on the computer in their distance teaching experience.

Other participants such as Diana agreed on the importance of this skill. This was apparent in the following conversation between us:

> MH: Do you believe that there are specific skills that are essential for tutors at distance language learning programme?
>
> Diana: The use of computers.
>
> MH: That's it.
>
> Diana: Yes, because if I'm teaching here in the class, it might end up the whole year and I don't ask my students to do anything on the computer, maybe, but the situation is different with distance sessions" (Diana: SSI).

Diana went on to confirm that this skill is very important by adding that the lack of computer skills causes the tutors to panic:

"…some of them panic when they are disconnected with the students. Sometimes there is a very simple technical problem in her laptop or in her computer and she doesn't know how to fix it" (Diana: SSI).

Their colleague Juliette also highlighted the value of this skill:

"I would say like an initial understanding of how the computer works and how to browse the Internet, a very technical side of the story. This has to be a skill that the teachers should know about before actually giving that sort of course" (Juliette: SSI).

It is normal for the tutors to panic, as stated by Diana, if the internet is disconnected because this is the basic tool of interaction between the tutor and her students, so the tutors should have an initial understanding, as suggested by Juliette, of how to handle any problem which might occur during the online meeting. Lack of this skill, as will be explored later, is considered as one of the challenges that the programme's organisers face in this teaching environment.

On the other hand, only a few other participants like Nadia and Amal thought of skills other than computer skills. Nadia, for example, thought of the necessity of having an artistic touch:

"I should have a little bit of an artistic touch because I have to present something simple, especially in designing PowerPoint presentations" (Nadia: SSI).

Meanwhile, Amal thought that the tutor should be innovative to be able to convey her message:

"I think she should be innovative, an innovative tutor, and equipped with a lot of methods and techniques, strategies, in order to have the opportunity to convey her message" (Amal: SSI).

From my personal teaching experience, I share Amal's opinion, because a teacher does have a message that needs to be communicated effectively to her students.

Furthermore, to back up these responses by referring to the participants' reflections in the reflective journals, Juliette thought of another skill which correlated with showcasing information sources to support her students' learning

"I tried to manage by providing extensive listening from websites and by uploading tracks on download centre" (Juliette: RJ).

As seen from these findings, the focus is consistently kept on the computer skills. These skills have been considered significant in online environments as suggested by Poe and Stassen (2002, p. 9) *'An online course requires a high level of computing power and reliable, telecommunications infrastructure'*. Comparing the participants' perspectives, regarding the necessity of e-tutors' computer skills, with previous related studies revealed similar outcomes. In their 2004 study, for example, McPherson and Nunes (2004) presented a list of skills needed by e-tutors in their online teaching. This list includes many skills, but the one to be highlighted here is *'to be able to cope with and resolve on-line conferencing conflicts'* (p. NC). Moreover, the coordinator's comments on recruiting the tutors who are skilful with computers align with Salmon's (2003) conditions of recruiting. Salmon presents a table including many competencies needed when recruiting what he called (e-moderators). This table includes technical skills that the recruited e-moderators should have to *'be able to appreciate the basic structure of online conferencing, and the web and internet's potential for learning'* (p. 54).

To end this section which focused mostly on the e-tutors' computer skills, the organizers and policy makers of this programme would need to put some conditions on recruiting the e-tutors by making sure that they are well trained or ready to be trained. Because this job is considered as an additional job and the tutors are paid for it separately, they need to be fully qualified to be able to manage between two jobs (regular classroom teaching and online tutoring (e-tutoring). Unless the e-tutor is fully qualified and trained for this specific role, she will not be able to achieve the goals and objectives of this programme. Most critically, the findings showed that the e-tutors lacked awareness of a specific scheme of work for online teaching which they would perhaps consistently follow to help facilitate the process and also meet the objectives of the programme more effectively. Considering models of teaching online such as that of Salmon's (2013) can offer a useful guide to e-tutors (more suggestions around this will be provided in the final chapter of the thesis).

This section has focused on the e-tutors' perceptions of skills required in this environment, as identified by them rather than trying to provide a comprehensive list of skills. It has also showed the significance of these skills in the e-tutor's role in this programme. The next section will explore another component namely the tutor's experience.

4.2.2.2   The E-Tutors' Experience

Another factor affecting the role of the e-tutors is their experience. To find out more about this factor and to gain greater insights into the participants' backgrounds, the following question was probed in both tools (RJs & SSIs):

> MH: How long have you been working as a regular teacher and as an e-tutor in this programme?

Initially, this question was considered an ice-breaking one between us, but later, as the data analysis proceeded, 'years of experience' was identified as one of the factors that have an impact on the tutor's role in this programme, in addition to their skills. Therefore, its discussion could not be neglected. It was found throughout the data analysis stage that participants with long years of teaching in the regular classes (see table 3.3 in chapter three for a summary of each participant's experience in both regular and distance sessions) are less aware of some terminology related to DL environment than those with less experience in regular class teaching. It was interesting to find that, the latter group of teachers, specifically those who had recently obtained their PhD degrees from British and American universities (perhaps where this kind of learning has been in practice for a long time) seemed to be more familiar with terms like autonomous learning, self-directed and independent learning than others with 20-30 years of teaching experience in regular classes. During interviews, I found that some of those tutors had not even heard of these terms before and I sometimes had to define these terms to help them to understand their meaning.

Moreover, it was noticed that the younger graduates were more open and accepting of technological innovation and generally familiar with terms related to e-learning (e.g. (synchronous vs asynchronous). Previous research in this area matches this study's particular finding, where in Al-Dosari's study (2011), for example, it was found that young faculty in Saudi universities are more interested in the implementation of technology than older teacher graduates who seem more likely to conduct their courses in more traditional layouts. Kopp et al. (2012) stress the necessity of e-tutors' experience in promoting online learning and the necessity of having enough expertise in teaching, generally. Nevertheless, it can be argued here that being experienced in classroom teaching doesn't necessarily imply success in online teaching where perhaps this environment calls for a different set of skills.

4.2.2.3   The E-Tutors' Perception of their Role (Role Description)

A third factor affecting the tutor's role in this programme is the participants' views of their role in this context of teaching. This issue has emerged as a crucial one in this study. The following perceptions arose:

> MH: How do you describe your role in this programme?

Most of the participants such as: Juliette, Sheren, Huda, Liza, Celine, Ruba, Cathy, and Rana see themselves as facilitators. This means that they realise that students can learn more if they are not taught everything directly but taught how to learn and are provided with the right support. Juliette's response in the interview is an example of those who realised this and identified themselves as a facilitator:

> "I feel myself as a facilitator because I provide some sort of tasks that would probably allow them to learn something" (Juliette: SSI).

Her response implies that she acknowledges that her teaching is designed to support and facilitate students' learning. Her colleague Sheren had a similar awareness:

> "…usually we cover two units per lecture, though it seems impossible teaching two units in one and a half hours but as I mentioned, we facilitate" (Sheren: SSI).

Moreover, Huda goes on to justify her choice of being a facilitator:

> "I choose to be a facilitator, because I'm not teaching them like regular students. I'm not explaining each and every thing to them. I'm helping them. I'm just helping them with things they don't understand. This is what I'm doing…I'm just helping them on things they are stuck with" (Huda: SSI).

Correlating Huda's responses with her on-line teaching experience (one year) is one example of my earlier argument that perhaps less experienced tutors in this distance teaching programme tend to be more aware of the necessity of promoting their students' autonomy by facilitating their learning and only providing them with help when needed.

In her journal entry, Liza (the coordinator of the DLLP) also thought of herself as a facilitator and added another role 'a mentor':

> "I think I am a facilitator and a mentor. I give the guidelines to students and then give questions, observe their answers, and correct their mistakes" (Liza: SSI).

By the same token, some other participants like Celine mentioned other roles besides being a faciliator. Celine, for example, described herself as adopting a combination of more than one role besides her being a facilitator such as, a guide, a tutor, a friend, and a bridge:

> "I think I'm a blend of all, of all. You can't alienate one from the other; a guide, a tutor, a friend, a facilitator, basically a bridge. That's it—basically I construct a bridge between the learner and the target language and the rest follows but then you have to keep switching roles as you're teaching" (Celine: SSI).

Her colleague Ruba also referred to being a guide as part of the tutor's role:

> "So the tutor here is just a guide and the students are self-learning and they report back to you, okay, so it means the responsibility of the students is for their own learning and the responsibility of the e-tutor is to guide, to give them the way, to direct them how they can learn, how they can depend on themselves" (Ruba: SSI).

However, Ruba's response here is an interesting one as her use and understanding of the term 'guide' seems broader and goes beyond guiding the students in the course contents and materials (e.g. the units of the book, tasks) which is more tied to what goes on in the actual sessions. Her view of the role of a guide is more in line with promoting learner autonomy as she would show them 'how to learn' and how they can be self-dependant, again indications of autonomy and control over learning.

Unlike others, some participants like Cathy did not see herself as a facilitator:

> "Not so much a facilitator; you can't really be a facilitator in this context, you know. It's more direct; you can't—there's no time to wait for the students to respond. It's more lecturing, you know" (Cathy: SSI).

Connecting Cathy's response to the fact that she was from England may explain the reason behind her holding this veiw given that teaching circumstances in the Saudi context are different from those in England. Cathy seemed disappointed by the context in which she was teaching; she wished to be a facilitator but she could not due to time constraints, meaning that the tutors had little contact time during the sessions and there was only enough time to cover the unit from the book and not sufficient to provide further support to the DLs. (More on time constraints will follow in Chapter Five).

In line with Cathy's view, another participant (Rana) described herself as an instructor who does everything for her students for reasons other than time constraints:

> "With our students we do everything…As an instructor we give instructions. We explain actually; we don't let them go and study, otherwise they will find a big difficulty because studying language is not like any other subject they have here in the programmes. English is different… we have to explain the curriculum and we help as much as we can" (Rana: SSI).

Thus, based on these findings I can argue that some of the tutors in this programme were willing to help their students to be autonomous learners, yet others thought that this is not possible due to various obstacles.

To end this section, it is important to note that the majority of participants' choice of the word facilitator to describe their role in this context revealed their understanding that their role in this context is different from their role in conventional classrooms. This choice also matches some of the discussions presented earlier in the literature review (section 2.9.1), such as that the on-line tutor's role is not anymore a sage on the stage (King, 1993). This is supported later by Collison et al. (2000), who posited several key roles of the facilitator, one of which is to be a 'Guide on the side'. They add that this role's purpose is *'to guide interaction among students, facilitate inquiry interventions crafted to identify and highlight important points, then move discussions forward to a higher conceptual level'* (p. 1).

The above extracts show the participants' perspective of their role in this programme as each one is looking at her role from her angle and is affected by different factors such as nationality and experience. Salmon (2003) points out that the role of the e-tutor or e-moderator, as he calls it, is affected by several factors, *'What the e-moderator does online, and how much, varies according to the purposes, intentions, plans, and hopes for the conference –and of course with the motivation, knowledge and skills of the e-moderator'* (p. 52).

The following component focuses on the role of technology in supporting the process of e-tutoring itself.

4.2.2.4   The Role of Technology in Supporting E-Tutoring

E-tutoring and technology are interrelated and inseparable. The E-prefix is added to the word tutor to signify the contribution of technology in the communication between the tutor and her students. As teaching in this programme occurs fully online without any face-to-face interactions, the role of technology is highly significant. Online technologies are, as pointed out by Trevathan and Myers (2013) '*at the core of flexible delivery courses and facilitate material provision, student collaboration, and subject administration'* (p. 1). Hence, this issue of the role of technology has emerged from the data as an important one to support the e-tutoring. The data analysis in regard to this component pointed to two main issues to be explored in this section: tools for interaction and tools for presentation.

- *Tools for Interaction:*

Prior to the presentation and exploration of the tools referred to by the participants, I thought it might be useful to summarize the nature of interaction between the tutors and their students in this programme as aforementioned in section 1.3 as follows:

1) Due to the Saudi cultural constraints, the e-tutors cannot see their students virtually and cannot hear them in spite of the presence of the microphone and speakers in the CENTRA System.

2) Similarly, the DLs in this environment can only listen to their tutors' voices explaining the lesson and the lesson is recorded to enable them to re-listen to it whenever they need.

Within this context, the participants were asked to respond to the following question in both their reflective journals and interviews.

> MH: Do you think the technology or the used system has any influence on both yours and your learners' roles?

The participants mostly agreed in their responses that communication between the tutors and their DLs was mainly through two tools; chat-box during the session (synchronous tool) and e-mails outside the session (asynchronous tool). Rana, for example explained:

"Our contact with the DLs takes place through the chat-box during the session
and by e-mails after the session. The system enables the learners to audio
record the session to be able to listen to it later" (Rana: SSI).

Before presenting the rest of the data, it is important to point out that what is meant by chat-box in this context is non-verbal communication by using buttons. There is a hand button in the CENTRA system of this programme to signify raising students' hands to ask or answer questions. Also, yes and no buttons are available to respond to questions, and it has an instant non-verbal chatting option with others by clicking on their names and writing in the chat box (Alsaeid, 2011). The following Figure illustrates the directory of virtual classroom system (Arabic version) used in the study's distance programme to clarify the meaning of the tools of the system. This directory is one of the documents analysed in this study.

Figure 4.4: The Arabic copy of the tools of the system

As noticed, this directory is written in Arabic to make it easier for the students to read the instructions but an English format is also available:
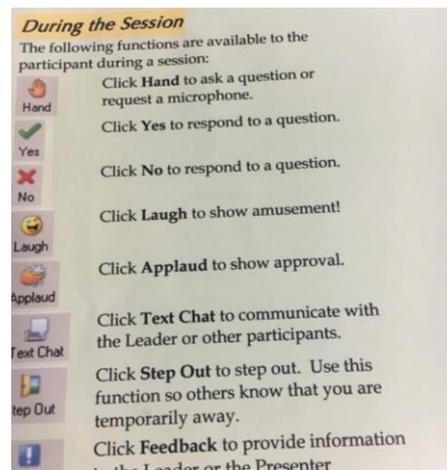
Figure 4.5: The English copy of the tools of the system

On the same topic, some participants referred to the same tools for communication in their journal entries. Huda's journal entry is one example:

"Chat box, e-mails, and forum discussions are used to communicate and manage their ideas" (Huda: RJ).

The tutors' attitudes to tools for communication used in the programmes varied indeed. Faten, for example, thought that the application of chat-box is a wonderful way of teaching and communicating with her DLs:

"I made use of the chat box and I found the chat boxes to be like a wonderful way because I would explain something to them and I say to them, please, give me an example; show me how would you say, for example—how would you explain what happened yesterday. If I'm talking about the past, for example, they would type examples. They liked it and I hope they learnt from it" (Faten: SSI).

Her colleague Amal was also positive and she utilised chat-box on the system and tried to communicate with her learners via the chat-box in a way that makes them feel they are in a classroom:

"I wait for students just to write their answers in the text chat box and I always give them sentences of praise and so on in order to make them feel that they are like students in classes" (Amal: SSI).

Juliette, on the other hand, had a different attitude when she thought that these tools might not be enough to communicate with the DLs and she added that they made the class boring for the teachers:

"I feel like it's really boring to keep talking, talking, talking for one and a half hours. Sometimes I like to stop and say, "Girls are you following? Could you just raise your hand (by pressing on the hand button on the system) or do something or nudge or something, just to show me that you're here because I feel like I'm talking to myself" (Juliette: SSI).

I tend to agree that the situation can feel unusual to keep talking for one and a half hours with little response from the other side (no vocal responses and minimal written responses using the tools available). To solve this problem, the course organizers have to think of other ways of communication.

Cathy shared the same opinion as her colleague Juliette:

"…so there's very little actual contact with the students, apart from like using e-mail or other means of communication like WhatsApp and things like that" (Cathy: SSI).

Therefore, before exploring other tools for communication that emerged from the data, I thought it might be appropriate to note that the participants' views on using e-mail to contact their DLs is similar to its usage in other online learning environments, as indicated by Packham et al. (2006):

E-mail was identified as a vital component of the on-line learning process and is utilised for a variety of tasks including communicating on either a one-to-one or one-to-many basis with students. Email can also be utilised to answer quires, posing questions and submitting assessments (p. 242).

Additionally, the reflective journals and the interview data revealed some other tools of communication such as 'WhatsApp groups'. The usage of this tool creates a friendly atmosphere as indicated by Rana:

"…we're making one group on WhatsApp with my students. I call them on the WhatsApp: the lecture has started, I'm here, where are you, come and sometimes they love it and we start you know in a friendly way together" (Rana: SSI).

Amal and Nadia also highlighted the use of WhatsApp as a means of interaction in their journal entries:

"The teacher can create a WhatsApp group for her students so they can communicate regularly" (Amal: RJ).

"…also, through WhatsApp group they can exchange ideas and contact with me" (Nadia: RJ).

In addition, Amal added that creating a WhatsApp group or a Facebook one with her learners makes the learning process more interesting

"…like if you create a group on WhatsApp or Facebook. You have a lot of means and it adds to the learning process—I think students become more interested in learning through these means of technology, rather than sticking to the traditional ways" (Amal: SSI).

This sounds reasonable, yet the use of these tools still demonstrates that the e-tutors and the students cannot communicate by speech and cannot see each other, and this can be considered as one of the basic challenges faced by the participants in this environment of language learning and teaching and will be discussed in Chapter Five which is related to the theme of challenges experienced by e-tutors in the DLLP.

The next sub-section will explore the tools of presentation as emerged from the study's data.

- *Tools for Presentations:*

In this sense, the tools for presentation mean the ways in which the tutors present the assigned curriculum to their DLs as generated from the study's data. The following question was asked:

MH: How do you present the materials to your students?

In their responses to this question, Cathy and Maryam highlighted the importance of the PowerPoint presentation:

"…but I tend to prepare a PowerPoint presentation with everything for the students and then focus on things in the lesson … We prepare everything for the students. We have to explain the curriculum and we help as much as we can" (Cathy: SSI);

"I import the PowerPoint I have prepared for my lesson and students like it very much. It's better than forwarding the scanned pages of the book, especially when the PowerPoint contains everything about the lesson. I use it to do that" (Maryam: SSI).

Moreover, Diana, another participant, does the same as her colleagues and uses the PowerPoint presentation and also prepares a lot of additional activities:

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"I usually prepare these PowerPoint presentations. I give them a lot of exercises. I prepare a lot of activities and open the chat box and through writing they can answer" (Diana: SSI).

The same tool 'PowerPoint presentation' was also used by Juliette to make the sessions more appealing for the learners:

"I can change the scanned materials to PowerPoint presentations to make it more attractive to the students" (Juliette: SSI).

Amal, moreover, added in her journal that the use of PowerPoint presentations makes the teaching more interesting for the students:

"The most interesting part was a PowerPoint presentation covering grammar and vocabulary of some units. Students were keen to participate in doing the exercises" (Amal: RJ).

These responses indicate that the PowerPoint presentation plays an important role in the tutors' presentation of their lessons.

For more clarification on the use of Power-Point presentation, one participant Sheren pointed to the use of the Agenda, through which the tutors can upload their PowerPoint presentation:

"Agenda is a tool in which we upload any kind of PowerPoint presentation and we can use it online for our students. For example, if I want to teach grammar, the PPT can be uploaded through Agenda" (Sheren: SSI).

It was clear that Sheren was dependent on Agenda in her session. She added:

"On the CENTRA teaching page, we have a tool called 'Agenda'. On Agenda, we upload—I can upload—I can share a PowerPoint presentation. So my students can see it on their screens while I teach them from there. I can highlight things. I can make them bold" (Sheren: SSI).

Furthermore, another participant Faten mentioned a new tool used for presentation of lessons called Appshare:

"the first time I used the application called Appshare, which is to present the material in front of the students —so that students see the material and we can only underline or—yeah, I think the best we could do is underline things or maybe draw a star or something and then I would go on, you know, explaining and explaining, like presenting all the material and then maybe give them some exercises later on" (Faten: SSI).

It seems that these tools, if used properly, are able to facilitate the tutor's role in this teaching environment. However, I may argue here that there was no evidence of students being involved in deciding and choosing how they prefer the materials to be presented to them or through which tools. If this was the case perhaps, it could offer them an opportunity to be independent learners; however, choices were, in fact made for them.

4.2.3 Summary of Findings related to Research Question One

In the previous sections and sub-sections, I have presented and explored the first main theme of this study which is related to the role of the tutors in the DLLP along with its sub-themes and components. This is to address the study's first research question. The presentation has focused on two sub-themes which are respectively: the e-tutors' duties and the issues influencing the role of the e-tutor in the DLLP. The discussion of the sub-themes related to the tutors' duties in this programme included findings around: on-line teaching, assessing the DLs, and searching for external language learning sources. One particular issue that emerged was that the tutors tended to lack control over their learners' assessment, largely following the Deanship's requirements.

The focus then shifted to the second sub-theme, which concerned issues influencing the role of the tutor in this specific programme along with their respective components: the e-tutors' skills, their experience, their role description, and finally the role of technology in supporting their role. The findings revealed the skills which the e-tutors' felt they needed to develop to support their role in this programme, focusing particularly around one element related to computer skills. This would suggest that not all e-tutors are well trained in such an essential skill, which would impact on how well they would perform their duties as an online tutor. How the e-tutors' described their role in this programme was also one of the key factors, revealing that although the majority of the tutors described themselves as facilitators, in many cases they seemed to act as the main authority of teaching in this programme, allowing the learners no chance to have any sort of authority. Finally, the findings revealed that the tutors in this programme applied both synchronous and asynchronous tools to contact and communicate with their DLs, but with mixed views on how effective these tools might be. Also there are constraints which tended to limit communication through speech. The role of technology in this programme and how it contextualized and sometimes hindered the tutor's role (due to the inadequate nature of interaction) was explored.

After exploring and discussing the theme of 'the role of the tutors in the DLLP' and how it addressed the first question of the study, the next section will focus on the second research question of the study.

4.3   Response to Research Question Two

From the e-tutors' perspectives, what role do distance learners play in their own learning in the context of DLLP?

This question will be addressed by exploring *theme two*: **The Role of the Distance Learner in the DLLP.** For the sake of clarity, the following Figure presents this main theme along with its sub-themes and components:

The Role of the Distance Learner in the DLLP

Differences between Distance Learning Sessions and Regular Classes

The Learner-Tutor Relationship

| The Methods of Interaction | The Nature of the Relationship |
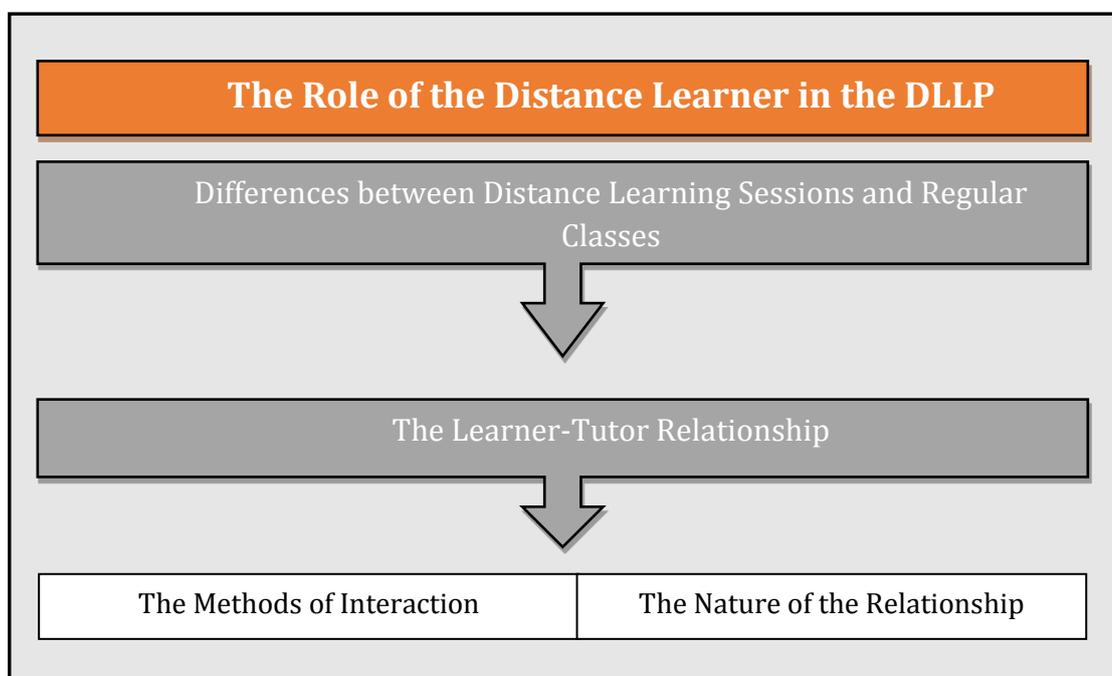
Figure 4.6: Theme Two and its Related Sub-Themes and Components: The Role of the Distance Learners in the DLLP

This section explores and presents the role of the DLs in this programme from their e-tutors' perspectives. It is worth reminding the readers that this study focuses on data collected from the tutors and the programme's documents. In other words, I did not have direct contact with the learners themselves for the following reasons:

1) Students in this study are distance learners who do not come on a regular basis to classrooms at the university, so it was hard for me to meet them.

2) As I was settled in Sheffield, UK, during the period of my study, it was inflexible for me to contact the distance learners.

3) Because of some cultural constraints, some families in Saudi Arabia do not allow their daughters to speak with strangers on the phone, so this was one of the obstacles.

4) Finally, this study mainly aims to explore the e-tutors' perspectives such as, how far the e-tutors' of the DLLP allow their learners to have more control over their learning; thus, the focus of this study is on the tutors' role, not the learners'. Nevertheless, the learners' role should not be neglected in this study because this role is of paramount importance as the learners are the ones who this whole programme is designed and established for, so exploring their role at least from the tutors' perspective is important to this research.

Hence, after explaining the reasons behind not contacting the learners in this study and only focusing on their tutors' perspectives, the following sub-section will present the sub-themes of the role of the learner in the DLLP programme which are according to their tutors; the differences between distance learning sessions and regular classes, and the learner-tutor relationship.

4.3.1   Differences between Distance Learning Sessions and Regular Classes

Prior to presenting the role of the learners in this programme from their tutors' perspectives, I will explore the sub-theme of the differences between distance sessions and regular classes. This sub-theme is presented and discussed initially in order to provide a background to the e-tutors' perceptions of their learners' role as evident in the relationships between learners and tutors.

All the participants in this study are mainly engaged as regular class English instructors as well as working as e-tutors on the DLLP, thus it is not hard for them to see the differences between the two contexts and to reply to the question regarding this issue:

> MH: What are the differences between teaching in a regular classroom and in distance learning sessions?

In their responses, the majority of the participants such as Noor, Nadia, and Faten, focused on the differences in their role as tutors in the two contexts of teaching. Noor, for example, thought her role as a classroom teacher is easier, as she could have more control and follow up of her students' attendance better in regular classes:

"A face-to-face teacher practises a much easier role. I have fixed time. I know when my students are present or absent. I have direct contact with them. We have longer time to spend together but with the distance learning experience, we have shorter time. We only talk to them once a week. You can't see them daily. You can't control their attendance. With the regular students, they can be more positive. I can give them the chance to experience something on their own or take my floor for some time to do something or a presentation or whatever, but with these students, I can't control them" (Noor: SSI).

By the same token, Nadia also thought of her students' attendance control as a variation:

"In regular teaching, I control the students' attendance. If you don't come, you don't take a mark for this task. For distance learning I don't control their attendance but listening, or according to the regulations here, listening to the recording is counted as attendance" (Nadia: SSI).

Similar to Noor and Nadia, Faten thought that she could have more control over face-to-face students, as she called them:

"So the first thing is control. I have control over the face-to-face learners. I make sure that they are present—I think I can get their attention, so as a role—my role, I can get their attention and I think I could be more creative. I could ask them to do things, to write things. I think I'm more able to run a student-centred session in face-to-face classes than of course in the distance" (Faten: SSI).

Faten's response suggests that she wishes she could control her DLs in the same way as she controls her face-to-face learners. Her understanding of student-centeredness seems to be somewhat puzzling as what she describes as a student-centred session is in fact a teacher-led session where she seems to be in control of almost everything in that session. Also her ability to run a student-centred session in face-to-face classes rather than a distance one seems to be in contrast to the definition of distance learning which is perceived to be a learner-centred term according to White (2003). From my experience as a language teacher, this thinking refers to the tutor's short experience of teaching at a distance, which may be why she understates the nature of teaching from distance.

Another perspective arose when their colleague Juliette thought that she could have better chances to track her students' progress in regular classes:

"The way I follow up on the students and I have the opportunity to track their progress is way clearer than the thing I'm doing with my EMIS students or e-learning students because you don't have access to these students. You can have access like through e-mails but still sometimes you send e-mails but you

never get replies. As I said, it's a face-to-face thing, while on the other side it's an e-mail-based thing" (Juliette: SSI).

Another participant Sheren thought that her role as a distance teacher is limited as she could not see her students' performance as in regular classrooms:

> "As a distance learning teacher, my role is a little bit limited because I don't have my students in front of me… I can't see their performance with my own eyes. Well, when I have my students in my class, I can interact with them openly. I can talk to them. I think if I see a student who is shy—in distance learning, what happens if a student is shy? She normally disappears or I have to struggle more to invite her to do something and sometimes it's very difficult for me to know" (Sheren: SSI).

Similar to Sheren, some other participants' perceptions of the disadvantages of e-tutoring included their inability to see their students and the consequences of this. Huda's response was one example of this:

> "Usually when you are in your classroom, in your actual classroom, you can read the eyes of the students. You can see if they understand or if they don't understand. When you don't really see them, it is hard for you to assess their level of understanding and sometimes they are totally silent" (Huda: SSI).

Further discussion of this challenge, that most of the tutor's experience while teaching in this programme will be provided in the presentation of the challenges in the next chapter.

From a different perspective, some participants focused on time as a main variation as indicated by Cathy:

> "As a distance learning teacher, I think the most important thing is just to focus on certain things because of the time limit"; "We have longer time to spend together in regular classes" (Cathy: SSI).

Furthermore, Cathy also thought that teaching in classrooms enabled her to do more activities with her students that make the students more involved than those who learn from a distance:

> "In the classroom, you can do extra exercises, you can use games and other activities in the classroom and the students are more like—they're involved" (Cathy: SSI).

The issue of being more creative in regular classes was raised by another participant Amal, who nevertheless thought that e-tutors need to be more creative than regular class teachers:

> "E-tutors should be more creative than a regular class teacher because regular class teachers have a lot of varieties, have many tools to use, but for distance learning students, I think the tools are not so many so they have to make good use of them" (Amal: SSI).

I tend to disagree with Amal's view because the use of technology in distance learning provides both learners and tutors with various tools, sites, and activities which, if used appropriately, will potentially help the DLs to enhance their language learning. This might suggest a lack of suitable training on the part of the e-tutors in relation to the necessary tools, which could be used in this environment to replace or make up for the tools traditionally used in regular classrooms.

Another participant (Ruba) felt that a big difference between the two contexts was that she missed the personal touch with the learners in the DL mode:

> "Well, I guess they are more or less the same but with the difference of not being able to be in real touch or in real contact with your students all the time, so sometimes you miss this personal touch but again, you are their guide, you are their mentor, you are their helper" (Ruba: SSI).

Lastly, another participant (Maryam) thought that that the best contact with the teacher is possible through classroom:

> "there's no, like, classroom contact with the teacher." (Maryam: SSI).

Upon relating these findings to previous studies in this area, it is noted that these findings tend to confirm existing knowledge in this area. White (1995), for example, posited that in distance education, the teacher could not set up and oversee learning activities and she could not intervene whenever problems emerge; she also could not provide her learners with the needed explanation, correction, feedback, and encouragement (see section 2.7 in Chapter Two for more details of the advantages and disadvantages of these two modes of learning).

Before ending the presentation and analysis of this sub-section of the differences between the two contexts of teaching and learning, it is worth noting that the above data did not include the focus on encouraging and promoting the learners to be more independent and

autonomous language learner in relation to the different contexts. This clearly revealed that the e-tutors themselves have not thought of this variation as a basic one when learning at a distance. In other words, no one has noticed that distance learners need to be more self-sustained as aforementioned by Clarke (2008) (see section 2.6).

This section has provided an understanding of the DLs role by exploring the e-tutor's perspectives on the differences between in-class teaching and DE teaching. This has touched on the issue of learner-tutor relationships, which will be explored more fully in the next section.

4.3.2 The Learner-Tutor Relationship

Initially, I planned, as a researcher, to explore and present the data related to this sub-theme in my presentation of the theme related to the e-tutors' role (section 4.2 of this chapter). However, I reconsidered because, although I am aware that this programme is basically developed to help DLs to learn, the circumstances of this study and the lack of the interaction between me and the DLs meant that I was unable to access the DLs voices directly. I decided, therefore, that it might be more appropriate to include this issue here as a way of valuing the learners' role in this programme and to investigate how the learners and the tutors are related to each other at a distance.

Before embarking on the exploration of this sub-theme, it is important to remember that the relationship between teachers and their learners is clearly significant in any learning/teaching environment. It helps teachers build rapport with their students, and helps students to benefit from the teachers' experience of the world (Abdulrahman, 2007). This vision sounds rational, yet it is important to note that the situation is different in the context of this study as we are talking about the relationship between two people who only interact by e-mails and chat-boxes and perhaps have never met physically.

In general, the participants' responses to this specific issue yielded two issues: the methods of interaction and the nature of the relationship.

4.3.2.1 The Methods of Interaction

This component of the sub-theme of learner-tutor relationship is an example of recurring components as it has been explored earlier in the first part of this chapter while exploring 'the role of technology in supporting e-tutoring' (under 'tools of interaction' see section

4.2.2.4) As I mentioned earlier, some sub-themes and components will be repeated, yet this repetition reflects the different angles that these components have. In this section, for example, the re-appearance of this component is necessary because participants need to get in touch with their DL students in order to establish and maintain a *relationship* with them and to be able to understand the learners' role in the programme. The question raised in the interview was:

> MH: What level of interaction do you usually expect from your distance language learners?

As previously mentioned, the main tools of communication between learners and tutors are e-mails, chat-box, and the use of WhatsApp. E-mails are considered the basic method of interaction between learners and tutors in this programme. Although the participants' responses related to the usage of this tool of communication were fully presented and discussed in section (4.2.2.4), here are further extracts to illustrate different points which do not particularly focus on the actual use of the tools as such but rather on how these tools help influence the relationship between the tutor and her DLs. Cathy, for example, was not pleased as her students used to have more communication with her in the past. She said:

> **"**In the past, there was more communication from students to me through e-mails. They would ask more but these days, very few e-mails; only if there's a problem like: They've been unable to send homework for any reason. Can you accept it by e-mail or you know why have I got this grade? (Cathy: SSI).

Furthermore, Maryam was not pleased either but her reason was different as her students wanted her to explain everything through e-mails:

> "they wait for the teacher to explain everything and even in their e-mails; they wanted me to explain everything and send it to them through e-mails" (Maryam: SSI).

Maryam also added in the same context:

> "Some others, they just—they consider that the session is not enough and they just—maybe the only strategy to learn is asking teachers some questions through e-mails or through text chat" (Maryam: SSI).

The second method of interaction mentioned by the tutors is the usage of "WhatsApp Application". Interestingly, the participants' responses indicated the value of using this

relatively new social android application to keep in touch and maintain the relationships as much as possible with their DLs as proposed by Celine:

> "we are really benefited with these phones, the Android Applications, when they have WhatsApp groups and all that […] the relationships are bound" (Celine: SSI).

Her colleague Amal added:

> "If you create a group on WhatsApp or Facebook. You have a lot of means and it is helpful to the learning process—I think students become more interested in learning through these means of technology, rather than sticking to the traditional ways" (Amal: SSI).

Similarly, in the data collected from the RJs, Maryam mentions several means of communication and explains how she interacts with her DLs through Chat box:

> "Distance learning is a type of education, where students work on their own at home and communicate with faculty and other students via e-mail, electronic forums, video-conferencing, chat rooms, bulletin boards, instant messaging and other forms of computer-based communication. In my case, my students just listen and ask questions in the text chat. We are using CENTRA and students don't have an audio or video option" (Maryam: RJ).

Maryam's response suggests that, given the mode of learning, i.e. DL, there is a need to establish and maintain contact and hence a relationship between the DLs and their tutors and also classmates through these various means of communication. Despite the issues with the audio and video options in this particular DLLP, findings suggest that the two ends (DLs and their e-tutors) are managing to stay in touch using whatever tools are available to them.

4.3.2.2 The Nature of the Relationship

The nature of the relationship between learners and tutors in this programme was not overt because, as mentioned earlier, the lack of audio and visual contact between them made this relationship vague and hard to be established.

Accordingly, I had few participants who commented on the nature of this relationship. One of these few comments was provided by Celine who commented that:

> "I firmly believe that, you know, be what you want them to be. So you have to ensure that, you know, you are with them. You pace with them and then

slowly you lead and they are going to follow you. In the beginning I become like them and then slowly I make them become like me".

These words were an example of how much some of the participants reflected an authoritarian and perhaps anti-autonomy stance, because in autonomous learning environments, the students would tend to be themselves and independent from their teachers. This might explain why most of these students have no choice but to be very reliant on their teachers. As Littlewood (1996) clearly argues, *'the autonomous learner is the one who has the independent capacity to make the choices which govern her actions'* (p. 427). Moreover, this finding would, once again, align with the literature about the Saudi context, with an education system which indicates *'that knowledge should be disseminated by the teacher to students…The student's function is thus reduced to one of passive reception. He listens, remembers, and repeats what has been presented to produce the desired outcome'* (Abdulrahman, 2007: pp. 81-82).

Some other participants, such as Cathy claimed that there is no relationship between her and her learners because she has little contact with them:

> "I don't know. I mean, it's very difficult, as I said, to know exactly what our students are doing because we have so little contact with them. There's just this one session and as I said, you know, many students don't even attend that session, so really it's very difficult to know what they think, how they approach studying, you know, what they do. I don't know" (Cathy: SSI).

Cathy also added that they are not allowed to give their leaerners their personal e-mails which makes it more difficult to establish relationships. She said

> "We're not encouraged to give them our personal e-mails because then they start sending homework and—if they can't send it on EMIS, they'll try to send it to us through our personal e-mails and we're not allowed to accept it" (Cathy: SSI).

As a teacher researcher, I tend to agree with Cathy, as the situation can be quite challenging. For a teacher to build a relationship and establish rapport with her learners in a virtual context where they have no direct contact might require further efforts than those in a physical classroom. This matter of not allowing the learners to interact with their tutors might be owing to cultural reasons as previously mentioned, but it is important to consider that critically and find some ways of helping build relationships.

On the other hand, Nadia had an interesting response on describing her relationship with her learners:

> "The DL student cannot see you but some of them become attached to you, just from your voice" (Nadia: SSI).

I suppose what Nadia means by her comment here is that the DLs would tend to get used to their e-tutors and gradually become more familiar with her voice during the weekly sessions.

Another participant (Ruba), from Egypt, was aware of the differences in teaching environments between Egypt and Saudi Arabia owing to the differences between the two societies. She implies that Saudi Arabia is more culturally conservative and closed. She also points to the differences between a regular classroom and a virtual one and the possible effects of these variations on the nature of the relationship between tutors and learners:

> I'll tell you something. Saudi Arabia is a very different from Egypt for example…When I was in Egypt; I didn't do e-tutoring. I did actual classroom tutoring only, but I guess it's much easier with you seeing your students, even having eye to eye contact with them, you know, having this personal touch, adding this personal touch…" (Ruba: SSI).

I can understand that this participant prefers more contact with her students, not a relationship as she said "behind the microphone". During the interview, I still recall her tone, enthusiasm, and her will to have a stronger relationship with her distance learners which might indicate that perhaps the context and the nature of this particular programme impede the realisation of some of the tutors' beliefs and principles.

To sum up this discussion, it is clear that most e-tutors and distance learners in this DLLP do not have any obvious relationships with each other, and I realized that the somewhat rigid Saudi culture and its constraints has an impact on this issue. Participants from different cultures and nationalities would have liked to improve their relationships with their learners, but found it challenging.

To compare these findings with related literature, I found very few studies focusing on the factors that affect the relationship between tutors and learners in on-line learning environment in Saudi tertiary level. One of these is the study conducted by Al-Shahrani,

(2013) who argues that the relationship gap between students and their on-line lecturers is increasing due to the extensive website use by students.

In conclusion, through the exploration of this main theme and its related sub-themes and components, the aim was to address the second question of the study related to the role of the learners (from the e-tutors' perspective) and investigated the importance of this role in this programme.

4.3.3 Summary of Findings Related to Research Question Two

The second research question of the study was addressed in the previous sections through the exploration of this main theme, namely the role of the DLs in the DLLP from their e-tutor's perspectives.

The first sub-theme was about the differences between distance learning sessions and regular classes. The findings related to this revealed that the e-tutors are aware of the differences between the two modes of education and most of them admitted that in the DL session they do not have as much control as they do in their regular classrooms. This for them was seen as a limitation to their role in terms of how they monitored their DLs' performance and progress, how they gauged their understanding during the session and even how they tracked their attendance. It was believed that not being able to see their students (their gesture and facial expressions) or hear them was a challenge. The tutors' overt desire to control the session and their DLs seems to contradict the concept of promoting a learner-centred approach to teaching through which learners can learn to gain control over their learning.

The second sub-theme of the learner-tutor relationship revealed through the two components of the methods of interaction and the nature of the relationship that there is a clearly ineffective approach to interaction in the DLLP between the e-tutors and their learners from the participants' perspectives. This, as emphasised by some of them, was due to several reasons, including the Saudi cultural constraints and the programme policy which enforced some limitations on the interactive tools used on the programme, thus influencing the nature of the relationship between the DLs and their tutors (i.e. limiting it to the use of e-mails, chat-box, and WhatsApp only). Moreover, it was stressed that given the nature of this limited relationship it was challenging for the e-tutors to identify at all times how their DLs were approaching their study and in most cases the e-tutors would

just dominate the session, thus suppressing any chance for learners to control any aspect related to their learning within this programme.

In the next part, I will address the third research question of the study by following the same technique.

4.4   Response to Research Question Three

From the e-tutors' perspectives, which learning and teaching strategies may enable the learners to become more autonomous?

After addressing the first two research questions in the previous sections, this section will address the study's third research question by referring to *theme three*: **Issues Influencing the Development of Autonomy in Learners.** As with the other main themes, the following Figure illustrates the main theme along with its related four sub-themes and components that will be explored and presented in this section.

Issues Influencing the Development of Autonomy in Learners
The E-Tutors' Understanding of Distance Language Teaching and Learning
The E-Tutors' Conception of Autonomous Learners
The E-Tutors' Teaching Strategies

The Process of the Lesson	Promoting Specific Skills	Using Arabic

Allowing the Learners to have Control over their Learning

Control over Learning Management	Control over Cognitive Processes	Control over Content	Control over learning in general

Figure 4.7: Theme Three and its Related Sub-Themes and Components: Issues Influencing the Development of Autonomy in Learners

4.4.1 The E-Tutors' Understanding of Distance Language Teaching and Learning (DLT/DLL)

This section will address the third research question by exploring and presenting sub-themes related to the issues of developing autonomy in learners from the e-tutors' perspectives (see Figure 4.7 above).

Starting with the tutors' conception of distance language teaching and learning, I need first to re-state here that there is a vast array of literature on the definition of this. I have highlighted some of these definitions in the literature review chapter (see section 2.4), but the intention here is focused on the following:

- The participants' vision of this specific type of education; and
- whether this vision or understanding matches or aligns with the ones mentioned in the related literature.

In their replies to my question ("What in your own understanding does 'distance language teaching and learning' mean; how would you define the terms?"), the participants' responses varied.

Generally, few participants provided responses to this question which might indicate that some tutors in this programme find it difficult to define DT and DL, but those who did, defined it from different perspectives. Liza for example focused on the element of distance when she said:

> "For me, it is something like two extremes. We are on that side and they are too far on the other side." (Liza: SSI)

Liza's reply seems to imply that the distance is causing a wide gap between the two "ends" which she does not seem to be pleased with. From another angle, Diana focused on what she saw as the objective of distance learning and that is to recruit more students more economically.

> "…the objective of distance learning is to make more economic students". (Diana: SSI)

Diana's response might suggest that it costs the government less to establish distance learning programmes than it does on-campus ones. Meanwhile, Faten perhaps seemed to

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grasp the main characteristic of DL and DT in her understanding of the terms, which is communication over a distance, and she goes on to highlight its challenging nature:

> "…distance learning and teaching means I should be able to communicate with them over distance and it's not easy to do this". (Faten: SSI)

From another perspective, Liza defined DL from what she thought her learners believed it to be:

> "The definition of distance learning here for the students is different from the one let's say, known all over the world. Here, for our students, distance learning is just a way of completing university studies without going to the university". (Liza: SSI)

In this quote, Liza is aware from her experience of DL (as a coordinator of the programme) that students in this programme are more likely to seek a university degree by joining distance programmes; she implicitly indicates that students choose this path for its convenience and for the ease of obtaining a university degree without the more traditional hardships of travelling and attending on-campus lectures and so on.

Finally, Sheren, in her definition refers to what she believed to be a vital aspect of distance learning:

> "…distance learning is self-study supported by the teacher; facilitated by the teacher". (Sheren: SSI)

As noted, Sheren was perhaps the only participant who implies an element of LA in her understanding of the term, where a student's role is more primary and the tutor's is supportive. However, this might not reflect her actual role or that of the DLs but what she assumes the roles to be in a distance learning situation. The other participants' understanding was similar to the definitions of the term in related literature (see section 2.13 for some examples of these definitions), which are mainly based on the idea that teachers and learners are spatially far apart from each other and that they contact each other online via electronic systems. This might indicate that most tutors in this programme are not aware of the possibility that such a teaching and learning context can allow the learners more opportunities to be autonomous, independent language learners.

4.4.2   The E-Tutors' Conception of Autonomous Learners

In this sub-section, the focus is to explore and present the participants' understanding of the conception of 'autonomous language learners' in this context. This understanding is fundamental because it will help me to achieve one of the objectives of this study which is to investigate the concept of learner autonomy within a DLL context at the chosen university from the e-tutors' perspectives and more importantly to investigate whether the e-tutors in this programme perceive the students, the DLs, as autonomous or not:

> MH: What in your own understanding does the term 'autonomous language learner' mean and do you think your learners are autonomous?

In answer to this question, most of the participants identified features which are associated with LA but stressed the fact that teachers' support is very crucial. Celine identified that DLs are more self-reliant than regular students, yet they still need the teacher:

> "To an extent, they're definitely more self-reliant, compared to regular students; … they can't just do it independently. They do need a teacher. For sure they do" (Celine: SSI).

Celine's view was supported by her colleague Juliette, who thought that autonomous learners in this context do need support:

> "Autonomous learners need support and encouragement, I give them a chance to do some work on their own and I give them homework as well, to do at their own pace" (Juliette: SSI).

It is clear from Juliette's response that although the learners need support, she still gave them the opportunity to do some work on their own; nevertheless, it was not clear whether her learners did this work independently or not.

Another opinion was presented by Noor who stressed the need for learners to have a choice:

> "So it's up to them to decide whether they feel like it for their own good or not" (Noor: SSI).

What is meant by 'like it' here is whether the students accept the responsibility of making choices.

Noor's colleague Nadia also talked about allowing her learners space:

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> "I give them some space and they already have their space on this programme, so they have their own space. They've created it themselves" (Nadia: SSI).

What is meant by space, as further clarified by this participant, is that the students in this programme are left to decide on the time of studying.

Liza agreed with Nadia's opinion about providing the students with some space and choice in their learning:

> "I am totally with this point. They should be given space to choose to do whatever they want when they want" (Liza: SSI).

Liza's view matches the definition of autonomy mentioned earlier by Littlewood (1996) as *'the autonomous learner is the one who has the independent capacity to make the choices which govern her actions'* (P. 427). However, Liza here says learners 'should' be given this space but, when further asked in the interview whether she does that with her learners, she admitted that she does not, unlike Noor and Nadia above. More details of allowing the DLs to make choices in this programme will be provided later on in this chapter when talking about levels of control.

Furthermore, the findings show that the some of the e-tutors understand what being an autonomous learner implies as illustrated below in both Cathy's and Faten's responses:

> "So they should go back to their own resources, whether it's the textbook or any other resources and they need to start to use some pictures probably, just to show that they understand or give some examples and not copying them from the book". (Cathy: SSI)

> "If they do other things like reading or listening to YouTube, simple YouTube English language clips or something, I think they would be—it would be— they would be autonomous language learners". (Faten: SSI)

These participants believed that the learners in this context should be autonomous and gave example of some techniques which might help them. However, their responses imply that they do not perceive them as autonomous learners and they agree that the students in this programme cannot totally depend on themselves in learning the language and that they need their teachers' support. More clarification of this point was given by Cathy and Huda:

> "it's a foundation year course and the students come from secondary school with very few study skills anyway and actually having to study in this way on their own, with very little guidance, I must say. I think some of them get lost". (Cathy: SSI)

"In this context, they are supposed to depend entirely on themselves, like they're studying by themselves… searching by themselves. They're not… they're very dependent, like the normal students, they're always depending on you that you're going to give them all the information in one bulk". (Huda: SSI)

Huda went on and compared the situation of developing learner autonomy with her own experience abroad when she struggled with the new learning context as she had not developed autonomy during her own education:

"I'm going to tell you from my own experience: when I first went abroad, I felt it was a bit difficult for me because we didn't have any research skills. We didn't have searching. We were mostly dependent on our teachers, so right now I feel this thing is going to help them also for their future.

Huda stresses that it is important to promote in her learners what will be beneficial for them in their future. I totally agree with Huda's opinion as I, personally encountered this challenge when I started my PhD studies in UK as we were not used to this learning system which necessitated greater learner autonomy. I obtained my Master's Degree from a Saudi University, the focus was then on passing courses with little chances of research and self-dependence. This is why I believe it is particularly significant to conduct this study in a Saudi University.

From another angle, the data uncovered some information about the assessment of autonomy in this programme. Although not much data could be found about the way it is assessed, Diana and Juliette, did point out that autonomy is assessed in this programme:

"I know that autonomy is kind of unassisted work but still it's— for this phase of the programme actually, it's still assessed" (Diana: SSI),

"The learners present some sort of work on their own—it's an assessed part of the course for this stage, it's assessed and I heard that the Deanship of distance learning is just promoting this autonomy within the students' communities … it's really hard, as I said, to communicate with the students and I know that they pay a lot of money for these programmes but unfortunately, they don't get enough attention and I wouldn't blame the system here because it's happening across the world" (Juliette: SSI).

In relating this point on assessment with the current literature, I thought it is useful to quote O'Leary's (2008) opinion of one of the benefits of assessing learner autonomy:

'Autonomy is a capacity which the student may or may not choose to exercise. If you don't

bring it into an assessment programme, the majority of students will not see its importance' (p. 8).

Interestingly, only one participant (Juliette) directly referred to her learners as autonomous:

> "I do appreciate the work that the students—that the distance learning students do because it's totally autonomous. They do everything on their own. Whatever part I take in the teaching, it's nothing compared to what they do on their own, because still, if you meet them once a week, this is not enough, with students who probably have left or dropped out college or university or even school like a long time ago". (Juliette: SSI)

It seems as if from her response that the nature of the programme and infrequency of meetings with their tutors has, in a way, obliged them to work on their own. She appreciates especially those students who have left their education and resumed after a wide gap, as they perhaps would need to make further efforts to revive their study skills compared to students who have been studying continuously.

This factor is of great importance for this study, because this study investigates how far the e-tutors are encouraging and promoting their DLs to be autonomous. The findings as discussed in this section are interesting as they show that the e-tutors are different in their approaches to teaching and how they perceive autonomy in learners. This might suggest the need for professional training and awareness-raising amongst teachers if they are to adopt a consistent approach which will allow their learners to manage their learning and develop autonomy.

The next section will discuss the e-tutors' strategies deployed in this study to find out whether their teaching reflects an approach that encourages learner autonomy in this distance language teaching context.

4.4.3   The E-Tutors' Teaching Strategies

This sub-theme focuses on the teaching strategies generally employed by the participants in their online language teaching and whether these strategies are related to autonomy or not i.e. whether these strategies encourage the learners to be autonomous. Teaching and learning strategies and their relation to learner autonomy have been widely presented earlier in my literature review (see section 2.13.2 in Chapter Two). This section is intended to highlight the strategies of teaching English to distance learners as practised by the e-tutors in this programme and whether these strategies promote learner autonomy.

The themes and sub-themes that emerged (as shown in Figure 4.7 above) are: the process of the lesson; promoting specific skills; and using the Arabic language.

4.4.3.1 The Process of the Lesson

This first component explores the ways in which the tutors run their online classes from their perspective. With this aim in mind, the following question was asked:

MH: What's the process of the lesson? How do you usually run your session?

The reason behind asking this specific question to the participants is to understand the process of the lesson from the participants' view and to find out through their answers which strategies they employ in these online meetings as well as how far these strategies might help their learners to be autonomous.

The participants' responses were similar as they have to strictly follow the weekly plan arranged by the distance learning Deanship at the beginning of each term (see Appendix 3). According to this plan, the tutors are supposed to cover two units in each CENTRA meeting which usually lasts for 1 hour 50 minutes. This plan or a set framework, as mentioned by Sheren, allocates the time and the number of units to be taught:

"According to the distance learning programme over here, we have a set framework. We have a lesson of one hour forty minutes or fifty minutes sometimes. This depends on how many times a week we are teaching and then we have specific units assigned to teach during that timing" (Sheren: SSI).

As I understand from Maryam's response, the students are informed of the titles of the textbooks and the units to be covered throughout the term:

"The outline of the lesson, they know it. They know it before they start. In the first session we tell them about this and this. We are doing this. This is from this book—and by the way, they are studying two books: pre-intermediate and intermediate, 102. So we send them the number of units to be covered from pre-intermediate, and the number of units to be covered from intermediate. So they know about it. There is no need to remind them…" (Maryam: SSI).

What is clear from these responses is that the students in this programme do not have any chance to have a say in the curriculum.

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Cathy also explained in her journal entry how she managed her lesson by saying:

> "…giving weekly sessions on CENTRA, sending and replying to student's emails on EMES, uploading homework assignments and quizzes, correcting homework assignments, recording grades, posting forum questions, posting FAQs" (Cathy: RJ).

This is also specified in the regulations of the curriculum assigned by the Deanship as:

> "Give all the assigned CENTRA lectures. The lectures are meant to be for explaining the core curriculum and discussing any questions students may have. The discussion meetings are going to be held only **ONCE** a week as scheduled" (DA: DLLP Curriculum Regulations).

Some of the tutors' responses showed how much these tutors are affected by their experience of conventional classroom teaching, especially those who have long term experience (highlighted earlier in participants' experience). This effect is clear, for instance, in Diana's extract

> "I finish with whatever point, then it's time to answer the exercise and I open the chat box and they answer through the chat box and I give them, for example, two minutes to answer, as if you are in the class" (Diana: SSI).

Her colleague Juliette is also very specific about the way she runs the start of her session by saying:

> "We usually start with greetings and creating online rapport with the students and I do that every single session and what we do is that I just give my instructions at the very beginning, if we're having like a homework that is coming very soon or a quiz that is supposed to be done on the same week. So I usually give very clear instructions about that at the very beginning of the session" (Juliette: SSI).

Despite these traditional methods of on-line or virtual spoon-feeding, as I may call it, there were some attempts of changing the way of running the on-line sessions, as shown in Faten's response, who had just joined the programme (which once again might be related to my earlier discussion on the impact of the participants' length of experience):

> "I decided to make my own way of explaining things. So I decided to use the Agenda, which you can import a whole PowerPoint file and show my student slide by slide and they can also write on them. So what I did is like I would take a snapshot of the grammar point and then explain it like in an illustration or maybe like a better way in my own writing or—it's typed writing but with

arrows and things, and then make up exercises and they loved this" (Faten: SSI).

I think Faten's expression "I decided to make my own way of explaining things" indicates that Faten was able to show some autonomy in her way of presenting her lessons and did not quite follow the course outline assigned by the programme. This ability should be encouraged and other e-tutors have to have more autonomy in managing and running their sessions. Furthermore, this autonomy could be conveyed to their learners. This echoes the discussion of the significance of teacher autonomy formerly debated in the literature review chapter, in section 2.13 where Little (2000) ascertains that *'the development of learner autonomy depends on the development of teacher autonomy'* (P. 45).

Unfortunately, such teacher autonomy was not identified in other participants' method of teaching as seen in this response by Juliette:

> "I usually use the scans that the University or the programme here provides for the teachers … I go through all the scanned materials as planned and we do have a pacing guide, a very strict pacing guide as well, and after we finish I usually ask them to—if they have any questions" (Juliette: SSI).

From another perspective, in her reply to my question, Cathy was a bit confused about how best to use the system:

> "I'm not sure how to use the system very well, so—but it is, I mean—it's difficult. I mean, it's more like the teacher lecturing. I don't know exactly how the other teachers go about it but my impression is that I want to tell them as much as I can in that short time" (Cathy: SSI).

Part of Cathy's confusion refers again to the shortage of time, which will be discussed later as one of the programmes' challenges.

The next sub-section will explore another component of the e-tutor's teaching strategies namely, promoting specific skills.

4.4.3.2 Promoting Specific Skills

As seen in the previous sub-section, most of the participants were describing what they actually do. It does not show what they believe they should do. In this sub-section, I will continue to present and analyse other teaching strategies which emerged from the data.

These include encouraging questioning, developing critical thinking, and using the Arabic language.

- ***Encouraging Questioning:***

A strategy applied by the e-tutors in this programme, to support their DLs, is allowing them to ask questions. The reason for this is to enable tutors to clarify any ambiguous issues that the learners might have in regard to their learning.

The participants' views clearly showed how much some of the participants are ready to support their learners through whatever means are available to them. Maryam, for example, considered this strategy while maintaining confidentiality:

> "I open the text chat and I have that option to let the students write their questions only to me, other students can't see" (Maryam: SSI).

I think this confidentiality between the tutor and her students is vital as it makes them less shy and encourages them to ask questions freely. From my experience, I am fully aware that most of the foreign language learners, in our context, do not ask questions in front of their peers because they think others would laugh at them if they do not speak the language perfectly. I imagine that the questions are asked and replied to in Arabic, although the participants did not comment on the language used for questions and I did not ask. More exploration of the use of the Arabic language will be provided later in this section, however.

On the other hand, another participant, Sheren assigned her learners a specific time to ask her questions:

> "I give them the last fifteen/twenty minutes to ask questions and I explain" (Sheren: SSI).

Her colleagues, Noor & Amal followed a similar strategy with their learners:

> "They should know when to ask a question. Usually, I tell them, in the last five minutes, you can raise any question you want" (Noor: RJ).

Amal's reflection was not different:

> "Students know that when it is time for me to explain the new material, they listen without any distractions. When I finish and encourage them to give any comments, they write what they want. Some students ask me to repeat or clarify certain topics. I do that on the spot." (Amal: RJ).

The responses and reflections of these tutors, unfortunately, showed not much support for autonomy as the learners were obliged to stick to their tutors' timing to ask or enquire. Yet, referring back to the nature of the programme, as discussed above, the reason behind assigning the last five or ten minutes for the learners to ask questions might be attributed to the lack of time, which is considered to be one of the challenges faced by the participants in this programme. Otherwise, more time might have been devoted to the learners' questions as suggested by Huda:

> "I would like to devote more time for questions, but because, as I told you earlier, first of all we don't have enough time, okay, and we have to cover a certain amount of material" (Huda: SSI).

Similarly, Juliette encouraged her learners to ask questions by emails:

> "…after we finish I usually ask them to—if they have any questions, they can send them through e-mails" (Juliette: SSI).

Another participant, Celine also added in her journal entry that she is the one who prompts her students to ask the questions and think carefully about their answers:

> "I was successful in eliciting responses. They'd write their answers in the text chat. At times, I'd deliberately give a wrong answer to get them to correct me. They did" (Celine: RJ).

Once again I would like to point out that there might be some recurrence and overlapping in the presentation of the participants' voices. This, as mentioned and explained earlier in section 4.3.2.1, reflects the richness of the data which can refer to more than one component as part of the sub-themes and themes in this study. I am, as a researcher following the data and it is clear from the data that one quotation could be interpreted in more than one theme.

- *Developing Critical Thinking:*

Another strategy which emerged from the data relates to the development of critical thinking in their DLs. Exploring this as one of the skills that might be enhanced by the tutors in this context was considered crucial to this research, given the findings from Philip and Bond's (2004) study of 'Undergraduate experiences of critical thinking'. In this study, which was based on their pedagogical focus and literature data, they referred to various conceptions related to the notion of critical thinking. One of these conceptions views developing critical thinking as a component of the skills of the autonomous learner.

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This conception includes a cluster of characteristics that are basic constituents of self-directed or autonomous learning such as: being reflective, analytical, curious, motivated, creative, independent…etc.

Three participants namely, Ruba, Noor and Amal referred to critical thinking in their responses. Ruba, suggested that students should be trained in developing critical thinking skills and added that she is a trainer of critical thinking:

> "Critical thinking has to be trained for. I'm a trainer of critical thinking so I know what it is. We are born naturally with a certain amount of intelligence but we are not born with critical thinking skills. We need to be trained to do that, so if you don't train your students to obtain them, then they're not going to get them" (Ruba: SSI)

Ruba adds:

> "With critical thinking skills, students have to be trained from the very beginning of their lives." (Ruba: SSI)

This points to the need to train learners in this from an early age. This extract perhaps highlights the importance of critical thinking skills in learning and throughout students' lives, as it was understood by Ruba. This also implies that the learners in this context lack these skills and therefore need to be trained in this.

Her colleague Noor briefly touches on the concept underlying critical thinking in learning which is to question what and how they learn:

> "Students have to know how to learn, what is expected from them" (Noor: SSI).

Critical thinkers are normally associated with their ability to question what they learn.

Amal considered the lack of her learners' ability to think critically as a great problem:

> "it's a great problem. They don't know how to think critically; this is the point" (Noor: SSI).

The fact that there was very little said about critical thinking overall suggests that both teachers and students in the Saudi context might be used to memorization as pointed out by Alkubaidi (2014) *'Saudi schooling is largely based on memorization rather than on critical thinking'* (p. 92). In line with this topic, in his study, Al- Shumaimeri (2003) recommended that to improve the students' English Language proficiency in Saudi

schools, they need to be engaged in activities to develop their critical thinking. Moreover, in her recent study, Alhinty (2016) refers to the students' lack of critical thinking skills. From my experience of teaching English as a foreign language for more than 25 years, I found Alhinty's study a useful one as I could see some of the reasons behind some students' inability to critically think in both conventional and on-line learning situations because as indicated by Alhinty they are 'passive receivers of teachers' input' (p. 8). This passiveness continues when they join university. From my perspective, this passiveness in tertiary level results from, in addition to Alhinty's reason, the lack of opportunities provided by their teachers to practise critical thinking while learning.

The significance of this in the current study is that the e-tutors need to be trained in helping their learners develop these skills.

In the following section, the use of the Arabic language as one of the teaching strategies will be explored.

4.4.3.3   Using Arabic

This theme emerged from the data as a majority of participants stressed the importance of using the Arabic language in their DL sessions. The reasons behind this usage as perceived by the e-tutors are summarized in the following points:

- *To Improve Learning:*

The first reason behind using Arabic in the English sessions is given by the first interviewee Sheren:

> "According to latest EFL techniques, teaching techniques, use of L1…if you want students to learn a specific rule, because if they are beginners, L1 helps a lot […] so sometimes yes, I use L1. I have to communicate with them in Arabic. I don't say, no, I am only using English. No, sometimes my main idea or my main aim is making them learn" (Sheren: SSI)

Faten, in her RJ, added that the use of Arabic language improved her students' grammar learning:

> "Going through the grammar and vocabulary at a pace that suits the students' ability, and explaining things in Arabic sometimes" (Faten: RJ).

As understood from Faten's entry the use of the Arabic language when explaining grammatical rules and vocabulary might help students to understand these rules and meaning. From my teaching experience I can tell that this is really helpful especially with grammar, because the English Language grammar is totally different from the Arabic one, it sometimes seems necessary to explain and compare a specific rule in Arabic. Another point to be clarified is the fact that not all tutors, specifically the non-Arab ones, are able to speak Arabic, yet some of them can like Sheren:

> "I am not an Arab but I have good Arabic…. if you want students to learn a specific rule, if they are beginners, L1 helps a lot…. Sometimes yes, I use L1. I have to communicate with them in Arabic so they need to learn some basic Arabic words" (Sheren: SSI).

In her attempt to speak Arabic with her DLs, Celine thought of a way to learn the language:

> "I don't know Arabic, so to learn Arabic, you know, I log on to Google translate and get meanings of certain words. It sounds ironic."

- ***To help Students who are weaker in English:***

Another justification for using the Arabic language is to help weak students, as stated by Juliette:

> "I merge the two languages. I'm a bilingual teacher and I use my bilingualism in the teaching... Sometimes I do with the very weak ones, that sometimes you resort back to Arabic". (Juliette: SSI).

Her colleague Maryam did the same:

> "…only very few students, they write in the text chat, please teacher, explain in Arabic. So, at that time, I say it in English and then I repeat the same thing in Arabic for those weak students" (Maryam: SSI).

Nahid is also obliged to using Arabic with her 'zero level students' as she called them:

> "I have to because I tried to use English as a medium of teaching. During the eighty minutes. The result was a failure, because some of them are zero level. I have to use a combination. I have to. It's not a choice. I have to" (Nahid: SSI).

By the same token, some participants had the same idea in their reflection in the RJ. Cathy, for example, reflected on this issue by saying:

"I supported my DLs by speaking in both English and Arabic as many students would be completely lost otherwise" (Cathy: RJ).

What is noticeable here is that the tutors who are recruited have to know how to speak Arabic language even if they are not Arabs, as suggested by Maryam:

"It depends on the level of students I have because even here they don't give low levels to teachers who don't know any Arabic. You should know some Arabic" (Maryam: RJ).

I know that it is not usual for knowledge of Arabic to be a condition of recruitment, as these tutors are employed to teach English and many of them are not Arabs, but I can fully understand, from my teaching experience, the need of weaker level students for this translation because the majority of students are very weak in English.

- *To Improve Interaction and Engagement:*

In their responses, some participants justified their usage of Arabic in the sessions as a way of improving the interaction and engagement with the learners while explaining the lessons and when interacting with them asynchronously (by email). Here are some examples of these responses:

"So if I don't communicate with them a little bit in Arabic, it becomes so silent, as if I'm talking to walls, […] just to shake them up, wake them up, bring life back into my lecture or make them understand something, I have to use L1 and I don't find, personally, this use of L1 up to a little extent, bad, you know" (Sheren: SSI);

"I speak Arabic in class because I want to reach a point, a certain point, and I want to do it very quickly so I do it and there is nothing wrong about that" (Ruba: SSI);

"They send e-mails to teacher to explain that and that and that point…they write in Arabic. They write the question in Arabic" (Maryam: SSI);

"Not all my students can understand easily my language or English as a foreign language so I might use a little of L1 and this is clear when a native speaker or a teacher who only knows L2 gives a session. There are always complaints of the students that their teacher doesn't speak the L1 or Arabic, so sometimes they feel lost" (Amal: SSI).

"They're not really placed in the right level so sometimes they don't understand your English and you need to talk in Arabic and then you need to revert back to English and even Arabic, sometimes they really don't understand" (Noor: SSI).

These reasons seem convincing because my experience of teaching English makes me aware that speaking some Arabic is vital in these online meetings. However, what surprised me is when a foreign tutor has to learn Arabic to be able to teach vocabulary as manifested in the following conversation with Celine:

> MH: Of course, you never use L1?
>
> Celine: No, I do. You'd be surprised I do. I've picked up a lot of language from my regular learners and my friends here. I do use it, especially when I'm teaching vocabulary (Celine: SSI).

Generally speaking, it is important to note that these findings are concurrent with some previous studies conducted to highlight the reasons behind using L1 in teaching a FL in a Saudi environment. One of these studies is, for example, AL-Nofaie's (2010) who states that the use of L1 in FL teaching has many benefits; one of these is that L1 can be used to translate the new words, especially those which are difficult to infer or explain. Another study was conducted by Jadallah and Hassan, (2011) who also stressed the use of L1 as a major issue in the area of EFL:

> *The use of L1 when teaching EFL is one of the major issues that have dominated the area of EFL acquisition for the last few decades. A number of studies have been conducted, which either support or oppose the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. However, the large quantity of research, as well as the flourishing forms of bilingual education programs have paved the way to the development of a new area of language teaching methodology* (p. 1).

This quotation about the issues related to the use of L1 points to the controversial nature of this issue in existing studies in this context.

To sum up this sub-theme, teachers in this programme spoke about a number of teaching strategies which they either deployed or aspired to use because they understood their importance. These included techniques and teaching strategies exercised during the process of the lesson, which encouraged DLs to ask questions and critically think in their approach to learning. Moreover, the participants repeatedly mentioned the use of the L1 and justified its use in this particular context.

The following sub-section will present and explore the final sub-theme and its components related to the tutors' allowance for their learners to exercise control over their learning.

4.4.4   Allowing Distance Learners Control over their Language Learning

This final sub-theme and its components will explore how far the e-tutors in this programme allow their DLs to have control over their language learning. This presentation and exploration of the sub-theme along with the previous three sub-themes will help me to address the study's third research question and to identify the development of learners' autonomy from their tutors' perspectives.

What is meant by control here is adopted from Benson's definition of autonomy and the three levels of control. As a reminder, Benson (2011) defines learner autonomy as *'the capacity to take control of one's own learning'* (p. 58). This definition implies three levels of control as adapted from Benson (2011) and as seen in the following diagram and discussed earlier in the literature review:
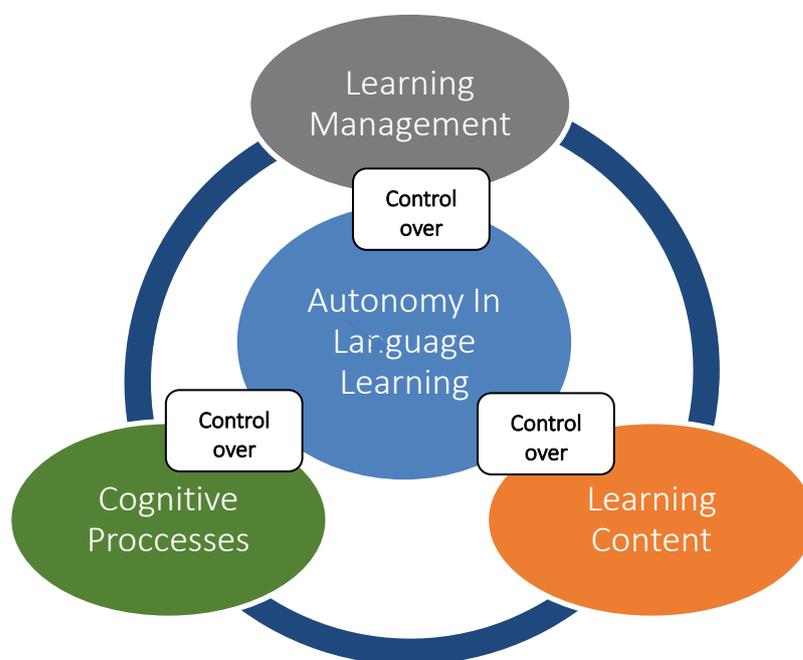
Figure 4.8: Dimensions of Learner Control as adapted from Benson (2011).

To generate data that enabled me to reflect on this model in order to keep the study's aim in mind, the following question was asked in both data collection methods, RJs and SSIs:

> MH: How far do you allow your DLs to have control over their learning of the language in this programme?

Initially, when this question was asked, I noticed that some participants needed more clarification of the meaning of control. My observation was based on the participants'

responses to this question. The following responses are examples of some of these responses in their reflective journals that reflected their own understandings of the meaning of 'control' in this mode of learning. These examples are taken from Sheren's and Celine's reflective journals:

> "Chat box, e-mails, and Forum discussions were used to communicate and manage their ideas" (Sheren: RJ);

> "This did not apply to all activities, but in two activities in each unit, they had their 100% contributions particularly towards answers" (Celine: RJ).

As seen from these two responses Sheren's focus was on the way the students interacted with her, while Celine's response was focusing on students' involvement in certain activities.

Meanwhile, in response to the same question in the interview, some participants like Nadia and Maryam revealed their different interpretation of the meaning of 'control' in this context and its relation to students' autonomy, as they thought that they themselves were the ones who had to have control of everything in the session:

> "We provide them with a syllabus, clear instructions about what work we are going to study together, the curriculum, how many minutes we are supposed to cover together, how many reading passages we should be able to read. We explore the grammar. We explore the vocabulary lists we should finish together. … I make what is required from them clear. I mean, to help them recognise their self-learning process, I give them clear instructions, what is expected from them" (Nadia: SSI);

> "Everything in the session is under my control" (Maryam: SSI).

Furthermore, some participants asked for more clarification as seen in the following conversation between me and Diana:

> MH: From your own point of view, do you think your distance learners have a chance to manage any control over their learning of the foreign language?

> Maryam: May you say the question again because I'm trying to concentrate.

> MH: From your own point of view, do you think your distance learners are allowed in one way or another to have any sort of control over their learning? Are they allowed, for example, to share in choosing the materials or choosing the timing of the sessions etc.?

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Maryam: It depends on the students. It depends on these distance learners' background of the language (Maryam: SSI).

This response was too general, from my perspective, to be useful to my research, and I realised that my question was not clear enough, I therefore chose to facilitate the participants' understanding of this concept by providing (during the interviews) a brief idea of the meaning of control as it is employed or investigated in this study. I precisely mentioned that control can be on many levels and referred to Benson's three dimensions of control as examples. As this was a semi-structured interview which allows this level of flexibility when questioning, I thought that having that follow up explanation and giving the e-tutors space to ask for further clarification was necessary. Moreover, there were further questions around self-directed learning and learning strategies which were more focused around the levels of control as will be explained in the following sections.

The following sub-sections explore and present the data grouped in accordance with Benson's (2003) three levels of control: data related to control over learning management, data related to control over cognitive processing, and that related to the control of content. Each sub-section includes the components that emerged from the data and reflects, of course, the tutors' perspective because this is the focus of this study.

4.4.4.1   Control over Learning Management

Benson (2003) clarifies that control over learning management can be described in terms of the behaviours employed by learners so as to manage the planning, organisation and evaluation of the learning. According to Lamb (2003) self-management aims to enable the learners to manage their learning by planning their goals, making choices from various activities, and finally monitoring and evaluating their competence; aspects which he believes are particularly essential for language learning programmes located outside the classroom. In an attempt to identify and classify these behaviours, several studies in the literature on self-directed learning (SDL) and learning strategies have provided a basis upon which we can do that (Benson, 2001).

Benson (2003) goes on to emphasise that it is at this particular level (control over management) that control over learning is most directly observable, which is perhaps why most of the research data in my study as revealed by the participants revolves around concepts in relation to control over learning management.

According to the findings of this study, data was divided into two components: the e-tutors' views in relation to self-directed learning (SDL) and their views around learning strategies (metacognitive strategies) and whether they perceived their students as being self-directed and are using learning strategies

- ***Self-Directed Learning (SDL)***

For the sake of clarity, it seems useful to provide some definitions of the term from related literature. In his discussion of self-directed learning, Moore (1983) cited Boyd's explanation of learners' self-directed learning is when *'The adult knows his own standards and expectations. He no longer needs to be told, nor does he require the approval and reward from persons in authority'* (p. 9). This, as commented by Moore, *'is fully autonomous or self-directed, and adult learning'* (p. 9). Furthermore, Moore (1983) adds to Boyd's explanation that self-directed learners are the ones who:

> *set their goals and define criteria for their achievement. They know (or find out) where and how and from what human and or sources to gather information required, collect ideas and practice skills. They judge the appropriateness of the new skills…eventually deciding if the goals have been achieved* (p.9).

Of more relevance to both distance learning and language learning, White (1995, p. 208) states that:

> *…distance learners are compelled to re-evaluate their role and responsibilities as language learners. To succeed in learning the TL, they need to be self-directed, which involves first and foremost developing an awareness of the process of language learning and an understanding of the need to master their own performative role in the language'*

Thus, in accordance with this description of SDL in distance language education, and with Moore's belief that self-directed learning and autonomous learning are associated, the following question was put to my participants to facilitate their understanding of the meaning of control (as previously mentioned):

> MH: Self-directed learning is a common term in our distance learning programme. What do you think this term might mean for your learners from your perspective?

The participants' responses stemmed from their understanding and perception of the term. Huda, for example, believed that SDL and autonomous learning are interrelated:

"…self-learning […] it's a mixture of both; autonomy learning and self-directed learning".

Huda was very enthusiastic to talk about this area and she added that SLD also means students' responsibility to know the meaning of the rule and the words:

"Self-directed learning means that they're going to be doing a lot of search on their own. For example, if they don't understand, let's say, a rule, a word, they can just go online and search for this word. It depends mostly on learner autonomy, like basically they're going to do everything on their own. They only go back to the teacher if they got stuck on something".

These words reflect how Huda understands SDL and how she connects this term with learner autonomy, suggesting that learners must find other ways to learn and to be independent from their teacher. This finding seems to correlate with White's (1995) argument above about how the role of distance learners needs to be reshaped urging them to become more self-directed to achieve success in their learning endeavours. It also agrees with Moore (1983) when he mentioned firstly the point about learners being able to explore where, how and from what sources to gather required information and practice skills, and a second point about not needing to be told or rewarded from authoritative people (in this case the e-tutor).

Nadia referred to the concept in connection with her role which is to help the learners become self-directed learners. She said:

"Self-directed learning means I teach my students to learn on their own. I mean, I give them the way how to handle a book".

As noticed from these two responses, some participants are considering SDL and autonomous learning to be concurrent; this aligns with Moore's (1983) understanding of SDL mentioned in the introduction and with Benson's (2011) definition of autonomy '*the capacity to take control of one's own learning' (*p.58). But what is also important in this participant's response is her belief that it is her role to teach her learners to "learn on their own" even if that is simply showing them how to navigate lesson materials

Thus, these responses revealed that some participants like Huda and Nadia have an understanding of the meaning of SDL and its relation to students' control over their learning management to be autonomous learners. Nevertheless, other participants like Liza and Noor seem to believe that this type of learning does not extend to all learners in this programme for the following two factors:

1) Students' low level of English language: this factor prevents the students from becoming self-directed learners as suggested by Liza:

> "Distance learning is supposed to be a self-directed learning programme but actually what we do is different…our students here are very weak in English and they have many problems with the language learning itself" (Liza: SSI);

2) Students' need for face-to-face guidance: this second factor also prevents the learners from managing SDL, as suggested by Noor:

> "Not all of them can manage self-directed learning, few of them can. Most of them need face-to-face guidance" (Noor: SSI).

Noor's response seems to suggest that self-directed learning in this case would then be possible given that this is a DE context where there are no face-to-face meetings. Thus, these two factors, in their opinion, did not enable the learners to practise any self-direction in learning in this context.

On the other hand, some participants, like Faten, noticed that their students' focus on passing the exam pushed them towards self-studying which she believes to be different from self-directed learning:

> "They say are these the materials that will come up in the exam? Is the exam similar to what you provided us? So they are concerned about the exam, and yes, for the sake of the exam, they would do anything. They would do self-study, a lot of self-study, but not to learn the language they do self-study but not self-directed learning" (Faten: SSI);

It is noted from Faten's response that the focus of some learners in this programme is not to have control over their learning and to be independent learners as much as to pass the exam (this issue will be explored more in the challenges theme in Chapter Five).

Sheren agreed with Faten's opinion and added that the students in this programme need support from their tutors to be able to self-study:

> "…so we definitely give them hints for the exam and then they do self-study. It's been mainly distance learning; it is self-study supported by the teacher; facilitated by the teacher" (Sheren: SSI).

Sheren also added

"They are supposed to self-study back home and then when they come for this lecture, they are attending this online one hour forty minutes lecture" Sheren: SSI).

Her colleague Ruba referred to self-learning:

"So the tutor here is just a guide and the students are self-learning and they report back to you" (Ruba: SSI).

Ruba's and other participants' responses above reflect the tutors' interpretation of the term self-directed learning and how some of them related it to self-studying and learning, yet as the focus here is on how self-directed learning might enable the learners to manage their learning independently from their teachers and how it might help them to have control over their learning, both terms were interpreted with this in mind.

From another angle, some participants such as Rana thought that SDL should be the core in any distance course, yet she thought that it is not in this programme:

"It's common and it should be the core of distance learning courses. It should be, but I don't think this is the case" (Rana: SSI).

Rana's understanding is that SDL should be the core of the distance learning courses revealed that some participants are aware of the importance of SDL in this programme.

Interestingly enough, Liza thought of self-directed learning in this particular programme in statistical terms:

"Self-directed learning! If you want to apply the word 'self-directed learning' to our students, it will be given a percentage of like twenty percent. This percentage, I suppose, is very low for learners in this learning environment" (Liza: SSI).

Again, Liza here admits that students are self-directed but according to her only one in five, which she seems to believe, is not good enough for distance learners.

Hence after exploring SDL from the e-tutors' perspectives with a focus on their role in the programme and how they perceive their learners as self-directing their learning, the next sub-section will explore another variable related to control over leaning management, namely learning strategies.

- **Developing the Required Learning Strategies**

In his discussion of learning strategies as another component of control over learning management, Benson (2011) cites Cohen's (1998) definition of learning strategies as '*learning processes which are consciously selected by learners*' (p. 2). Benson also cites some other scholars' classification of these strategies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991) (see section 2.13.2, in Chapter Two for more details of these classifications). According to Wenden (1991), metacognitive strategies (e.g. planning, monitoring, and evaluating) refer to general skills through which the learner manages, directs, controls, and guides the learning. Lamb (2003) believes that, self-regulation aims to improve the outcomes and processes of learning by identifying the successful learning strategies,

In regard to the strategies deployed by distance learners, some scholars' studies such as White's (1995, and 1997) and Hurd's (2001) have concluded that distance learners deploy metacognitive strategies more than class-room learners.

Hence, in this section, I will explore and present the data related to the strategies which are perceived by the e-tutors' to be deployed by the distance learners in this programme to enhance their foreign language learning. To access this, the following question was asked:

> MH: What strategies do you think your DLs employ to enhance and manage their language learning in this programme?

The following components emerged from the participants' responses in relation to the strategies deployed by their learners: Cooperating with peers and revising.

- *Cooperating with Peers*

Two questions in the interviews are relevant to findings in this section:

> MH: What level of interaction do you usually expect from your DLs and how do you identify such specific level?

> MH: Do you provide your students any chances of collaboration with their peers?

In the interviews, the participants' responses stressed the value of their students' co-operation or group work and they were pleased with this co-operation. Maryam, for example, said:

"Students are good when they do projects. It was a group work and for my students—as I told you, they are excellent—it was wonderful and organised. They sent me a PowerPoint".

According to this participant the DLs are required to complete a team project which would require both planning and organisation from the learners. Maryam went on to explain how the students interact with each other:

"They can interact among themselves to plan and complete their projects. They can interact together through text chat. They can interact together through e-mails. They have a WhatsApp group".

The extracts above show how the strategies of planning and organisation (mentioned by O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford, 1990; and Wenden, 1998 as metacognitive strategies) are being used by the DLs in this DLLP. This is also in line with Lamb (2003) who points out that self-management aims to enable the learners to manage their learning by planning their goals and making choices from various activities, which the DLs seem to be doing when completing their projects (e.g. planning and making choices about how to interact).

It might be worth noting that 'interaction with other learners' is considered a socio-affective strategy under O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) classification, but I can argue that what the learners in this context are actually doing when they are interacting (e.g. planning and organising) is what might be seen as metacognitive strategies. Furthermore, cooperating with peers is perceived as a supportive learning strategy, once again referring to the socio-affective impact of this strategy; nevertheless, this can have a direct role in helping learners to manage their learning specifically for those slow-progressing and lower proficiency level students as indicated by Juliette:

"Some of them are really, really, weak, so they need someone else to support, someone who could be a colleague or a classmate or a peer that they wouldn't feel shy in front of and they would express themselves and their weaknesses and communicate it with them" (Juliette: SSI).

Several other participants described how they were also impressed with their students' group work and the level of cooperation and collaboration of efforts in completing the team projects amongst the students.

"Group work, yeah I ask them to do that—they're very good […] when it comes to group work…, we give them a task where they have to do some kind of group work together… they impressed me although they were very weak.

Imagine if they were advanced students. They were very weak but they did an excellent job" (Huda: SSI).

"My students … gave us wonderful PowerPoint presentations—it was collaborative work. Every ten students did something, so we encourage them to work in a team, to look for their own a certain piece of information" (Nadia: SSI).

"When they are asked for this homework as group work, some of them started interacting with each other and the outcome was really nice". (Diana: SSI)

Another participant, Noor pointed out that group work is all done by students themselves:

"They choose their own group and the topics. They share. So sometimes they depend on sharing information or collaborative learning. I realise this many times" (Noor: SSI)

Meanwhile, Sheren referred directly to control over learning:

"I give them a lot of control over their learning process. I mean, they can interact with me…they interact with each other. They come up with something combined. That's also kind of control over their learning". (Sheren: SSI)

These observations from the participants seem closely linked to autonomy, again pointing to choice in the selection of the group members as well as the project topic which would involve a lot of planning and organisation i.e. control over management through the use of these strategies and also a choice in how they wish to interact and collaborate their efforts.

Based on these findings, this team project seems to have sparked a sense of positivity amongst most of the e-tutors. This team project is one of the five homework tasks the students have to complete and is a requirement in the Deanship's course work and assessment list in this specific course (as collected from the programme's official documents and as cited in the file of Distance Learning Teachers' Job Duties; see Appendix 1). It is interesting to note (although it is not directly stated in the documents or even inferred from the participants' responses) that perhaps one of the objectives of the team project as a task is to encourage learners to manage their own learning in this way, hence indirectly encouraging them to become autonomous DLLs.

On the other hand, some other participants such as Rana have a contrastively different opinion and think that such group work demanded by the Deanship is not appropriate:

> "This semester, the Deanship asked us for the first time to ask the students to make a group work ... Students actually do not communicate with each other. They can't sit together, and they can't even meet each other" (Rana: SSI)

This was also pointed out by Ruba:

> "…students actually don't communicate together" (Ruba: SSI)

These responses refer to the nature of this programme being a distance learning one where students can not physically meet and the e-tutors here believe that this is an obstacle impeding student-to-student communication. However, based on what their colleagues mentioned earlier, it suggests that some DLs do tend to make use of the means available to them to interact or participate in interactive tasks such as this one. I believe this is a really important point because it demonstrates that completing these tasks is a choice that is made by the students themselves and although tasks such as this are part of the course work and are assessed, some students seem to give it more weight than others.

It might be worth noting here that as with all aspects of the data, it happens that even if the majority of participants agreed on certain issues, some others did not. However, this I believe contributes rather than detracts from the trustworthiness, as it reflects varied perspectives from varied participants. Although they do not represent all those in this context nor can this be transferable to other similar settings, it still gives useful insights into how different teacher perspectives can be.

- ***Revising***

Another strategy inferred from the participants' responses is revising. According to Lamb (2003), self-regulation aims to improve the outcomes and processes of learning by identifying successful learning strategies. And if the outcome of learning is to pass exams (as is the case in the context of this study as part of the DLLP), then revising might be considered a strategy to help achieve this. Revising as understood from Marayam's remark does help the DLs to manage their learning and succeed particularly in exams:

> "Of course, they revise. They ask for the revision book and they revise for the exam so they can manage and succeed" (Maryam: SSI).

This strategy of revision, however, seemed to be closely associated with the e-tutors' support; it suggests that the distance learners would need the aid of their e-tutors in order to develop it. For example, some participants such as Liza provided their learners with revision worksheets, giving the choice to utilise these:

"for revision. We give them worksheets. If they want to study on their own, they will do of course" (Liza: SSI);

Moreover, Celine added that she uploaded the required documents for her students for revision:

"I send my students e-mails saying girls, I'll be seeing you on Wednesday and I've uploaded the required documents for your revision. Please make sure you go through them and also do the reading test and I'll see you all" (Celine: SSI)

These responses refer to the e-tutors' own role in facilitating and encouraging revision, but the e-tutors are also assuming or seem to be certain like Liza above ("they will do of course") that their learners use this strategy. However, as in this study I did not include the learners as part of the study's sample, for the reasons mentioned before, these observations stemmed from the tutors' responses to the interview questions; in other words, the findings here are as perceived by the e-tutors in relation to what strategies they think their students are deploying.

In summary, this section explored control over learning management from the e-tutors' perspectives. The focus was on SDL and learning strategies as perceived by the participants in their responses in the data methods of reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. The next sub-section will focus on presenting and exploring the data related to the second dimension of control; control over cognitive processes.

4.4.4.2   Control over Cognitive Processes

According to Benson (2011) control over cognitive processes is '*purely cognitive in the sense that it is not concerned with direct control of behaviour, but with control over the cognitive processes through which leering management and content are controlled*' (p. 100). Benson (2011) adds that the areas related to this dimension of control are attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge.

According to this second dimension of control, and as with other levels of control, all data presented below is based on the e-tutor's responses to the two data collection methods (reflective journals and interviews). The findings in relation to this dimension were few but participants' responses pointed to two processes, namely student attention during the session and meta-cognitive knowledge.

- *Paying Attention During the Session*

Tomlin and Villa (1994 cited in Benson 2001) state that attention helps language learners to reduce, sort out and control the influx of input and cognitive information which would otherwise overwhelm the learner.

In this study, attention was identified by some participants' responses in the reflective journals. Celine, for example, pointed out that her students responded and did their assignments and quizzes:

> "they'd seem involved, they'd respond. They'd give answers in the session. Most of them did their HWs and Quizzes" (Celine: RJ).

Rana was also pleased with her students' contribution and attention paying in general:

> "I usually say they are positive learners. Their contribution is really good. They are doing the part that they are supposed to do. They're supposed to attend the sessions and they do. They are supposed to listen to the teacher and focus and they do." (Rana: RJ).

On the other hand, Faten was not sure whether all of her students were paying attention in the session as it was hard to tell if they were even listening:

> "I assumed they listen and about 10 or more students interact through the Chat-box which I keep open all the time. They also used their textbooks to follow the lesson and a number of them might ask which page the part of the session was about" (Faten: SSI).

However, it seems that she was able to recognise that some of the students, through their interaction and questions, were paying attention.

Meanwhile, Nadia admitted that she thought that her students joined the online session but realised that they might be doing other things:

> "Sometimes they join a programme and they join on papers. On paper they join a programme and actually they attended something else" (Nadia: SSI).

Nadia's response suggests that not much attention is being paid really by the learners.

The other cognitive processing aspect was metacognitive knowledge as will be discussed next.

- *Metacognitive Knowledge*

In related literature this term has been widely discussed. Various definitions and classifications of the term were identified but Wenden's definition is perhaps the most widely cited. In line with Wenden (1998), metacognitive knowledge refers to the learner's knowledge of aspects of his/her learning, Wenden's describes three kinds of metacognitive knowledge: person, strategic, and task knowledge (discussed in the literature review chapter; see section 2.13.2). The focus in this section will be on task knowledge as it is related to language learning: according to Benson, '*in the context of language learning, a task may be as narrow as learning a new word or as broad as the entire process of learning the target language*' (Benson, 2011, p. 110). Task knowledge would involve learner's information about the task's demands like understanding what a task is for, how to do it and whether it is appropriate, for example (Wenden, 1998). One of the questions asked in the interview that revealed information related to this was:

> MH: What level of interaction do you usually expect from your DLs and how do you identify such specific level?

Given the nature of the context (learning from a distance), the e-tutors noted that it was not always easy for them to identify how the learners went about the course tasks. This is due to the little contact they had with the learners to be able to ask them about learning tasks in their learning of the foreign language in this programme. This is clearly expressed by Cathy:

> "I think, I don't know. I mean, it's very difficult, as I said, to know what the students are doing exactly because we just have so little contact with them. There's just this one session and as I said, you know, many of the students don't even attend that session, so really it's very difficult to know what they think about tasks, how they approach studying, you know, what they do. I don't know" (Cathy: SSI).

Nevertheless, the data showed that some e-tutors, such as Huda were able to recognise learning patterns identifiable of task knowledge:

> "You can give them for example a task. Okay, next week, I want you to tell me—okay, I want you to come up with examples of, for example, let's say the present continuous, for example. I want you to give me examples of the present continuous. I want you to give me your understanding in words. They would ask me questions about how to do this, they always ask" (Huda: SSI)

In other instances, the e-tutors simply referred to the tasks that they felt their learners were achieving individually in order to learn the language, which could demonstrate that

learners do, in fact, understand how to complete them. Two participants, Rana and Noor pointed to this:

> "the project was a PowerPoint presentation about the difference between two tenses, for example. So they go back to their own resources, whether it's the textbook or any other resources and they start to put some pictures probably, just to show that they understand or give some examples and not copying them from the book, for example, and they present some sort of work on their own. It's usually very good; they do it very well" (Rana: SSI);

> "If someone found a good grammar explanation or PowerPoint—sometimes they send it to me, Teacher, is this good? I say, Okay, it's good. It's very informative. Okay, so they distribute it, share it" (Noor: SSI).

On the other hand, some of the participants like Huda spoke about how they encourage their learners to develop metacognitive knowledge through tasks that might enhance their language learning and in particular enhance their independence as learners:

> "Let me try to think of something. … for example, there was a—I can't remember—a picture—a word they didn't understand. They kept on asking me what's this word, what's this word? I told them, I'm not going to give you the meaning of the word. I want you to go on Google search, search it and I want you to tell me the meaning in English, not in Arabic, okay. So this is a way of letting them depend on themselves because usually we spoon feed the students, you know what I mean?" (Huda: SSI)

This is an interesting finding because it specifically points to the e-tutors' role in this process, which this study is investigating. It shows that there are attempts from some of the e-tutors to foster learner autonomy by allowing them to have some control (in this instance control over cognitive processes). Huda here justifies her action and mentions that this is to avoid spoon feeding (more on spoon feeding in Chapter Five in section 5.1.1.4)

For Juliette, it is a matter of choice for learners as she tried to encourage them to manage their learning as shown below:

> "I don't explain all the tasks of the lesson, like not everything on the scanned materials. I give them a chance to do some work on their own, to figure it out I mean and I give them homework as well, to do at their own pace, and I don't push them to do this homework very insistently, I would say. So it's up to them to decide whether they feel like it's for their own good or not" (Juliette: SSI).

Not explaining everything related to a task would allow the learners to try to understand the task demands on their own - "Figure it out" as Juliette says. Her understanding is that giving the learners space would encourage them to decide for themselves about the appropriateness of this task and whether "it's for their own good or not", as she describes it. These aspects are related to metacognitive (task) knowledge as an aspect of 'task demands' as referred to by Wenden (1998).

4.4.4.3   Control over Content

Benson (2001, p. 99) argues that *'control over their learning content is fundamental to autonomy'* and defines this as the process by which learners say what they think and what they would like to do and learn in relation to course curricula.

Data related to this third level of control, which is linked to control over learning material and contents of those materials, are very limited.

> MH: From your opinion, do your learners have any control over their learning content?

The findings were summarized from three participants' responses (Maryam, Rana, and Huda). For Maryam, such control was not possible because the material is uploaded in the system by the Deanship:

> "They don't have control over content because the material is already uploaded in the system and they have to follow the material…they don't have control over content" (Maryam: SSI).

Rana agreed with her colleague that students do not have control over content, but she thought that they must be given a chance to choose their studying materials:

> "They don't share in choosing the materials, they don't choose, but I agree they should be given some kind of freedom to choose their content. They should be given—I am totally with this point" (Rana: SSI).

This positive attitude towards learners' choice of content suggested that some participants understood that learners should be allowed some freedom to choose the content. This freedom would enable the learners to get more involved in the learning/teaching process and it should be taken into consideration by the programmes' policy-makers, according to such a perspective.

Unlike other participants in regard to this level of control, only one participant (Huda) mentioned in her reflection that her learners could have freedom to express their opinion regarding how they are taught or how materials are presented to them:

> "I always allow them to freely express their opinions on any newly introduced teaching technique, or if they want any changes on quizzes or HW and their dates" (Huda: SSI).

This reflection resonates with the point made earlier about the significance of the tutor's experience explored earlier, because Huda is one of the participants with a relatively short period of experience with online teaching, but she has recently obtained her PhD certificate from a British University. Therefore, it might be that she is more familiar with learner autonomy than her more experienced colleagues. It may be the case that she is more willing to try newer methods of teaching in this Arab setting, some of which are already practised in western contexts.

4.4.4.4 Control over Learning in General

In addition to the presentation and discussion of control according to the three levels suggested by Benson's framework, the data revealed some other perspectives on the issue of learners' control in general. These data are divided into three groups: a group who *could not* give their learners as much control as they wanted or as they should have; a group who thought that their DLs *should* have it; a group who were *willing* to allow their DLs to have control over their learning.

Firstly, the majority of the participants maintained that they could not give their learners as much control as they should have owing to many reasons (Rana, Huda, Ruba and Noor are examples of this group). Rana and Huda justified this by referring to the lack of time and the broad syllabus which needed to be covered.

> "Usually they don't control the session. They just respond to what I want them to do. This is because of the shortage of time and the too thick material that we have to cover" (Rana: SSI);

> "…plus there is a big lack of time. We don't have that much time. It's only like we're teaching once a week for like an hour and twenty minutes. … I keep on stressing on time. If we had more time, maybe I would have given them more control" (Huda: SSI).

Ruba's reason for not allowing her learners to have control over their learning was down to their low level of language proficiency:

> "If they have some solid background in the language that would be possible, but they just come for completing their studies, well this is fine but to start from scratch distance learning with the language, I don't think that it is possible to allow some control, except for very, very few students who really have the power to control their learning" (Ruba: SSI).

This issue of students' low level of language proficiency raised by Ruba has been discussed earlier in this analysis (section 4.4.3.3) as well as in related literature as basic conditions for DLLs to have control over their learning. This was reinforced by White (2003), who explains that distance learners' control over their learning requires freedom to make choices, sufficient proficiency, and suitable support.

The programme structure and system have a role in constricting control, as some tutors such as Noor suggested:

> "Very little control I give them. The system is very rigid" (Noor: RJ).

In line with this, based on information from the official document analysis, tutors are not directly and clearly encouraged to allow their learners more control over their learning, so it is likely that teachers do not see this as an expectation or pedagogic requirement of them (see Appendix 1 of tutors' duties) in this particular programme.

Secondly, some other participants like Celine claimed that although her students did not have such control, she thought that they should have it:

> "No, they do not have control over their learning, yet they have to have some kind of control, like girls at twenty-one/twenty-two. You know, you can't pour information in their brain cells".

Her colleague Amal had the same opinion and cited some interesting advantages of allowing the learners more control:

> "Allowing the students more control over their learning helps them to become good learners and it helps them to become good people or good citizens in their countries because depending on themselves will help them become more confident and more beneficial, I think"

A third group of participants claimed that they were willing to allow their DLs to have control over their learning, but suggested that the learners themselves either did not want it or that just very few had the ability. Liza is an example of those who were keen to allow this, but unfortunately they felt that their learners were unwilling as they were relying on her. This attitude was clear in our conversation relating to this point:

> MH: How far do you basically allow your DLs to have control over their learning?
>
> Liza: As I told you, if they want—they will, they don't want to—maybe they are dependent. They can't do it on their own, they can't. I feel if they want to, they will do and I will allow them to, but actually, they don't want to do it on their own. They don't want.
>
> MH: They rely on you?
>
> Liza: Of course, in every single issue, even the place of their exam, final exam, their own number. They ask for every detail. Each and every single detail, they ask for it.

This conversation reflects the situation of most of the distance language learners in this programme, as perceived by the e-tutors, as they seem to be dependent on their teacher for most aspects of their learning. Diana's and Faten's responses confirm this, also suggesting that only a few students had the ability to have control over their learning whereas the majority did not:

> "I don't think that it is possible except for very, very few students who really have the power to control their learning, you know, and they have the will and they can guide themselves …" (Diana: SSI);

Faten similarly thought that some students lack this ability:

> "Well, to be honest, I think many of them wouldn't be able to control their learning. I think—I'm not sure but they don't—I mean they wouldn't do learning for the sake of learning; I mean many of them. Some could do but many of them, they're just taking the course because it's a requirement" (Faten: SSI)

4.4.5   Summary of Findings related to Research Question Three

The presentation and exploration of the main theme of the issues influencing the development of autonomous learners along with its sub-themes and components have

been presented and explored in this sub-section to address the study's third research question. This presentation has covered areas related to the tutors' understanding of DT and DL, the e-tutors' conception of LA, the e-tutors teaching strategies, and finally the extent to which they allow distance learners control over their language learning.

Findings showed that e-tutors in this programme find it difficult to define DT and DL and described the differences between the two modes of distance learning and regular classrooms from different perspectives. The teachers then described the teaching strategies they used in their sessions, with some promoting autonomy and others not so much. Interestingly the use of the Arabic language in the teaching sessions was found to be useful and necessary by some of the e-tutors. The sub-theme of allowing the learners to have control over their learning was also explored and discussed. Participants gave examples of where they thought some of the DLs have demonstrated different levels of control. These findings also revealed that despite the aspiration of some tutors to increase learners' control over learning, very few participants usually allow their students to have control. These findings further imply that the e-tutors will need training and awareness-raising in this regard. To help the tutors in this matter, the programme's policy makers have to be aware of suggestions from research studies. In the literature on autonomy suggestions were provided by some researchers who proposed that teachers need to be prepared to promote learner independence and autonomy in their students both inside and outside classrooms settings, meaning that they must have awareness and personal experience with this, which once again according to this data seemed to be lacking from the context. Lamb (2000) concurs with this and refers to the need for teachers*: '... to be prepared to encourage their pupils to work independently inside and outside the classroom. This means that they need to have an understanding and experience of all aspects of leaner autonomy'* (p. 125).

It is worth noting here that the shortage of information (i.e. the e-tutors' perspectives) regarding dimensions of control or any other aspect in this research study does not, from my perspective, decrease the value of my study. This is an exploratory case study and the focus is on the role of tutors in allowing their learners some control to become more autonomous. As the data include issues related to control, I included them here in these findings and discussion chapter.

4.5 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has addressed and discussed the first three research questions in the thesis. These have included a focus on the e-tutors' perspectives on their own roles as well as those of the distance language learners in the context of the DLLP, and an exploration of the teaching and learning strategies in relation to autonomous learning. The themes, sub-themes, and components explored to address each question were summarised at the end of each section (see sections 4.2.3; 4.3.3; 4.4.5)

In relation to addressing the first research question, the most significant findings were related to the e-tutors' duties in the programme. These duties were identified by the participants through their perspectives on on-line teaching, the ways used by the e-tutors to assess their DLs, and their effort to search for extra language learning resources. As this study aims to investigate the e-tutor's role in this programme, the issues influencing this role such as the e-tutors' skills, experience, and the role of technology were explored in detail.

To address the second question of the study, the main theme of the role the DLs in the DLLP was explored. Sub-themes such as differences between DL sessions and regular classes and the learner tutor relationship with its two components of the method of interaction and the nature of the relationship were explored and presented.

Finally, this chapter ends with the discussion of the issues influencing the development of LA aiming to address research question three in this study. A summary of the most significant outcomes of this theme and its sub-themes and components were summarized above in section 4.4.5.

The Figure below visually summaries all three themes with the sub-themes under each theme:

Theme One addressing RQ1	Theme Two addressing RQ2	Theme Three addressing RQ3
⬇	⬇	⬇
The Role of the E-Tutor in the DLLP	The Role of the Learners in the DLLP	The Issues Influencing the Development of Learner Autonomy
⬇	⬇	⬇
The E-tutors' Duties in the DLLP	Differences between Distance Learning Sessions and Regular Classes	The E-tutors' Understanding of the Distance Language Teaching and Learning
Issues Influencing the Role of the E-tutor	The Learner-Tutor Relationship	The E-tutors' Conception of Autonomous Learners
		The E-tutors' Teaching Strategies
		Allowing Distance Learners Control over their Learning

Figure 4.9: Summary of Findings Addressing the First Three Research Questions of the Study

5 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented and discussed the findings related to the first three research questions. The main purpose of this chapter is to focus on the findings and the discussion related to the fourth and final research question.

5.1 Response to Research Question Four

From the e-tutors' perspectives, which aspects related to the DLLP challenge or support the e-tutors in their role in this Programme?

This question will be addressed by exploring theme four: **The Challenges Experienced in the DLLP and the Support Available in the Teaching-Learning Process**.

This section focuses on the presentation of theme 4 related to firstly the challenges experienced by e-tutors in this specific programme, as articulated by the participants, and secondly it focuses on ways in which e-tutors feel supported in the DLLP.

For the sake of clarity, and as with Chapter Four, the following Figure presents this main and final theme which is divided into firstly *challenges* and secondly *support* along with their sub-themes:
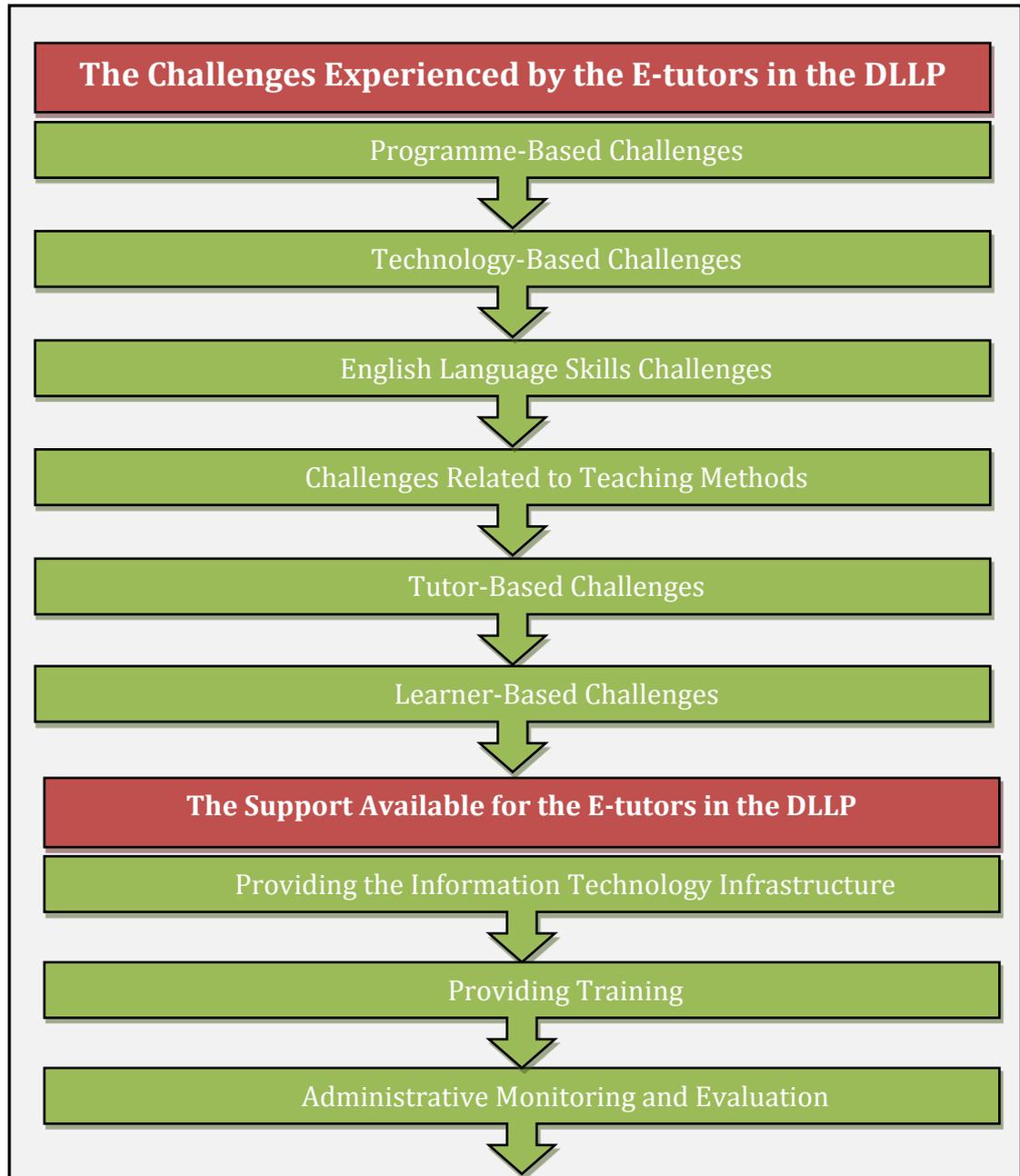
Figure 5.1: Theme Four and its Related Sub-Themes and Components

5.1.1   The Challenges Experienced by the E-tutors in the DLLP

As illustrated by Figure 5.1, this first part of theme 4, related to challenges is one of the richest themes that emerged from the data. To facilitate the presentation and exploration of this, challenges were classified into six sub-themes with several components under each sub-theme, as illustrated in Figure 5.2 below.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                                 │
│   ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐       │
│   │  The Challenges Experienced by the E-tutors in the DLLP │     │
│   └─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐       │
│   │           Programme-Based Challenges                │       │
│   └─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌──────────────────┬──────────────────┬──────────────────┐    │
│   │ Deanship's       │ Lack of the      │ Time Pressure    │    │
│   │ Regulations      │ Programme's      │ Issues           │    │
│   │                  │ Philosophy       │                  │    │
│   └──────────────────┴──────────────────┴──────────────────┘    │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐       │
│   │           Technology-Based Challenges               │       │
│   └─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌──────────────────┬──────────────────┬──────────────────┐    │
│   │ System Failure   │ Lack of          │ Lack of Technical│    │
│   │                  │ Appropriate      │ Support          │    │
│   │                  │ Technological    │                  │    │
│   │                  │ Communication    │                  │    │
│   │                  │ Tools            │                  │    │
│   └──────────────────┴──────────────────┴──────────────────┘    │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐       │
│   │         English Language Skills Challenges          │       │
│   └─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌──────────────────┬──────────────────┬──────────────────┐    │
│   │ Speaking and     │ Grammatical      │ Issues concerning│    │
│   │ Listening        │ Concerns         │ Students' Level  │    │
│   │ Practice         │                  │ of Proficiency   │    │
│   └──────────────────┴──────────────────┴──────────────────┘    │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐       │
│   │        Challenges Related to Teaching Methods       │       │
│   └─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐       │
│   │              Spoon-Feeding Method                   │       │
│   └─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐       │
│   │              Tutor-Based Challenges                 │       │
│   └─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌──────────────────────────┬──────────────────────────┐       │
│   │ Tutors' Training         │ Tutors' Attitudes        │       │
│   └──────────────────────────┴──────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐       │
│   │             Learner-Based Challenges                │       │
│   └─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
│   ┌──────────────────────────┬──────────────────────────┐       │
│   │ Learners' Training       │ Learners' Attitudes      │       │
│   └──────────────────────────┴──────────────────────────┘       │
│                                                                 │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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Figure 5.2: Part One of Theme 4 and its Related Sub-Themes and Components: the Challenges Experienced by the E-tutors in the DLLP

In the following sub-section, the focus will be on the first list of challenges related to the design of the programme and its components.

5.1.1.1 Programme-Based Challenges

In this section, the focus will be on exploring the challenges related to the design of the programme as perceived by the participants. These include the Deanship's regulations, the lack of the programme's philosophy, and time pressure issues.

In the following, the emphasis will be on the Deanship's regulations and how these regulations impact the e-tutors' teaching role in this programme.

- *The Deanship's Regulations*

In the exploration of the challenges related to the programme, I decided that it would be appropriate to begin with the Deanship's regulations, as this will provide readers with a clear picture of the regulations followed in this programme.

The Deanship's regulations are fully presented in the formal website of the Deanship. This presentation is available in more than one language (Arabic, English, French, and Spanish) to enable those whose native language is not Arabic to understand these regulations.

The data, which emerged when exploring this issue, show that one of the main challenges of this programme, from the e-tutors' perspective, is associated with its regulations, as the e-tutors are obliged to follow these regulations and objectives as assigned by the distance learning Deanship. For some, these regulations are acceptable, but for some other participants they are not. These regulations were discussed in depth with participants; however, it is worth mentioning that the various nationalities of the participants sometimes posed an issue during the data collection phase. This might be due to the fact that some participants are non-Saudis and felt embarrassed to speak frankly. I know this from my experience of teaching with e-tutors recruited from other countries. Such e-tutors usually feel uncomfortable to discuss their troubles and concerns openly with strangers, because they sometimes panic about losing their jobs if they complain or speak frankly. This was noticed in relation to various aspects of our meetings and discussions about their on-line teaching experience, especially with those whom I was meeting for the first time. I assured them that their names would be anonymous and tried my best to make them feel

secure about speaking up. This reassured them and consequently, the participants' replies to this question during the interviews were more open:

> MH: How do you think the current regulations in the institution could influence your role?

Prior to presenting the participants' responses to this question, it is worth pointing out that the regulations of the DLLP cover the vision and objectives of the programme as aforementioned, in addition to some aspects related to assessment through the assigned materials, the number of assignments, quizzes, discussion topics, and the exam marks distribution (see Appendix 1 for more details). In general, the e-tutors did not have any chance of control over most aspects of their teaching in this programme as will be seen in the following presentation and analysis.

In her reply to this question, Ruba was not pleased with some of the restrictions that these regulations imposed and spoke about the need for allowing the teachers to be more autonomous in developing their own ideas. For example, Ruba was one of the e-tutors who basically thought that the students did not have group work:

> "… I mean like doing group work is one strategy that I believe would enhance their learning … and this could be enhanced even more if the system and the Deanship would allow us to think of other innovative ideas of how to get them to work together, but we are not allowed to" (Ruba: SSI).

Celine also did not differ much from her colleague when she said:

> "I personally think that these regulations should be flexible and the e-tutors should be given some space in their running of the distance sessions" (Celine: SSI).

Their colleague Huda was also not so happy about having to strictly follow the curriculum designed by the Deanship:

> "This is the real situation: we, according to the curriculum, according to the material we're receiving, we're supposed to follow each and every word. However, you as a teacher, you need to have a little bit of control. You can teach them in other ways if you feel these ways are more appropriate" (Huda: SSI).

In her response Huda raised the important issue of allowing e-tutors some control over their teaching. This issue is worth focusing on because, as previously noted in this study, if the e-tutors do not have a chance to have some control over their own 'professional

development', as shown by McGrath (2000), they would find it difficult to transfer this control to their students. This also aligns with Benson's study (2000) in which he also argued that most teachers work in an environment where control is extremely constrained by factors such as institutional rules and educational policy. These constraints exist in this programme.

From another perspective, another participant (Noor) spoke of the Deanship's regulations in regard to students' support and assessment and complained about how time-consuming and exhausting they were for the e-tutors:

> "…we have to use tools, which are time wasting and exhausting. They waste our time. I'll give you an example to be clear. We have tools for FAQ. We have something for homework, like quizzes[2], I don't know. Why should we have quizzes and homework? A quiz, you have to correct many, eighty-eight students, which is very hectic. Why do we get the quizzes?" (Noor: SSI).

Noor's opinion seems to show how challenging and time-consuming it is for the e-tutors to have to correct such a large number of quizzes for the students, especially as previously mentioned (see Appendix 1 on teachers' duties), when the DLs are also required to complete five assignments and another five quizzes each semester.

Furthermore, Amal mentioned that they are provided with a "pacing guide" by the Deanship which they have to follow in their online sessions. This works as a tool for tracking the learners' completion of and performance in their assignments. Once again the e-tutors would need to spend a lot of time and effort on this:

> "I have to follow the pacing guide, to make sure that all the students did their home assignments or quizzes on time and help those who need help" (Amal: SSI).

From a different angle, some participants such as Cathy made a connection between the inability to listen to the DLs' voices and the Deanship's regulations by stating that:

> "I thought we can give the students the microphone to speak but we're not allowed to do that" (Cathy: SSI).

Other e-tutors expressed a level of frustration about how firm they thought the regulations were. For example, Juliette was annoyed by the constant tracking by the distance Deanship. She said:

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[2] The term 'quiz' is an American synonymy of 'test' in British Education

"I'm talking about the distance learning here…there's a report for everything tracking, tracking, quizzes tracking, how many times—even when the teacher enters—even on the teacher, there is a report at the end" (Juliette: SSI).

By "when the teacher enters", she meant that teachers have to log in to the session as as the distance Deanship insists that this has to be tracked or recorded. I understand from the participants' replies and from the documents that the regulations are very firm regarding the e-tutors' on-line lecturing (see Appendix 1 on teachers' job duties). This is reflected in Amal's reply:

"From day one, we took the training. They told us there may not be any students on-line. If it's your time to give the lecture and you open the system and there is no one there, no students are there, give the lecture" (Amal: SSI).

Although this seems impractical, even pointless, for some of the e-tutors, it perhaps makes sense as the lectures, as mentioned before, are recorded and are accessed by the students at different times.

Meanwhile, for some of the other e-tutors, particularly the foreign (non-Saudi) participants, it was a matter of following the rules and regulations of the Deanship as best as they could, as shown in Maryam's reply:

"I am covering the whole curriculum as the distance unit sends it. Everything they send I cover, everything" (Maryam: SSI).

Diana had a similar reply:

"I'm trying as much as I can to meet with the objectives of course of the Distance Learning Deanship" (Diana: SSI).

With regards to programme regulations, AL-firh's (2010) study has shown a lack of university regulations to manage and run DL in SA, where distance instructors thought that DL regulations should be clearly stated and understood by all DL stakeholders to achieve the vision and mission of DL. According to the context of this study, however, the majority of participants agreed that there were clear regulations, even holding views that they are too tight. I would perhaps support the participants' desire to have some space, because the emphasis here is to enable DLs to develop a level of control over their learning, and this control demands more autonomy for their e-tutors; autonomy, for example, over content, decision-making, lesson management. Furthermore, this would be in line with some researchers' postulations (Thavenius, 1999; Little, 2000; Lamb, 2008) about the relationship between teachers' autonomy and learner's autonomy and the need

for teachers to be able to utilise their professional skills autonomously if they wanted to foster a level of autonomy in their learners. With reference to the theory of transactional distance proposed by Moore (1972), it can be said that the structure of this programme is somewhat rigid (pre-planned and instructor led) in accordance with the Deanship's regulations. While it cannot be claimed that the programme is said to have high transactional distance (as with a television broadcast course), it also does not have low transactional distance because autonomy is not highly expected of the learners in this programme.

In what follows, another component, which concerns the lack of the programme's philosophy, will be presented and explored.

- *The Lack of the Programme's Philosophy*

Another challenge closely related to the programme's regulations is its philosophy or rather, in this case, the lack of it. Supposedly, each programme's philosophy is available on its official website, yet this programme's philosophy is not explicitly explained. The official website includes the Deanship's vision, mission, long term goals, and objectives. For example, this information, in addition to what is available in the programme's documents, does not include clear objectives in relation to helping the e-tutors realize that this programme is intended to promote autonomy in the learners, even though this is suggested in other parts of the regulations. A presentation of the Deanship's objectives posted on its official website below suggests how these might be too general:

> "- Offer increasing numbers of students the opportunity to get an education according to approved standards.
> -Implement the latest technological solutions to enhance the educational process.
> -Increase educational staff's proficiency in e-learning and distance education.
> -Realize quality and performance indicators in e-learning and distance education according to international best practices" (DA: Official Website).

Such lack of information and ambiguity in the programme's philosophy have clearly appeared in the data from both RJs and SSIs. In accordance with some participants' views, this programme is an exam-oriented one. Faten, for example, highlighted this by saying:

> "…you want them to understand language concepts, honestly and truly— well, later on, it gets closer to being exam-oriented but I start by really wanting them to learn the concepts that I'm teaching them… I then give them exercises that are similar to the questions they get at the exam... Everyone

sends them the same material that's similar to the questions in the exam" (Faten: SSI).

In accordance with this interpreted philosophy of the programme, one of the participants mentioned the techniques followed with these exams by saying:

> "I give them complete exam instructions. I give them all the instructions they need about the location, timing, everything" (Rana: RJ).

In this quote, the participant shows that in addition to the idea that this programme is an exam-oriented one, it also suggests how much the DLs depend on their e-tutors.

Noor's reply also implicitly suggested that this programme is an exam-oriented one by talking about her way of examining her students:

> "Of course I have to write a sample exam. I have to send my students sample exams and questions. In the download centre, I usually upload PowerPoint presentations, revision worksheets. I give them the opportunity to answer something easy to build self-confidence. They receive instant feedback" (Noor: SSI).

Another participant, Juliette refers to the contradiction in the programme:

> "I feel there is some sort of conflict within myself, like what I am doing here exactly? Is it the language I am teaching or is it an exam-oriented course? If it's an exam-oriented course, so this is what we're doing. So, okay, this is what we're doing so I can do that but if it's teaching the language, no. It's not how I learned how to teach the language" (Juliette: SSI).

Juliette's response seems more critical in relation to the role that she should be playing in the programme. Although she agreed with the others that it is an exam-oriented programme, she admits that she was not teaching the language efficiently. Her response here suggests a level of confusion as to what the programme's overall vision should be.

What is inferred from these responses is that the majority of the e-tutors and the students are reverting to the traditional way of teaching and learning as it seems that the matter of exams and marks are of high importance for both. It is likely that the lack of a clear programme philosophy has allowed the teachers to revert to old ways of teaching and has led to the programme to be envisaged as exam-oriented. Moreover, the emphasis on exams in other places has possibly contributed to this situation, for example, the word 'exam' appeared 5 times in the job description document indicating its significance in this programme (see Appendix 1 on teachers' job duties).

Another component, which concerns time constraints, is presented next.

- ***Time-Pressure Issue***

Another challenge stated by the participants is the lack of time allocated for on-line sessions. As mentioned in the documents and the RJs, the duration of the programme lasts between 13-14 weeks per one term, with a weekly one hour fifty-minute session. According to the participants, firstly this once-a-week session allocated for the DLL course is a problem as the majority of the e-tutors complained that they have insufficient teaching time and they needed to be in contact with the students more regularly during the week. In their reply to the same question regarding the obstacles that the e-tutors might face while teaching on-line, this participant, Diana, for example, said:

> "As I'm telling you, the one-time session per week is not enough —if it's more than one time per week, I think it will be better for students because they will meet with the objective of distance learning, and they will feel more comfortable to know that they will not wait for seven more days to meet with their teacher for any problem that they faced when they studied alone" (Diana: SSI).

It was noted from Diana's reaction that she was concerned about this challenge of time and she suggested a solution to overcome it:

> "The online meetings could be done three times a week, for example, an hour, an hour, an hour" (Diana: SSI).

Furthermore, her colleague, Noor raised an important issue related to time by saying:

> "It will be more effective to meet with students more than once a week…if you meet them once a week, this is not enough, especially with students who probably have left or dropped out of college or university or even school like a long time ago and then they're coming back to education" (Noor: SSI).

This obstacle was mentioned earlier by the same participant in her reply to a similar question in the reflective journal when she said:

> "There is only one session per week and it is only one hour and fifty minutes long. In this time teachers are expected to cover 2 units from the course book, which means there is no time to allow students to participate as they should" (Noor: RJ).

Here this participant added that the time allocated for the session (1hr 50mins) is also insufficient. Another two participants Ruba and Amal tend to agree with Noor and wished to have more time:

"I think more time for the sessions would certainly help... I can't think of a better way of getting the information across to the students in that short time" (Ruba: SSI).

"We are giving them different kinds of assignments and usually in one hour fifty minutes to do this lesson, it's very difficult for a teacher to cover all the points during the lecture" (Amal: SSI).

In contrast with the above participants, Faten was not concerned about the allocated time for the session, yet she suggested having more than one meeting per week:

"An hour and fifty minutes is awesome. It's awesome because you just give the session, but if this is three times per week, it will be more effective for English language teachers" (Faten: SSI).

Faten' s different opinion in regard to this time challenge, from my perspective, means that a one hour and fifty minutes session is enough for the learners to allow the students more freedom to study the language by themselves without the e-tutors' guidance. This interpretation is based on her understating that more time is good for teachers not for learners.

For some e-tutors the lack of time might force them to prioritise certain parts of the planned lecture in order to complete the prescribed syllabus on time. Huda commented on this:

"As a distance learning teacher, I think the most important thing is just to focus on certain things because of the time limit" (Huda: SSI).

It was obvious during the interview that Huda was frustrated by the lack of time and wished she could be given more time to provide her DLs with what she called "better sessions":

"I wish they can change the time by giving us more time, even if like twice a week, we will give better sessions than what we're doing right now" (Huda: SSI).

The participants' responses suggest that time plays an important role in on-line learning whether in terms of the frequency of sessions per week or the length of the session itself in relation to completing the units of the syllabus. This obstacle of time and differences between regular and online classes is discussed in related literature. It seems that this time problem is generally common in most online programmes as pointed out by Salmon (2003), who argues that a face-to-face tutorial has a clear start and finish time and it is

hardly interrupted by anything, whereas the online one has a reputation of 'eating time'. He adds that *"Time takes a new dimension online…Failing to get to grips with Internet time can result in the feeling of falling into a 'deep well' (and certainly failure to complete the course, discussion or programme)"* (p.64). Accordingly, real fears and concerns do occur and should be addressed.

Thus, with the exploration of time-pressure challenges, this sub-theme (Programme-Based Challenges) comes to its end. The following sub-section explores and presents another sub-theme, which focuses on the challenges related to the use of technology.

5.1.1.2   Technology-Based Challenges

Any on-line learning system is linked in one way or another to technology in its different phases. This can include Internet connection, Learning Management System (LMS), chat rooms, e-mails, forums, etc. Despite its facilitating role, the use of technology holds many challenges and uncertainties. This sub-theme, according to the research data, includes the issues of system failure, lack of face-to-face communication tools, and lack of technical support.

- *System Failure*

As mentioned in the literature review chapter, technology plays an important role in the success or failure of any distance learning and teaching programme. If the system does not work well, this causes many problems for both the e-tutors and the learners. In this study, this challenge was significant, from the perspectives of the e-tutors. Their concerns revolve around several issues, the first of which is related to the updating of computer hardware and software. In this matter Sheren says:

> "it could be challenging from a technology point of view. They had different software. Their computer equipment is not well-updated… They do not update them" (Sheren: SSI).

This seems to be problematic for a course based on online-teaching and learning. For example, an old version of software caused a sound problem as stated by this same participant, Sheren, in her response to a similar question in the reflective journal:

> "…disrupted internet technical issues at students' end, sound problems due to old windows version used by students" (Sheren: RJ).

From my perspective, this is an important issue because technology is rapidly advancing and the money spent on on-line learning in Saudi universities demands the programme's stakeholders to be aware of recent, more advanced programmes to help both tutors and students to avoid problems which might emerge from old versions of Windows Software.

Another challenge was related to the limitations of the system used on the programme as stated by Celine:

> "My main concern is about the system itself that we use. It's very limiting, you know, there are only certain things we can do" (Celine: SSI).

Cathy's opinion was similar to her colleague Celine when she proposed that the system is not flexible:

> "I mean, on the system there is—you can like arrange with the students to do like text chat but we have one session a week and then when I try to log in again, it says you have no session, so there's no way I can get into CENTRA to chat with the students, even if we wanted to" (Cathy: SSI).

To overcome these deficiencies in the current system, the installation of a better system is needed, as suggested by Cathy:

> "We need a better system, an electronic Learning Management System (LMS). We need something better and I think there's been talk of using Blackboard next year" (Cathy: SSI);

The internet connection was yet another problem. This problem is seen as an internet server one as explained by Rana:

> "…as I told you, the internet problem is one of the server problems, this you know—this is probably the main actual one" (Rana: SSI).

Her colleague, Sheren added:

> "…the automatic shutting down of the system and that is, I think is because of, having a lot of pressure on the system" (Sheren: SSI).

She further clarified:

> "In the middle of the session the system automatically shuts down. So you're teaching something, you're in the middle of something and automatically, it turns off. This causes a problem, then you go back again, you sign in and then you go back to the lecture, but five/six minutes of your lecture are taken away by such hazards. It definitely causes a problem" (Sheren: SSI).

This argument was supported by another participant, Maryam, in our discussion of the problem, as it could also affect the attendance of individual students even if the class was running:

> "…because sometimes I'm about to finish and one of the students joined the class, at the end of the class! And she said hello or سلام عليكم or whatever, OK, she has just joined it and I am about to finish!"

> MH: "but she knew beforehand the timing of the class?"

> Maryam: "Of course she knew but maybe because of weak Internet connection she couldn't join. Maybe because of other—I don't know—other reasons."

> MH: "What else?"

> Maryam: "I don't know students sometimes, they don't—if you send a quiz or assignment, sometimes they can't do it due to technical problems. Sometimes the system is under maintenance, so they can't do it in the limited time we assigned" (Maryam: SSI).

As inferred from this discussion, action should be taken by those who run the programme to provide better, stronger servers. This will help both teachers and students during their online interaction and it will enable the teachers to identify and tackle any students' late joining/signing into the sessions.

A further issue was related to the tutor's lack of IT skills. This problem was noted earlier by Diana who stated that the teacher's inability to fix a very simple technical problem is a challenge:

> "The centre of course has been dealing with teachers from different cultures, different characters, and okay some of them panic when they are disconnected with the students. But sometimes there is a very simple technical problem in her laptop or in her computer and she doesn't know how to fix it" (Diana: SSI).

Relating these findings to existing literature, there is consensus that technology needs to be closely integrated with e-learning, yet there are concerns and challenges as stated by Gedera (2014):

> *Online learning environments can offer learners opportunities for flexibility, interaction and collaboration distinctly different from face-to-face learning environments. However, the integration of educational technologies also presents challenges and concerns in relation to students' learning* (p. 93).

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Because of these challenges, and as shown from the participants' extracts, the capacity of technology is not to be neglected in any distance language environment. White (2003), for example, emphasized the importance of this in such environments and said:

> *Technology is a major issue for language learning and teaching in distance education. ...it is the major issue, not only because of the new possibilities offered by technological changes, but because of the range of attendant issues for learners and teachers and for the future directions of the field* (p.65).

To sum up the discussion of this challenge and its effect on the tutor's role and their interaction with their DLs, action should be taken by stakeholders to solve the problems identified by the participants to enable them to be more productive e-tutors and this will, as well, be of great benefit for the learners.

The next component explores the lack of communication tools but from a technological perspective.

- *Lack of Appropriate Technological Communication Tools*

This component is similar to the ones explored earlier in Chapter Four in sections (4.3.2.4) where the focus was on the tools of interaction employed in this programme. This is revisited here because it was one of the main challenges of this programme (technology and its relation with communication) as perceived by the participants. Throughout this programme and during all sessions, as explained earlier in the context of the study in Chapter One, the e-tutor is not allowed to see nor hear her DLs' voices but rather communicate by other means and not always in 'real time'. The DLs can only listen to their e-tutors' voice explaining the lesson and the lessons are audio-recorded. This issue was highlighted and stressed by the participants in their response to my question:

> MA: Do you think teaching in the distance learning environment is challenging? If yes, which part is the most challenging one?

The participants' responses showed their serious concern for the lack of communication between them and their DLs, and counted this as a major challenge. One of the participants (Maryam) for example, who is originally not Saudi, thought that it is challenging because her students could not see her and she was unable to see or hear them:

> "It's a challenge. It's a big challenge and you're teaching people who are not seeing you…" (Maryam: SSI).

Maryam adds:

> "You're not even listening to them. You can't hear them, nothing" (Maryam: SSI).

This participant was frustrated by this situation and in addition she often wondered why the students' microphone was not working:

> "Many times, I saw hands raised there [symbols of hands on the system screen, see Figure below] and I click on them [to hear the students] and I can see the student's mic is not open—is not opening. I don't know what is wrong, what is happening and why the mic is there but students cannot speak…yeah" (Maryam: SSI).

Figure 5.3: Symbols shown on the online system during the session

It seemed worrying for Maryam too that the system is showing an existing microphone for the students but it is not used. This reaction confirms the existence of the microphone in the system as previously mentioned (see section 4.2.2.4). Moreover, this finding is interesting and significant as it also shows the strength of social constraints in regard to female distance language learning as will be more explored in this sub-section.

With a focus on tools that allow face-to-face interaction such as video conferencing Maryam, for example, wondered why the video option is not working:

> "I mean the video option is there.... It's locked, yeah. It's not working through the computer. This challenge is a basic one for e-tutors because they cannot see their learners" (Maryam: SSI).

These extracts show that Maryam was really frustrated because the video option was not working and counted this as a basic challenge. She went on to stress the importance of

eye contact which is not possible in this learning environment and compared this with the situation in Britain:

> "There is something very important: there is no eye contact between students and e-tutor, yeah. Because I know, if you are doing online courses in Britain or wherever, you can see the students. You can meet your students" (Maryam: SSI).

The same reaction came from another non-Saudi (Rana), who had been teaching on this programme for more than eight years and who was fully aware of this challenge:

> "Of course, it is. All of it actually is a challenge, all of it; especially the part of communicating with the students is a challenge" (Rana: SSI).

Her colleague Juliette, who has less experience in DLL (one year and a half) added:

> "you are connecting with the students through the Internet with a computer but you can't see them and they can't see you" (Juliette: SSI).

This shows that this challenge is a basic one for the participants regardless of their experience.

As mentioned earlier, perspectives on this issue are affected by the participants' nationalities and cultural backgrounds. It seemed ambiguous for this British participant Cathy, for example, who could not understand why the student's microphone is not used or rather not allowed to be used:

> "That I can't tell you but I seem to remember sometimes that we were not encouraged to use the microphone. I don't know why" (Cathy: SSI).

She added:

> "I thought we could give the students the microphone to speak but we're not allowed to do that" (Cathy: SSI).

The data show that the participants were confused about the existence of devices which were meant to facilitate learning through better communication, yet they were not allowed to be used. I personally can imagine the feelings of foreign e-tutors in regard to this issue; it is hard for them to understand that although student microphones seem to be installed in the system, due to cultural reasons they cannot be used nor can teachers see their students. When I presented my work at the World Congress of Modern Languages held in Niagara Falls, Canada in March, 2015, for example, this issue was raised and discussed

with the audience who were surprised as well. This challenge is related, as far as I know and as mentioned earlier, to the culture of the society where this study was conducted. It is a matter of religious and social habits that restrict the possibilities of female students being seen or heard by others over the Internet. These findings align with previous studies in similar contexts in Saudi Arabia. Alsaeid (2011), who conducted one of these studies in one of the Saudi universities, observed that female students were not encouraged to use the microphone to speak during online classes. It was found that this was due to the idea that some Saudi families are conservative and do not feel comfortable when their daughter's voice is heard speaking aloud (Alsaeid, 2011).

Other participants referred to the lack of certain aspects of a lesson that perhaps these technological tools might have made possible. The lack of body language between learners and teachers is a challenge as indicated by Huda:

> "It's challenging. It's very challenging…because there are no body gestures" (Huda: SSI).

On the other hand, the lack of communication made the e-tutor unable to know what the students do during the session as expressed by Nadia:

> "…so really it's very difficult to know what they think, how they approach studying, you know, what they do. I don't know" (Nadia: SSI).

In addition, some of the participants pointed out that language teaching requires audio contact between the two main parties of the learning process (e-tutors and DLs). This, she believed, provides better chances for e-tutors to help in correcting their students' mistakes while practising speaking and listening. This participant (Juliette), for example, wished she could hear her DLs voices to provide much needed feedback. She commented that:

> "because I'm teaching them a language and it's a foreign language, I wish that I could hear their voices in order to correct—to be able to correct, to give them guidance on how to speak because some of them have said that they like English very much but they don't know how to speak the language and this is a kind of common expectation from so many students" (Juliette: SSI).

I tend to agree with this opinion as it is hard to learn the language without speaking it. Language students need to utter the words and the tutor needs to be able to listen to them in order to give feedback or correct mistakes. Hurd (2001) supports this view and argues that weaknesses in learners' pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary can only be

identified and diagnosed through teacher's direct involvement which requires the two ends hearing each other.

Connecting these findings to my discussion of synchronous and asynchronous web-based instruction tools in the literature review chapter (see section 2.7), I do agree that it is a basic challenge because e-tutors need to see their learners and this is what takes place in other distance learning programmes in the world. Some e-tutors, for example, in the Open University (UK), as indicated by Salmon (2003), *'choose to use synchronous or real – time conferencing, for the benefit of the dimension of spontaneity'* (p. 71). Salmon added *'Many universities and colleges have installed video conferencing equipment that enables them to deliver the teaching to the distance location'* (p. 67). So, the installation of this tool in many universities, as pointed out by Salmon, reflects the increasing importance for the e-tutors and for the learners to see and hear each other through the video or any other available tool. Nevertheless, this was not the case in the study's context and it is therefore hoped that there is room for improvement regarding this issue in the future where alternative approaches need to be considered for this language learning context.

- *Lack of Technical Support*

Another challenge faced by both e-tutors and DLs is the lack of technical support. It was thought that this is one of the major factors that play a role in impeding the success of this programme. To discuss this fundamental factor, the participants explained how this issue affects their role in their responses to my question:

> MH: What are the problems you face during the session that may influence your role?

Maryam's response focused on technical problems:

> "most of these problems are technical problems of students sometimes, they don't—if you send a quiz or assignment, sometimes they can't do it due to technical problems" (Maryam: SSI).

This seems logical especially given that the sessions are delivered to the private laptops or desk computers of the users, which means that the computer technical supporter is unable to help the DLs with any problem that might emerge during the session. Another participant, Amal added:

> "Sometimes we have some technical problems like the sound or the session is not recorded" (Amal: SSI).

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The e-tutors assume this challenge is not easy to deal with because sometimes the problem is a consequence of the student's inability to use the Internet as stated by Juliette:

"they [the students] do not know how to browse the Internet" (Juliette: SSI).

On a similar note, their colleague Huda added:

"Mostly technical; some of them, they don't have good connection, so they keep on getting disconnected. Some of them, they are computer illiterate—they have no experience in computers; illiterate!!" (Huda: SSI).

Her colleague Diana agreed:

"…some of them panic when they are disconnected. Sometimes there is a very simple technical problem in her laptop or in her computer and she doesn't know how to fix it" (Rana: SSI).

Another participant (Liza) talked about the disconnection of the system as a technical problem:

"I don't know why, every time we try to use the AppShare. CENTRA simply disconnects and we lose connection with the students. We have to reconnect again. We have to start the whole lesson from the very beginning" (Liza: SSI).

In accordance with the participants' perspective of this challenge and to solve the students' problems with the Internet connection, it would be helpful if the Deanship offers a helpline for both the e-tutors and the DLs who lose connection and need immediate help, taking into consideration that most of the DLs live in remote areas where the Internet connection is either not strong enough or there is literally no Internet connection. Furthermore, some of these DLs are living in Nomadic, very basic areas where they have never owned nor used a computer before.

With reference to the literature, Saudi Arabia is 2,240,000 square kilometres in size, as indicated by the Ministry of Information (1992); this huge space is accompanied by the fact that not all areas in Saudi Arabia have access to the main Internet network circuits. In addition, the usage of the Internet is relatively recent in Saudi Arabia as posited by Al-Kahtani et al. (2005) who say *'The widespread availability of the Internet in Saudi Arabia is a rather recent phenomenon. Connection to the Internet was made in 1997, but it was not made available to the public until 1999'* (p. 228). This explains, from my perspective, the reasons why the DLs struggle with the Internet, and makes it essential to overcome the problem of some DLs' computer illiteracy, and also to make sure they have access.

Furthermore, Alenezi (2012) confirms, in his discussion of e-learning research in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia that poor Internet infrastructure and lack of support for the faculty members in Saudi universities are basic barriers to the success of the e-learning environment in the country.

Finally, it is important to recognise that such obstacles, as seen from this analysis, not only affect negatively on the tutor's role, but also have a negative effect on the whole learning/ teaching process in this learning environment. The next sub-section will explore another challenge which relates to English language skills.

5.1.1.3 English Language Skills Challenges

This third sub-theme of the challenges experienced by e-tutors in the DLLP is divided into three components: speaking and listening practice; grammar concerns; and students' level of proficiency. In the following sections, each one will be presented and discussed.

- *Speaking and Listening Practice*

A major issue in this programme as mentioned before is the inability of the e-tutors to listen to the voices of their DLs. Comments were found in the participants' reflections in the RJs. Sheren, for example, referred to the listening challenges caused by the lack of technical facilities and argued that listening exercises can be difficult due to technical issues at the students' end.

The lack of these technical tools seems to have an impact on the lessons themselves. The fact that they were unable to hear the DLs speaking the language was enthusiastically discussed by the participants, who argued that this challenge makes the teaching process hard for the e-tutors. This can be seen in Juliette's reply to my question in the following conversation:

> MH: What might you do differently and what would you wish your students to do differently?
>
> Juliette: "I wish that I could—because I'm teaching them language and it's a foreign language, I wish that I can hear their voices in order to correct—to be able to correct, to give them guidance on how to speak because some of them have said that they like English very much but they don't know how to speak the language and this is kind of a common expectation from so many students" (Juliette: SSI).

She went on to add:

> "Yeah, and with English, it's really hard to teach someone a language like at a distance without actually listening to what she has to say or—so it's really hard for me. I find that this is, again, another challenge" (Juliette: SSI).

Juliette also touched on the importance of listening practice:

> "We guide them to a listening website where they can actually practise the listening online" (Juliette: SSI).

Her colleague Nadia shared the same opinion, indicating that this is a key element of the learning process:

> "They should be good listeners".

To comment on these responses, I might highlight the strong desire of the participants to encourage the DLs to practise listening and to listen to their students speaking the language as it is difficult to learn a language without speaking it. This challenge has clearly affected the effectiveness of teaching a foreign language from a distance. This issue of speaking the language is highly discussed in literature; Salmon (2003), for instance, states that e-tutors in the Open University (UK) use audiographic more than text conferencing because of their belief in its benefit and appropriateness for language learning, where oral communication is a basic element of this experience of learning. Thus, the programme's stakeholders might need to seek solutions for this challenge by thinking of alternative ways that will allow for better speaking and listening opportunities and perhaps assign more time to developing these skills in the sessions. This could be helpful for both e-tutors and students and it can make their language learning experience an effective one, particularly in relation to developing the skills of listening and speaking.

- *Grammatical Concerns*

Another challenge experienced by the e-tutors in this context is the concentration on the grammatical rules of the foreign language. They were concerned that teaching grammar in the distance sessions takes up most of the time of a session. This concern was manifested in their quotes about this issue. Faten, for instance said:

> "…grammar takes most of the time. I don't know why. Even in the materials we get it takes up most of the size" (Faten: SSI).

Her colleague Ruba agreed:

"Most of the time it is grammar skills, most of the time" (Ruba: SSI).

Another participant, Maryam reflected in her journal on one session that it is challenging to teach grammatical rules online:

> "Unit 6 was quite challenging. As I was explaining the grammar I found out that the "relative clause" concept was not easy to explain using the grammar parts of the units and the exercises. Perhaps an illustration with arrows and lines could have helped" (Maryam: RJ).

I tend to agree with Maryam's reflection that it is challenging to explain grammar in this programme where perhaps illustrative tools, which might facilitate the process, are limited.

Moreover, this emphasis on teaching grammar drew my attention throughout the discussion of this issue between me and one of the participants (Faten), who explained the reason behind this emphasis:

> MH: Yeah, and everybody was telling me about explaining grammar, grammar. Is it only grammar that you are teaching?
>
> Faten: It's because like twenty questions they have in the exams are about grammar, so we have to explain grammar.

Another complaint with regard to this challenge is the translation of grammatical rules, such as, present simple tense, present continuous, present perfect, present perfect continuous and past tense …etc. into Arabic to enable the DLs to understand the differences between these tenses and their usage in English. One participant, Juliette, expressed her discomfort with the teaching of grammar in this way:

> "…in a very awkward position, like explaining the English grammar in Arabic. So you go back to the very, very, very traditional way of teaching, which is teacher-led class; very teacher-oriented class, and grammar translation" (Juliette: SSI).

Juliette's response also suggests that this had made her classes teacher-led which she tends to think as ineffective and does not help the DLs to learn the language.

It is understood from the participants' responses that the reason for this emphasis on grammar is to address an exam requirement. This may not be an acceptable reason for spending most of the session time on teaching grammar, yet this reminds me of the regular English classrooms in Saudi Arabia where we used to employ methods of teaching which

involved spending the whole class on explaining grammar, and ending up with low achievement among students, who would memorise the grammatical rules just to get high marks in the exam. This situation should not be repeated in distance language learning sessions where new methods of teaching and learning have emerged in addition to the installation of new technology that provides the students with the latest methods of learning the language. Furthermore, this contradicts one of the objectives of the distance language learning programme which aims for:

> "…the consideration of the newest learning techniques that helps in raising the learners' scientific level" (DA data).

These findings are, unfortunately, not far from the more general situation of learning English in Saudi Arabia. Alkubaidi (2014) confirms this by stating that it is typical in Saudi Arabia that English is learnt through memorization, where students are asked to memorize paragraphs without understanding their meanings. This may result in students passing the exam with high grades whilst their actual language achievement remains questionable. In conclusion, more language learning skills should be considered to enable language learners in general and distance learners in particular to develop language learning strategies other than rote memorisation.

The following section will explore the last component related to this sub-theme.

- *Issues Concerning Students' Level of Proficiency*

This issue (i.e. placing students in the right class before the programme) concentrates on the students' level of language proficiency from their e-tutors' perspectives. The findings highlighted two areas: the first is the problem of the students not being in the right group; the other relates to challenges for the e-tutors to identify the DLs levels of learning in the programme itself. These challenges are fundamental because the main aim of any language programme is to measure its learners' proficiency level and to determine whether this DLL programme is helping in the improvement of this level or not. In spite of the significance of this issue, it was not clear from the collected data and from the interviews and RJs as well as from the programme's documents whether the learners need to undertake a placement test to enable their distribution in accordance with their level.

The DLLP has different levels as the students' proficiency levels vary. These levels were explained earlier in the context of the study (see section 1.3 in Chapter One), but the

following question was asked in the interviews to initiate the discussion with the tutors about their students' level:

> MH: how many courses are there for—I mean English courses for DLs?
>
> Diana: ELCA 101, that goes with level one, with two books, with two courses; for example, beginner and elementary and then the 102 goes with the other higher levels, which are the pre-intermediate and intermediate.
>
> MH: So there are in general four levels?
>
> Diana: Yeah, there are four levels here
>
> MH: And all four levels, they are taught by e-tutors from the Institution?
>
> Diana: Yeah (Diana: SSI).

The discussion here confirms that there are basically two levels ELCA 101 which has two sub-levels (beginner and elementary); and ELCA 102 which also has two sub-levels (pre-intermediate and intermediate).

According to the participants, this issue of learners' level of proficiency is counted as a challenge because it is hard for them to know their DLs' level. This was indicated by Celine who nevertheless was aware that students have various levels:

> "Not all the students have the same proficiency level of English, so sometimes I may not be aware, since I'm not looking at all of them and I'm not meeting them and not all are giving me answers when I'm asking them for feedback". (Celine: SSI).

To support her 'level one' students, Celine added:

> "When I talk to my level one student, I make sure I use the simplest words. I make sure I never speak very high-flown English. I'll speak well but I'll ensure that I make use of words which they will understand. So it's very important to grade your language…I love grading my language because I'm not here to impress them. I'm here to express myself" (Celine: SSI).

From another angle, another participant (Nadia) stressed the necessity of using the Arabic language in her sessions to help her very low level learners to understand the lesson:

> "…because some of them are zero level. I have to use a combination. I have to. It's not a choice. I have to." (Nadia: SSI).

Another participant (Ruba) agreed that the use of Arabic is needed because the learners are not always placed in the correct proficiency level:

"They're not really gauged in the right level so sometimes they don't understand your English and you need to talk in Arabic and then you need to revert back to English and even Arabic, sometimes they really don't understand" (Ruba: SSI).

Issues related to the DLs' proficiency level seem to be considered here one of the major problems that tutors are suffering from in their teaching of the language and which they would like to solve. The e-tutors' responses suggest that it is difficult to identify the learners exact level in the online-session given the nature of the distance learning environment where there is no face-to-face contact. The tutors add that there is no way of prompting the learners to interact or participate. Furthermore, although some teachers would grade and simplify their language teaching to suit the learners' noticeably low proficiency level, some of the tutors were obliged to use the Arabic language to support and ensure that students understood the lessons. Discussion of the usage of Arabic language in English distance sessions was already discussed in a previous section in Chapter Four.

In summary, this section has explored the components related to the challenges of English language skills; the focus on the next section will be on another set of challenges related to the methods of teaching.

5.1.1.4   Challenges Related to the Methods of Teaching

Another challenge which emerged from the data is related to the methods of teaching employed in this programme. The focus in what follows is on the one component of this sub-theme which is the e-tutors' struggle with the traditional method of teaching "the spoon feeding" method.

- *Spoon Feeding Method*

First of all, it might be suitable to define the term 'spoon-feeding' before presenting and exploring it. McKay and Kember (1997) state that '*By spoon feeding we refer to instruction based upon an information transmission conception of teaching'* (p. 57). They added, according to this method, *'the lecturer gives many notes and handouts for us to read-out and then have an examination or test'* (p. 62). It is understood from MacKay's and Kimber's definition that the method is used in a classroom context where the lecturer spoon-feeds the students with the information required for a later test. However, as this study is based on a distance context, its programme is ideally supposed to offer its learners

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enough independent tools to ensure effective learning. Fortunately, some participants aimed to avoid the use of the spoon-feeding method of teaching like Huda, who tries to encourage her learners to be autonomous (as seen earlier in section 4.4.3 related to the tutors' understanding of self-directed learning), yet Huda pointed out two reasons that might force her as an e-tutor to sometimes rely on the spoon-feeding method with her DLs; firstly, the students are accustomed to this method of teaching while they were at school:

> "Usually, we spoon feed them because in schools usually they're like this, you have to memorise this thing";

Secondly, the students' low proficiency level was another reason for Huda to use the spoon-feeding method:

> "Unlike with the high level students, with the weak students, I—honestly speaking, I couldn't do this because they're not even responding back to me" (Huda: SSI).

What is meant here by ("I couldn't do this") is that she could not let her lower level DLs depend on themselves; she needed to spoon feed them. This was the context of our discussion over this topic.

In regard to this specific method of teaching, I need to mention that the method of "spoon feeding" was not always explicitly articulated, with most of the participants' responses implicitly referring to it. Nadia for example indirectly descibed her method of spoon-feeding her DLs in this programme:

> "We provide them with a syllabus, clear instructions about what work we are going to study together, the curriculum, how many minutes we are supposed to cover together, how many reading passages we should be able to read. We explore the grammar. We explore the vocabulary lists, we explore everything" (Nadia: SSI).

In a similar vein, Rana explained:

> "We prepare everything for the students. So we do everything for them. As an instructor we give instructions. We explain actually; we don't let them go and study, otherwise they will find a big difficulty because studying a language is—for the students is very special case, not like other subjects they have here in the programmes. English is different, you know. That's why I—of course, we have to explain the curriculum and we help as much as we can" (Rana: SSI).

Rana here seems to have made the excuse that because it is a foreign language the DLs are learning, this is why they need this extra support from their tutors which differs from other subjects the students are studying. This is an interesting point which may raise queries as to whether the DLs would perhaps not exploit the 'Spoon-feeding method or rely on their tutors as much in other course modules or when studying other university subjects.

Meanwhile, Maryam mentioned that her students waited for her help in everything although she had been told by the Deanship to help them depend on themselves. The following are her responses in this regard in the two data collection methods

> "It is meant to be a discussion session with the students. Students should study on their own and later ask their teacher questions. In fact, students don't do that. They rely on their teacher to explain every single thing" (Maryam: RJ);

> "The distance learning unit—told me that the system should be as follows: students should be learning at home. It is a self-study system and during the lecture they can only ask questions and it is a kind of discussion with the teacher, which is not taking place in our case. We are explaining because if you wait for students to answer or to ask questions, they will not. Why? Because they are not prepared; they are waiting for the teacher and I mentioned this in my—reflective journal I sent you—they wait for the teacher to explain everything" (Maryam: SS).

As seen from Maryam's responses in both data collection methods (RJs and interview), her DLs totally relied on her and that they were not ready to be independent learners. This contradiction between reality and the requirement of the Deanship reflects the status of most of the Saudi learners who are still used to traditional teaching methods where the teacher is the focus of the teaching process and source of information; otherwise the learners would be lost as indicated by her colleague Cathy:

> "I mean, it's a foundation year course and the students come from secondary school with very few study skills and are used to certain teaching methods . Anyway… I think some of them get lost" (Cathy: SSI).

Furthermore, Juliette's response to this issue was quite frank as she admitted that her teaching method in this programme is outdated:

> "My role is providing information for students and this is a very traditional role for teachers and is actually very outdated nowadays. People are not thinking of teaching in this way anymore. It's a very outdated way of thinking but I am the information provider in these courses" (Juliette: SSI).

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Hence, these responses revealed how the tutors deploy this traditional method of teaching on their distance teaching. This challenge needs to be considered carefully by these e-tutors in this context of teaching if learner independence is to be fostered as required by the Deanship. Moreover, White (2003) argues that distance learners have more opportunities to gain control not only over 'what to learn' but also over 'how to learn' than their peers in teacher-directed classrooms. However, autonomy might not be realised as long as learners are being spoon-fed by their e-tutors. Unfortunately, considering the teacher as the main source of knowledge is very common in the Saudi education context as indicated previously by Abdulrahman (2007) who pointed out what he called 'teacher-centred learning' in the Saudi education system, while 'the student's function' as described by him '*is reduced to one of passive reception. He listens, remembers, and repeats what has been presented to produce the desired outcome*' (p. 82).

In line with Abdurrahman and the findings of this component, it seems that the students' reliance on their teachers is prevalent, and to transfer students from the complete spoon-feeding method to less reliance on the teachers' assistance would be a challenge. Nevertheless, it is hoped that with the help of insights from this study and further studies in this field, stakeholders, programme organisers, and tutors will form a better picture of the current situation and cooperate towards gradually allowing the DLs more control over their learning. More recommendations will be found in the final chapter.

5.1.1.5   Tutor-Based Challenges

This sub- theme focuses on the tutors' challenges, from their own views, in relation to two considerations: training and attitude towards distance language learning and teaching.

- *Tutors' Training*

As this teaching environment differs from the regular teaching one, and as it needs specific training for the recruited tutors, I asked a question related to the participants' training before joining the programme, keeping in mind, as shown from the participants' table (3.3) shown earlier in Chapter three, that many of the tutors did not have much on-line experience. This makes the training issue more crucial before and during on-line teaching. The participants too were aware of the importance of this training. Faten was one of the participants who said that the e-tutors did receive some training before they started teaching:

"We have to take a special orientation or a course for two days" (Faten: SSI).

Her colleague Maryam suggested a need for more awareness of the programme in terms of how to apply the approaches they are being trained in:

"More awareness should be given about the system because what I noticed is that the teachers sit for the training course, but how to do it is what's important" (Maryam: SSI).

She added that the training they received was insufficient for them:

"I remember I had it for two days …but that was not enough as we needed more training" (Maryam: SSI).

Noor, also, highlighted this issue saying:

"I think continuous training is important" (Noor: SSI).

In line with this, Juliette stressed the importance of the technical side of the training:

"I would say there should be a need of an initial understanding of how the computer works and how to browse the Internet, a very technical side of the story. This has to be a skill that the teachers should know about before actually giving that sort of course and this is why we get training courses regarding this bit" (Juliette: SSI).

Thus, it is obvious from the participants' view that initial and on-going training is an essential issue in any on-line programme. Furthermore, the current training does not seem to be sufficient, and there should be more emphasis on the technical side of training. The literature supports this need as discussed by Alenezi (2012) who stresses the significance of sufficient training for faculty members in his study *'Such preparations included sufficient training for faculty members before the program began as well as introducing them to the real working environment so that they can familiarize themselves with work in advance'* (p. 5).

It was seen from the data that emerged in regard to the tutors' training that the tutors' understanding of training was related to familiarizing themselves with the technical issues of the course and how to manage it using the system. Meanwhile, tutors' training that might involve training them to support their learners to be autonomous language learners was not identified in the data, despite its significance as emphasized by Little *'if we are to achieve large-scale progress in the promotion of learner autonomy, we must now bring our focus of concern back to the teacher, and especially to the way in which we organize*

and mediate teacher education.' (1995, p. 180). Moreover, McGrath (2000) highlights the importance of preparing the teachers to promote learner autonomy in their own education. However, and according to my own experience as a language teacher, language tutors' education does not include such training and in the context of this study, the two-day induction for the course was mostly technical. This was noted in the Deanship's official website which posted its mission as:

> "…providing varied and distinguished educational services in response to the growing demands for such services through the effective implementation of modern technologies in e-learning and distance education; according to both national and international quality standards" (DA: official website).

After presenting and discussing the tutors' training issue in this programme, the next issue will present and discuss their attitudes.

- ***Tutors' Attitudes***

This sub-section intends to present the participants' attitudes towards their teaching in this programme. Some participants have positive attitudes in this regard; like Nadia, for example, who was very enthusiastic about this experience, which she described as a wonderful one:

> "It's really, really wonderful" (Nadia: SSI).

Similarly speaking, her colleague Celine's attitude was positive too:

> "I think things are pretty convenient for all of us" (Celine: SSI).

It seems that some tutors enjoyed the experience of teaching from a distance, perhaps as a new prospect for them which adds to their development as teachers. For others it might be because it is a profitable extra time job and they enjoy the convenience the programme brings with it.

On the other hand, some participants' attitudes were somewhat negative in regard to their teaching on the programme. Juliette expressed her negative attitude by saying:

> "I feel myself in a very awkward position and to be honest, sometimes I send the e-mail in English and I have to send its translation underneath" (Juliette: SSI).

What is noticed here is that this participant's attitude is negatively affected by the need to translate English e-mails into Arabic language when communicating with the DLs. As

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explored earlier in (section 4.4.3.3) this was done to enable weaker level students to understand the e-mails.

Other participants' attitudes were negative not because of the experience of teaching but because of the system and the limited time for researching. In this sense, Cathy said:

> "I do think it's challenging because—I mean, it's not the actual experience itself, it's maybe the system we have been using and the fact that we only have like one very short session a week" (Cathy: SSI).

Huda added:

> "It's a challenge. It's a big challenge and you're teaching people who are not seeing you. You're not even listening to them. You can't hear them, nothing" (Huda: SSI).

Their colleague, Maryam ,was not very optimistic either:

> "It is challenging in many ways. For example, if we talk about problems or obstacles we face, we face, let's say, a lot of problems. We as teachers and students also face many problems" (Maryam: SSI).

More seriously, another participant (Juliette) admitted to the unpleasant attitude of the tutors and the Deanship and the outcome of the programme:

> "I can feel like there is something serious going on. We're not going anywhere; we're just taking money from students, giving some to the teachers, the teachers are delivering the course on their own and the Deanship is saying that it's doing the work, technically, and then the outcome is that students pass but they don't know anything about English and they have to pass, otherwise they won't be able to graduate"(Juliette: SSI).

To end the discussion of tutors' attitudes, it is necessary to point out that attitudes play an important role in shaping our views and perspectives, as mentioned by Jabeen and Shah, (2011) *'Attitudes play an important role in forming our world view. They influence our perception of the world around us and determine how we respond to different entities of the world'* (p. 604). Consequently, the challenge when many have a negative attitude towards teaching in this programme needs to be taken into consideration because it will reflect on their way of teaching, the outcome of the programme and most importantly the level of the students graduating from this programme.

The next section focuses on another set of challenges related to the distance learners as pointed out by the e-tutor participants in this study.

5.1.1.6   Learner-Based Challenges

This sub-theme explores some challenges related to the learners themselves as seen from their e-tutors' perspectives, regarding the following three considerations: learners' training, learners' attitudes, and learners' cultural concerns.

- ***Learners' Training***

What is meant by training here is the distance learners' training in relation to the DLLP as a whole. This would involve technical training in how to access the course website; the different software used during the online-sessions as well awareness of all the course tools which would facilitate the learning process. Another aspect of training is in relation to the learning of the language itself which might include raising the students' awareness of some language learning strategies (metacognitive knowledge) that they could use on their own independent of their teachers. McCarthy (2000) highlighted the significance of learner training *'Learner training in certain explicit areas can broaden the horizons of the learner and may empower him or her to become autonomous in some or all aspects of language learning'* (p.6).

When the interviewees were asked about what they knew of the DLs' training in relation to the whole programme, I did not get many replies as most of the participants did not know if their students received any form of training before starting the course, as mentioned by Cathy:

> "I've heard in the past that the external students [on-campus students] have a short course where they actually come on campus, yes, for induction, but whether the distance learning students have anything like this, I don't know" (Cathy: SSI).

Learners' training is of significant importance, and its lack in this programme as viewed by the participants is thought to be one of its deficiencies. The e-tutors thought that it is essential to include learners' training in any language learning programme, especially when it is a distance one where the language teacher is not always available to guide and help the distance learner. The teacher's availability is restricted to the online sessions held once a week. They thought that the lack of learners' training impacts their roles as tutors as they themselves would then have to find the time and exert the efforts to provide this training to their learners, rather than focusing on the syllabus content. Therefore, the DLs should be capable of finding their own way of exploring the course website and its

different sections as well as making attempts to learn the language when the teacher is not around. Noor briefly touches on the concept of learners' training when she says:

> "Students have to know how to learn, what is expected from them" (Noor: SSI).

Accordingly, McCarthy's suggestion stated earlier about the necessity of learners' training to become autonomous learners has to be applied with the learners in this programme because they need to be trained before they resume their on-line studying (suggestions as to what this training would involve will be presented in the conclusion chapter of this thesis).

It is interesting to note here that this particular challenge is perhaps interrelated with other challenges such as the prevalence of the spoon-feeding method in this context. It might be the case of the learners expecting and relying on this method that even if different forms of training and awareness-raising existed they still would not respond to any form of training effectively because they know that their tutors would provide them with all the information they needed anyway. Maryam, for example refers to this in her interview:

> "…they wait for the teacher to explain everything and even in their e-mails; they wanted me to explain everything and send it to them through e-mails" (Maryam: SSI).

It might be worth reiterating here that this finding (lack of learners' training) was revealed by the tutors according to their perspectives in the interviews and reflective journals. From the document analysis data, it was found that on-line tutorials were added in the DLLP Deanship site to support the distance learners and raise their awareness of the programme and the available courses. These tutorials are the equivalent of an induction session that on-site students would normally receive at the start of their courses. However, whether the DLs access or are obliged to access these tutorials before the start of their courses and the extent to which these tutorials help the learners (particularly in becoming autonomous learners) remains unknown. It was obviously impossible to confirm this with evidence from the distance learners' perspectives because these were not investigated as part of this study. Nevertheless, this finding is very much a key finding because it is perhaps the lack of learner training that contributes to learners not being able to control their own learning.

- ***Learners' Attitudes towards On-Line Learning***

The word attitude might be seen from many paradigms (behavioural, psychological), and might be interpreted at many levels (experiential, cognitive, and ideational) as pointed out by Jabeen and Shah (2011). In this study, the word "attitude" simply means the learners' behavioural and emotional response and reaction to the distance language learning experience but from the perspectives of their tutors. In the following dialogue in the interview between me and one of the participants (Rana), this issue emerged in relation to the DLs' general approach to distance learning:

MH: When can you describe your students' contribution as positive?

Rana: "I usually do actually and I usually say they are positive learners. Their contribution is really good. They are doing the part that they are supposed to do. They're supposed to attend the sessions and they do. They are supposed to listen to the teacher and they do. They're supposed to do some assignments, specific quizzes on time and they do. Everything they are asked to, they do" (Rana: SSI).

Noor also agreed with her colleagues' opinion by saying:

"I think it's positive because they know English is important to them and sometimes I raise in the forum open questions: why do you learn English? I receive a lot of amazing answers" (Noor: SSI)

Their colleague Huda mentioned in her reflective journal that her students were generally positive:

"Students found it interesting and they always shared positive feedback via e-mails, messages and chat box" (Huda: RJ).

Other than Rana, Noor, and Huda, the majority of the participants had different opinions in regard to their learners' attitude towards their language learning experience in this programme. Ruba, for example, wished that her students' attitude was better and wished that they cared more about their language learning:

"I expect them to care more about the subject. I expect them to be real learners, not just passers of tests, not just exam-takers. It makes a hell of a difference if a student is a real learner or not. They are not real learners. If they are just exam-takers, then they postpone you until the very end of the course and then they start torturing you" (Ruba: SSI).

It sounds from Ruba's words that she was desperate about her learners' attitude towards learning in this programme; this gets clearer when she added:

"if you go up the wall, if you walk on the ceiling, on the roof, whatever, they're not going to learn and they're not going to give effort… they're just hopeless, helpless. They don't respond, they're not interested" (Ruba: SSI).

Another example of learners' negative attitudes was implied in Diana's extract in her SSI in which she thought that her learners would perhaps not require English for reasons other than communication:

"English language has to be something tangible to their lives. Saudi students want to communicate. They don't want to integrate. They don't want to be British. They don't want to be American" (Diana: SSI).

In an attempt to examine these arguments from the perspective of related literature, I found that the issue of students' attitudes towards e-learning in Saudi universities is a controversial one. In some Saudi studies, findings showed a positive attitude such as the one conducted by Al-Dosari (2011) which found that learning, learners' and faculty's attitudes are better in e-learning conditions than in traditional learning context. Other studies, however, revealed a negative attitude as shown in the results of a study conducted by Ibrahim et al. (2007) who argue that many DL students fail to finish their programme. He suggests that this is due to the fact that most of the people in the Arab societies are still doubtful about distance learning programmes thinking that they are not an innovative approach to learning and they are just another form of correspondence. This area needs further research to be conducted. This societal preconception of distance learning is likely to have an impact on these learners' attitudes towards their learning experience.

To sum up the discussion of this challenge, and to link it with the aim of this study, it would be significant to note the fact that some of the learners have a generally negative attitude towards their distance language learning experience, which might impact on whether or not they would have a tendency to become independent and learn to control their learning. However, as the DLs were not interviewed as part of this study it is difficult for me as a researcher to understand exactly what other factors might affect learner attitudes. Also, with little contact between the tutors and their students, the tutors themselves were not always sure of their students' attitudes and would rely on student answers to forum discussions or on their commitment to submitting course work on time to form a general idea of such attitudes.

- *Issues related to Culture*

Brown (2000) notes that culture is highly important in the learning of a second language, *'A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture'* (p.171). According to this argument, teaching the English culture is a must when teaching the English language. The views of the participants regarding this argument were explored as part of this study. Issues related to culture emerged during discussions about learners' challenges; according to the participants' beliefs this factor seems to affect their learners. There were several perspectives related to culture, the first of which was to do with the content of the English curriculum. One of the participants, Rana, for example, states that the programme is a good initiative, yet the actual course content would need to be adapted in line with Saudi culture. Rana said:

> "It's really a good one. I guess it's a good one. It is really a very good endeavour from the University but it still needs to be developed. The course materials need to be made more applicable to the society and the culture" (Rana: SSI).

This response may seem contradictory to the argument that language and its culture are inseparable as pointed out by Brown (2000). We must not overlook the fact, however, that foreign language learning often takes place within a context with its own established culture; which is quite often very different to that related to the target language. From my own teaching experience in the Saudi Arabian context, I can fully understand what these tutors mean by their responses. In the Saudi society the culture is totally different from the Western one in many aspects. When an English book is taught, we sometimes need to leave out or adapt topics that do not suit our culture and religion e.g. dating, drinking, bars, Christmas and Easter ceremonies …etc. Such topics would be unacceptable from the learners' perspectives and would perhaps trigger discomfort and rejection from their side. This might explain some of these participants' objection to teaching certain aspects of the English culture and their belief that there is an urgent need for the Saudi culture to be prioritised.

Furthermore, the cultural factor has an impact from other perspectives involving the mode of distance learning. Liza's opinion, for example, is that the distance learning programme needs to be made more applicable to the society and the culture:

> "The current DLLP needs to be tailored to our culture. We have distance learning programmes and we actually have to tailor them. We have to adapt it to our culture and to our students' needs" (Liza: SSI).

Liza's view implies that the programme in its current form does not suit the learners' needs. Here she is suggesting that the cultural question may also have an effect on the learners' understanding of concept of DL:

> "I told you at the very beginning this has to do with the culture—students here, for them, distance learning is just a way of completing their university studies without going to the university" (Liza: SSI).

Liza's view describes how this mode of learning is just seen as a way to obtain a certificate without the actual need to physically go to university. Once again her response here seems to point to the cultural norms of some families in the Saudi society where it is more preferable for females to study from home. I also sensed some negativity when she said "just a way", so I asked Liza to further explain what she meant by this. According to her, distance learning programmes seem to be of less prominence to some people than their counterpart programmes taking part at university campuses. It seems from a Saudi cultural view that for many Saudis, those who obtain online certificates are seen as less qualified than those who get them from regular universities. I believe more studies need to be conducted to find out more about this issue.

Culture also seems to have an effect on how the learners perceive their independence in learning within the distance mode as revealed by Huda who said:

> "They should be self-independent. This is not our culture" (Huda: SSI).

The meaning of 'not our culture' is related to learning and teaching and refers to how students in Saudi schools and universities are not yet used to being very independent from their teachers and tutors.

Furthermore, in some situations, the differences in culture can have an effect in the DL environment itself as indicated by Juliette:

> "Sometimes when you exercise your sense of humour, for example, and they come from a different culture, some misunderstanding might take place" (Juliette: SSI).

In other situations, (as mentioned earlier in section 5.1.1.2), some participants such as Diana linked the impossibility of using the microphone and video-conferencing in her session to cultural constraints which tend to restrict the possibilities of female students being seen or heard by others over a public space like the Internet.

"We cannot use the microphone in the session … because of the culture" (Diana: SSI).

Finally, to some participants the cultural issue is in fact the main obstacle to the success of the programme. This is clearly stated by Rana:

"…unfortunately and honestly speaking, number one may be the culture" (Rana: SSI).

Thus, when discussing language learning, the role of culture is to be taken into consideration because language education takes place within a culture, (Palfreyman and Smith, 2003).

This discussion brings to a close of this part of the main theme related to the challenges experienced by the e-tutors and its sub-themes and components.

In order to complete the exploration of the study's fourth question, the next section will focus on the support offered and needed by the e-tutors in this programme.

5.1.1.7 Summary of the Challenges Experienced by the E-tutors in the DLLP

In the previous sections and sub-sections, I have focused on the presentation and analysis of the challenges faced by the e-tutors in this programme. These challenges which emerged from the study's data collection methods were divided into six main challenges related to the programme, technology, English language skills, teaching methods, and tutor and learner based challenges. It is hoped that this analysis will help those involved in this programme to identify some of the deficiencies in this DLLP as perceived by the participants and perhaps work on finding solutions and manage and reduce these deficiencies. I also hope this will be of some benefit to the improvement of e-learning contexts in Saudi Universities.

As aforementioned in the introduction, this theme partly addressed the study's fourth research question. The next section will present and explore the second part of the question related to the support available for e-tutors in the DLLP.

5.1.2 The Support Available for the E-tutors in the DLLP

After exploring the first part of research question four (related to the challenges faced by tutors in this programme), this part focuses on the different ways in which the e-tutors are

supported in the English DLLP as perceived by the e-tutors themselves. (See Figure 5.4 below):
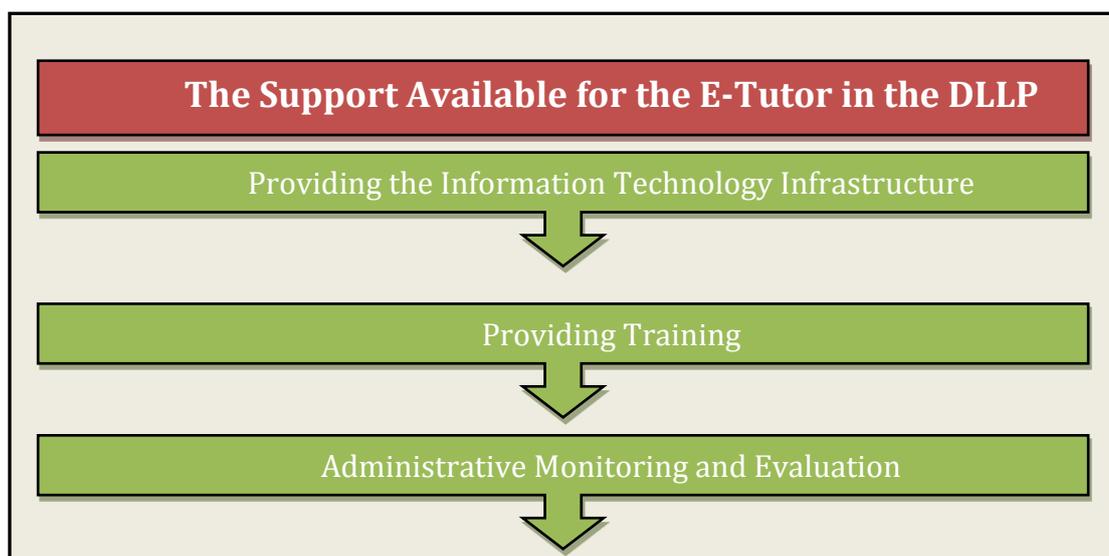

Figure 5.4: Part Two of Theme 4 and its related Sub-Themes: the Support Available for the E-tutors in the DLLP

As was evident in the data collected from the documents, the Deanship of e-learning and distance education is the one responsible for all its staff educational affairs as is manifested in the Deanship's official website. One of its main publicised objectives is to:

> "Increase educational staff's proficiency in e-learning and distance education" (DA: Official Website).

In line with this objective and with the tutors need for more support in this programme to help them in their role, the following sub-sections discuss the three sub-themes derived from this theme (see Figure 5.1 in the beginning of this chapter).

5.1.2.1 Providing the Information Technology Infrastructure

During the conduct of this study, as mentioned in section 1.3 in Chapter 1, the electronic system used in this distance language learning programme included CENTRA (virtual classrooms) and EMES (e-mails, FAQ, Forum, assignments, and quizzes). In our discussion about these networks and about technological support, the participants' responses revealed that the system provided some other iTools to support the e-tutors, such as Agenda and Appshare. These iTools, as emerged from the data, were mainly to support the e-tutors in presenting their lessons during the session.

Agenda was mentioned for the first time in this study as a helpful tool in Diana's reflective journal:

"The best part that I always use is the Agenda. It is easy to upload whatever PowerPoint I prepared then share it with my students and use all the tools which are interesting and easy to teach with" (Diana: RJ).

Another participant, Sheren, later mentioned Agenda in her interview:

"Agenda is actually I think a tool there on our CENTRA distance learning teaching system" (Sheren: SSI).

Other participants also mentioned this; Celine, for example, talked about some of its functions:

"It's a particular label. When you open CENTRA there's something called Agenda, so you just click on it and you import your files in it and your files get uploaded. It uploads PDF and PowerPoint presentations and then when you open it, it opens with the students too" (Celine: SSI).

Noor also provided her description of this iTool:

"Agenda is a kind of programme. Actually, it's a part in your class or your recorded session you import from desktop, PowerPoint presentations, audio files, Word documents, pdf files. You want your student to keep and they will be able to open them after the session. It's called Agenda, it's just like another folder" (Noor: SSI).

Rana also described Agenda and added another function of this tool:

"Agenda is an option in the EMES, okay, from which you can upload some jpg files. They have to be in this format, jpg file and jpg document, and we upload this to be shared with our students during the CENTRA session" (Rana: SSI).

Finally, it seemed that Rana is satisfied with Agenda as a supporting tool for her learners:

"Agenda, for example, is a very good way […] so far, it's a good way to communicate with the students and to give our class so smoothly. This is something like as if we're sharing the same book with the students. You know, if you don't do this, the students will get lost" (Rana: SSI).

In addition to Agend another participant, Cathy, described the use of another iTool called Appshare:

> "…there's an AppShare, Application Share, where you click and you can show the materials using that and there's also the Agenda, which is where you can upload things like PowerPoints. So there are two ways of showing the students on the screen the materials that you're using. Some teachers prefer to use Agenda. I prefer to use AppShare" (Cathy: SSI).

As understood from these exrtacts, the tutors have some freedom in choosing the App or the iTool that they think is more suitable for their DLs. This depends on each tutor's choice as clarified by Liza:

> "There are many options to do this, to share these items. One of them is called AppShare. AppShare, this is to share any application with the students" (Liza: SSI).

These tutor responses show how important it is to have a reliable technological infrastructure such as CENTRA and EMES along with important iTools such as Agenda and AppShare in the week to week running and proceedings of the course. This perhaps would make sense given that this is a distance learning programme based primarily on online communication.

More information about the computer system employed in this programme was also evident from the Document Analysis (see Chapter One) and matches the participants' views here.

5.1.2.2 Providing Training

Another service provided by the Deanship is the e-tutors' training for distance teaching. The participants' replies suggested that they had two days of training before they started teaching on the actual course (as mentioned earlier in section 5.1.1.5 when training was discussed as a component of tutor-based challenges). One participant, Diana commented that the training is an initial requirement for the teachers:

> "Of course, it's a prerequisite....as far as I remember, for one day to two days" (Diana: SSI).

Rana and Noor agreed with their colleague:

> "Yeah, of course, they have to do two trainings before they start working with us, one for CENTRA and one for EMES and the distance" (Rana: SSI).

> "We have to take a special orientation or a course for two days" (Noor: SSI).

However, some participants asked for more training and said this current training is not enough. Maryam, for example, stated:

> "I remember I had it for two days but it was long. I think from 9:30 to 1:00 or to 2:00 something like that, for two days, but that was not enough as we needed more training" (Maryam: SSI).

Moreover, Noor emphasized the importance of on-going training:

> "I think continuous training is important" (Noor: SSI).

These participants' responses imply that training is provided but that having all the training at once at the start of the programme can be intensive; "it was long" as Maryam pointed out. So, perhaps distributing the training at different stages when needed might be another suggestion for this provision.

5.1.2.3   Administrative Monitoring and Evaluation

Another service provided by the Deanship of Distance Learning is the tracking of both the students' and tutors' attendance and performance when logging on. This was clearly explained by the participants and the programme's documents which state that attendance is mandatory for students either for live or recorded sessions, as it is part of the programme's regulation that both the tutors' and the students' attendance of live online session should be monitored. Moreover, it is part of the tutor's duties to call out the students' names at the beginning of each session; if the student is present she clicks on the hand icon to prove her attendance and this is registered on the Deanship's electronic site. If the hand icon is not clicked, this means she is absent. If this same student listens later on to the recorded session, she will be counted as present. If the student is recorded absent for more than four sessions, she is excluded from the course. This was clarified by Diana who commented on useful she thought this was:

> "yes…, how many times the student opened, how many times the teacher opened, for how long did the class run—so this has really affected the programme—I like that very much. The Deanship is following up" (Diana: SSI).

It seems that it is vital for some of the participants to know that there is some form of monitoring from the Deanship. According to them it has a generally positive impact and enables the tutors to feel that the responsibility is shared and that it is not only the tutor's role to follow-up on the DLs' attendance and performance.

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In addition to this the Deanship, as stated by Liza, evaluates the teachers' job:

> "there is an evaluation for the teachers that's done twice a semester, one after the first half of the semester and the second one is at the end of the semester and this evaluation, they have to guarantee the teachers actually do some tasks specifically, like, for example, they check the teachers do at least four assignments, at least two quizzes" (Liza; SSI).

This aspect once again seems to be a course specification in relation to the teacher, which is intended to maintain consistency in relation to the DLLP course requirements. It might also have implications for teacher development in relation to this specific programme.

5.1.2.4   Summary of the Support Available for the E-tutors in the DLLP

This section has presented the second part of data responding to Research Question Four. The focus here is no longer on the challenges, but on the support provided for the tutors' role in this programme as perceived by the e-tutors themselves. Three sub-themes were identified by the e-tutors: providing the information technology infrastructure, providing training and administrative monitoring and evaluation.

This brings to a close the discussion of the data related to the fourth and final research question in which both the challenges and support available during the DLLP were explored from the e-tutors' perspectives.

5.2   Summary of the Chapter

In summary, this chapter highlighted the challenges and obstacles faced by the e-tutors. These challenges were classified and explored as they emerged from the different data collection methods of the study (document analysis, reflective journals and semi-structured interviews). These challenges included: programme-based; technology-based; English language skills-based; methods of teaching; learner-based; and tutor-based challenges. The discussion and presentation of these challenges reveal the factors that might have impeded the tutor's and the learners' efficiency in this programme. Some of these are, for instance, the lack of training for the learners, lack of appropriate on-line interaction tools, the quality of methods used in teaching, and the emphasis on some language skills.

To make this experience a good one for both teachers and learners, and to achieve the aim of this study, these challenges, problems, and obstacles should be taken into consideration

by the programme's stakeholders. More recommendations for the improvement of the teaching environment will be provided later in the final chapter of this study.

This study's fourth question is not however, just about challenges but also about the support already offered as perceived by the e-tutors on the DLLP. The support offered by the Deanship included the provision of an information technology infrastructure, e-tutor training as well as monitoring and follow-up from the administration of the programme.

6   Introduction

This chapter will begin by presenting the study's main conclusions in relation to the aims of this research as represented through the research questions. These are summed up in this chapter to show how the overarching research question of this study has been addressed.

Overarching Question:

- What are the perceptions of e-tutors about learning and teaching processes in the context of the DLLP?

First Question:

- What are the e-tutors' perceptions of their roles in the DLLP and how can these roles be enhanced?

Second Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, what role do distance language learners play in their own learning in the context of DLLP?

Third Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, which learning and teaching strategies may enable the learners to become more autonomous?

Fourth Question:

- From the e-tutors' perspectives, which aspects related to the DLLP challenge or support the e-tutors in their role in this Programme?

The chapter goes on to describe the contributions of this research to knowledge and more specifically how this study contributes to developing an educational framework, which can be referred to and utilised in this DL context. This chapter also reflects on the limitations of the study and some of the main issues that hindered or caused difficulties particularly during the data collection and analysis processes. Some suggestions for future research work are provided, suggesting how to make use of this study's findings and expand knowledge in different contexts and with different research samples. The chapter furthermore provides some reflections on the personal and academic challenges that I encountered over these past few years and how these helped to shape and develop the knowledge and various skills I am proud to have developed. The long list of academic events that I attended is evidence of how I countered these challenges. Finally, the impact

that this journey has had on me socially, personally and academically is briefly presented in the last section of this chapter.

6.1 Research Conclusions and Addressing the Overarching Research Question

The four main research questions were addressed and discussed in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis. This section summarises the e-tutors' perceptions of their experiences of teaching on the DLLP, thus aiming to address the overarching research question of the research study (see Figure 6.1).

E-tutors' perspectives on their roles as teachers in the DLLP

(RQ1)

E-tutors' perspectives on the roles of distance learners in the DLLP

(RQ2)

What are the perceptions of e-tutors about learning and teaching processes in the context of DLLP?

E-tutors' perspectives on teaching and learning strategies and learner autonomy

(RQ3)

E-tutors' perspectives on the course design, educational context, support and challenges

(RO4)

Figure 6.1: Addressing the Overarching Research Question

6.1.1 E-tutors' Perspectives on their Roles as Teachers in the DLLP

According to the research findings, there was no clear evidence that the role of the e-tutors was fully and clearly defined. Some information was provided in the job description

documents but according to the data, it was not clear how much of this the e-tutors were aware of.

The findings revealed that the e-tutors considered assessing DLs to be one of their main duties. This was in line with the policy of the programme; the evaluation and assessment system is mainly organized by the Deanship and the e-tutors have to follow this system of evaluation. Another e-tutor's duty as shown by the data was the need to search for external language learning resources which the DLs could use. Again, it was not clear if the programme stipulated this duty particularly given that not all e-tutors provided their students with external learning materials.

Being proficient in computer skills was paramount for all the e-tutors in this programme and possibly one of the few skills that was highlighted when it came to recruiting these e-tutors to teach on this DLLP. Nevertheless, it was still a challenge for some of the e-tutors as the lack of this skill would cause technical issues where e-tutors would panic and lack confidence in handling certain sessions.

Although the experience of the e-tutors who participated in the study ranged from 1-8 years, only 4 out of the 14 e-tutors had more than 5 years of experience in e-tutoring. It was interesting to see that the newly experienced e-tutors in this distance teaching programme tend to be more aware of the necessity of promoting their students' autonomy. There was no evidence that the concept of DL was clearly understood by the e-tutors or explicitly explained in the strategic vision of the programme.

The e-tutors were aware that their role in this context is different from the one in conventional classrooms; nevertheless, there were varied views as to how they exactly saw and described themselves. While some thought of themselves as facilitators only providing their students with help when needed, others saw their role as more direct, believing their roles to be that of an instructor, thoroughly doing everything for the students. This, according to the e-tutors, was mainly owing to factors such as time restrictions, students' proficiency level and the students' reliance on their e-tutors.

6.1.2 E-tutors' Perspectives on the Roles of Distance Learners in the DLLP

The e-tutors commented on the difference between online teaching and face-to-face and how that impacted on the relationship they had with their learners in a way that they believed did not allow them to identify the role of the DLs clearly. The e-tutors had little

chance to get to know their students before or during the course; thus, they were unaware of their students' needs and unable to form a clear picture of their weaknesses and strengths.

It was mostly agreed that students were mainly receptive (mostly listening to the lectures) and not interactive enough. Most e-tutors commented that students, particularly the lower attaining students, relied on them for everything, from the explanation of the course structure and requirements to the curriculum tasks, assignments and exams. Students' levels were being assessed on a summative basis with grades being assigned for final exams and assignments.

6.1.3 E-tutors' Perspectives on Teaching and Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy

The findings showed no clear indication or agreement in relation to the teaching strategies the e-tutors used in this programme. E-tutors implemented strategies randomly as they saw fit and depending on what the learners needed. The use of Arabic as the learners' first language with students performing at the lower levels, was one example of what would perhaps be considered a strategy, yet it is important to note that not all e-tutors used or could use Arabic in their lessons. Other skills such as encouraging critical thinking in the learners were seen as vital by some e-tutors but were not commonly promoted by all the e-tutors.

According to the e-tutors' understanding of learner autonomy and how it was seen and practised in this programme, several views were expressed including; autonomous learners need support and encouragement; autonomous learners need some space for freedom; autonomy is assessed in the DLLP. A concept that was closely associated with autonomy in this research was self-directed learning. The e-tutors were convinced that the environment of distance learning demanded self-directed learning, yet they witnessed very little evidence of this happening in their learners.

Findings showed that the learners' contribution to their self-control of their learning varied and was not consistent. While some of the e-tutors were not satisfied with the opportunities available for their learners to take control of their learning in this programme, others reported that their learners have some amount of control over their learning and were allowed to freely express their opinions on any newly introduced

teaching techniques or if they want any changes to quizzes or homework dates. Those e-tutors restricting their students' control justified their position in relation to the shortage of time and the amount of course material, while others believed it was either due to problems with language proficiency or the dependent nature of the learners. Moreover, there also seemed to be a lack of consensus among the e-tutors about what is meant by control and their understanding was inconsistent with definitions in the literature (Littlewood, 1999; White, 2003; Benson, 2011).

Data showed that a basic difference between the distance learning context and a conventional classroom context is the e-tutors' inability to monitor students' attendance, attention and performance during the online sessions mainly due to them learning at a distance. This seemed to restrict their e-tutoring roles and prevented them from forming an image of the distance learners; it posed a challenge for the e-tutors who did not know of alternative ways of overcoming this issue. It also suggests why it might be difficult for the e-tutors to promote more autonomous learning.

White (2003) has a different opinion when she argues that it would not seem right to presume that the distance mode by itself leads to LA. The distance learning setting is just similar to any other formal education setting, and might limit or foster the development of the learners' abilities to manage and understand their language–learning process.

6.1.4 E-tutors' Perspectives on the Course Design, Educational Context, support and Challenges

The Deanship of E-Learning and Distance Education, in which the DLLP is located, is a hierarchically structured organisation, which means that the e-tutors must follow the direction provided by (the Deanship) and course coordinator. E-tutors are expected to give the lectures assigned by the CENTRA (the system specially used in the programme). The lectures are meant to be for explaining the core curriculum and discussing any questions students may have.

It was noticeable that the e-tutors were following an exam-based approach rather than learning-based methods to teach the students the language. This is perhaps owing to the lack of a clear programme philosophy which left room for interpretation and for some of the e-tutors to revert to traditional ways to meet student expectations (to pass exams).

The time limitation stood out as an issue; the courses require the e-tutor to complete the textbooks provided by the Deanship during a specific limited time in addition to the exercises. E-tutors and students were not given sufficient time to enable the learning to occur.

Communication was limited to the email system; in the Job Duties document (2013) it was stated that e-tutors needed to communicate continuously with the students on the EMES Email system, at least an email per week for the whole class till the end of the semester. The data shows that the participants were confused about the existence of devices (webcams, microphones speakers and video-conferencing), which were meant to facilitate learning through better communication, yet which they were not allowed to use. This is due to the religious and cultural constraints of the Saudi society where perhaps a distance learning context for females is still envisaged as an insecure public space and where caution is required to avoid revealing the learners' faces and voices.

Technical and administrative support was available and the course coordinator was always ready with recommendations and assistance but it was not clear how far the e-tutors sought this help and how this impacted on their roles and performance during their courses.

The e-tutors were offered a two-day induction before the start of the course to familiarise them with the online systems used and how to improve their communication and interaction skills. However, the overall impression was that the induction was not long enough to cover all aspects of the programme requirements and there was no evidence that the e-tutors received the required training or suggestions on how to manage their time and tasks.

The e-tutors' beliefs about the programme regulations generally suggested that they are not allowing them to have any space. This might hinder the e-tutors from having any autonomy over their teaching. As a result, this lack of space and autonomy is likely to be reflected on their learners; not only do the e-tutors believe they have no autonomy over how they teach, but they also are unable to address the constraints on their learners' autonomy. Nevertheless, there was some evidence that a few e-tutors aspired to this, which may suggest that with greater autonomy and support, they themselves would be willing to transform learning and teaching in this DLLP. This would, however, also require specific training for learners on how to learn autonomously and how this is beneficial for them.

6.2   Research Contributions and Practical Implications

This research has contributed to the field in a number of ways.

The case study has explored the perceptions of e-tutors about learning and teaching processes in the context of the DLLP. It has shed led light on some of the issues around teachers' thinking and practices and has aimed to relate them to the broader institutional and cultural context, revealing both constraints and opportunities for further development. The study has made a particular contribution to existing knowledge by providing a general understanding of how the e-tutors perceive learning and teaching in this particular context. Moreover, it offers insights into the constraints on the promotion of LA and control over learning in DE in this context; practically speaking, e-tutors struggle to implement it and it is barely practised by distance learners. The study showed how several factors have contributed to this situation including time restrictions, learner attitudes where reliance on the teacher is the norm, as well as cultural and religious factors and issues related to the use of technology for communication in this particular context. Although several research studies (Alfrih, 2010; Al-Dosari, 2011; Alenezi, 2012; Alrashidi, 2014) have investigated DE in Saudi higher education, to my knowledge no study has investigated the role of and the challenges facing the e-tutors in promoting DLLs' autonomy in this particular environment.

However, the recommendations and suggestions which have emerged from this study can also be used to enhance the quality of the current programme and others similar to it. This may lead to solutions to the challenges faced by a DLLP in this particular cultural context. The study has indeed investigated the curriculum implementation of this DLLP with a focus on teachers' perspectives and provided an opportunity for their voices to be better heard. It has extended and deepened knowledge and understanding in the chosen areas of research as identified in the research questions. The rich empirical data have offered clear practical implications for curriculum developers and teacher educators in Saudi Arabia by helping them understand the different influences on teachers' perspectives.

In this way the study makes a valuable addition to the broader literature of distance learning policy. For example, the analysis of teachers' rich perspectives demonstrates the value of considering them in new policy planning and implementation of distance learning programmes. Policy developers would benefit from considering establishing a more positive link between programme implementation and the evaluation of the main stakeholders such as teachers and students.

A further contribution is perhaps related to its potential impact on the e-tutors who participated in the study. Participating in the research methods and being encouraged to reflect on their practice is expected to have had an impact on them in terms of developing their confidence and raising their awareness not only of their teaching but also of the value of research itself. This knowledge base might be useful and interesting for them in future if they choose to participate once again in other studies or if they decide to undertake research themselves. From another perspective, it might contribute to their career and teacher development as these tools might help highlight issues, which were not observable or understandable to them previously. Some of the research participants commented that this experience allowed them to make some implicit thinking explicit and that the reflective journals and being interviewed enabled them to see and question some taken-for-granted practices which had not been the subject of reflection in the past.

It is clear that no previous research in this context has provided a framework to be followed and consulted or a set of guidelines that can support institutional reviews of DLL programmes and be used by e-tutors to practise e-tutoring effectively in Saudi universities. Accordingly, this study has developed such a framework. This framework, together with the recommendations and suggestions that have emerged from the study, can be used by decision-makers in this context to enhance the quality of the current programme as well as others similar to it. It can, for example, also be used to develop a model to train e-tutors on how to help their learners to manage and control their own learning. As a case study, the emergent framework and findings have direct relevance to this particular institution, but can also stimulate reflection in other similar contexts. It is worth noting that research has indicated a lack of such frameworks generally (McMullen, 2009) and perhaps more so in this particular context, where distance language learning has recently been introduced. The framework and its guidelines were developed in light of the themes that emerged from the study's data guided by the four research questions. It cannot be claimed, of course, that this framework is a comprehensive one, relevant in all contexts, but it is rather a framework that focuses on aspects that were overlooked in this institution's programme (see sections 6.1.1 through 6.1.4 above) and that aims to draw attention to them. As such, it can be used by the Deanship to evaluate its support of the DLLP, including raising some challenging questions that are particular to this particular cultural and religious context.

6.2.1 A Framework to Support E-tutors in the DLLP

There are four main sections to this framework as shown in Figure 6.2.
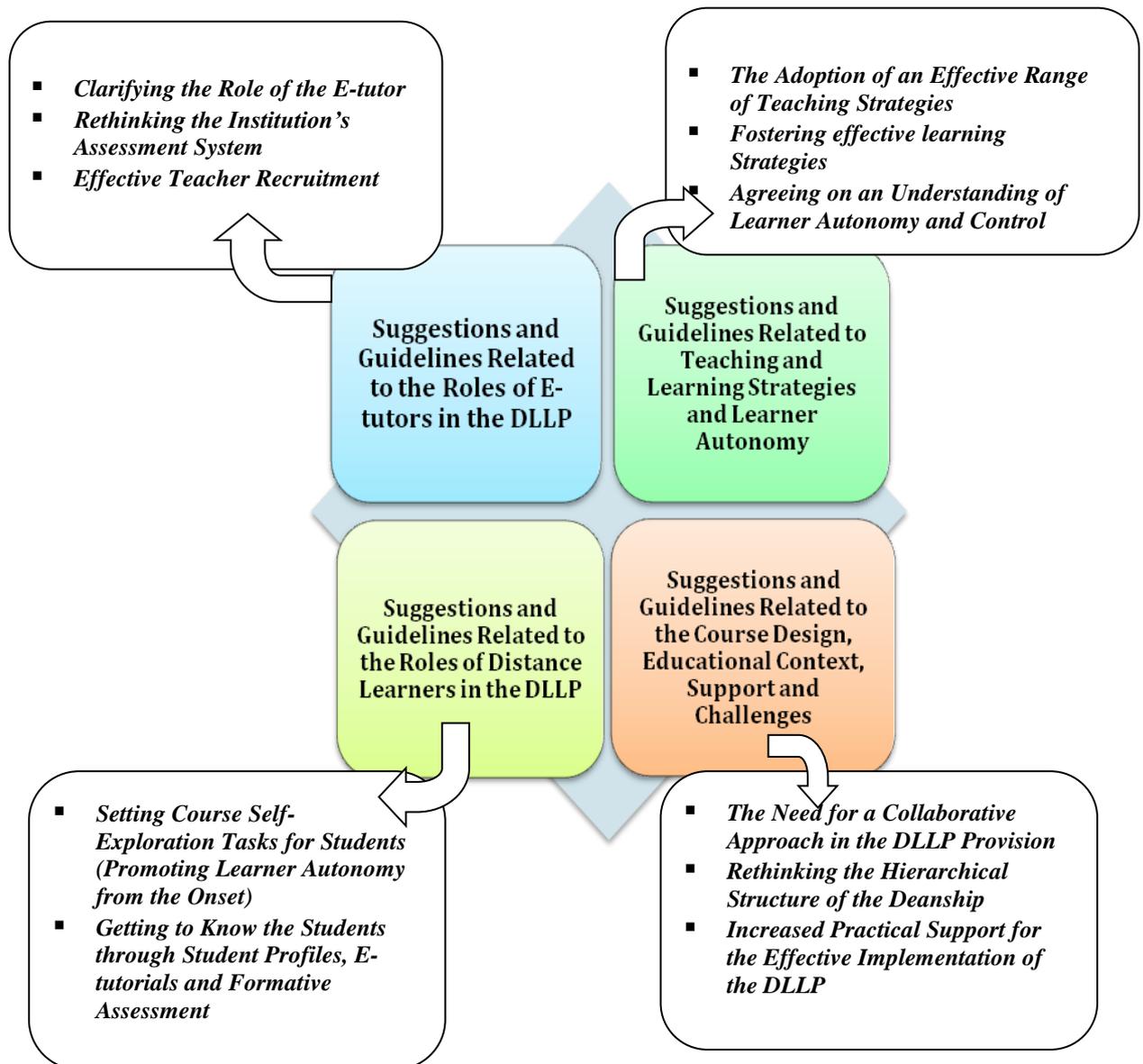
Figure 6.2: The Framework for E-Tutor Development in the DLLP

6.2.1.1 Suggestions and Guidelines Related to the Roles of E-tutors in the DLLP

Clarifying the Role of the E-tutor

The role of the e-tutor should be made clear in the job description and e-tutors' awareness of their specified roles within this DL context should be raised. This will support greater consistency in the teaching and allow e-tutors to share experiences and resolve similar concerns. There needs to be a consistent understanding of and critical reflection on how e-tutors identify and describe themselves, i.e. whether as facilitators (promoting learner independence) or conventional instructors (spoon-feeding their students). In the context of this study they need to be trained on how to encourage positive relationships, collaboration and motivation in a context where they cannot see each other and where the DLs can only hear the e-tutors and the e-tutors cannot hear their students. Doing this through writing is one of the many skills they need.

The adoption of a model for online teaching as a part of the programme might be necessary, or at least helpful. For example, Salmon's (2013) three-stage model can be referred to and adapted. In this model learners firstly need to absorb and understand the basic knowledge; they then create rules and procedures to use this knowledge; and finally they need to develop skills to use this knowledge with ease as needed. From an e-tutor's perspective, it is vital to cater for the needs of the learners and the course content requirements by providing the appropriate means for learning at each of these stages (Salmon, 2013). An important point to note from Salmon's model is that the time and effort required to ensure learning should be carefully considered; this means that teaching staff need to provide technical support and moderate student activity consistently throughout all three stages. There should be an early focus on helping students access the different areas of the online course and make social connections with others, before moving on to the learning activities and supporting them in deepening their knowledge. In a thirteen-week semester, for example, it may take several weeks to move students through the first two stages of the programme. Only once students feel comfortable, supported, and capable of working well in the online environment can teaching staff expect a higher level of academic involvement.

Rethinking the Institution's Assessment System

The institution's assessment system does not give the e-tutors any chance to have control over their learners' assessment. Due to the pressure that such a discourse imposes on the e-tutors, they would mostly likely resort to traditional methods of teaching which are exam-focused and oriented. Hence, reconsideration of the assessment system is required. The e-tutors should be allowed to assess their students' level through both formative and

summative assessment and furthermore encourage their students to practise forms of self and peer-assessment.

Assessment in online learning should be of high value to the teaching/learning process and instructors should be able to apply formative assessment using a range of methods to conduct evaluations of student academic progress, their comprehension and learning needs during a lesson or programme. Formative assessments can allow teachers to identify skills learners are having difficulty in developing and concepts they are struggling to understand, and in a distance learning context to identify strategies needed to help learners manage and control their learning.

Effective Teacher Recruitment

Effective selection of e-tutors could be one of the most significant factors contributing to the effectiveness of any distance education programme. Applicants for e-tutoring posts need to be made aware of the different teaching responsibilities they would be expected to take on. Ensuring that they have the appropriate skills (not just computer skills) is important. Teachers' years of experience, their cultural backgrounds and how that impacts on their perspectives towards DL and the promotion of learner autonomy need to be taken into account in the selection process.

6.2.1.2   Suggestions and Guidelines Related to the Roles of Distance Learners in the DLLP

Setting Course Self-Exploration Tasks for Students to Promote Learner Autonomy from the Onset

The role of the distance learners as being mainly receptive could be related to the way the materials are presented to them. Instead of having the e-tutors explain the main differences between the distance learning course and other face-to-face courses, there could be several set assignments for the students to allow them to find this out for themselves. This will not only be a first step towards autonomy but will hopefully help establish the idea that they need to be less reliant on their teachers for information and that this is relevant and crucial to their success in this course. This should also be clearly explained in the course expectations when students first enrol on the programme.

Getting to Know the Students through Student Profiles, E-tutorials and Formative Assessment

Given that e-tutors cannot see the students, additional efforts should be made to help gain a clear picture of who these students are so that e-tutors are able to support their active role in their own learning. White (2003) suggests that e-tutors must have an idea of who their learners are and what their needs, preferences and motivations might be. One way is to make use of students' profiles which students should complete as fully as possible at the beginning of the course and keep updating throughout the course. Regular one-to-one e-tutorials (at the start, during and towards the end of the course) could be scheduled focusing on learner's needs, weaknesses, strengths and ongoing and future learning targets. Another important method is to assess learners formatively by gathering regular feedback that can be used by the e-tutor and the students to guide improvements in the ongoing teaching and learning context.

Having said that, it is important not to neglect the cultural constraints, which have led to not being able to see or hear the students in this DLLP and which have therefore raised problems with forming relationships and developing oral and aural skills. If these constraints must still persist, this situation could be kept under review until new technology may help eventually.

6.2.1.3 Suggestions and Guidelines Related to Teaching and Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy

The Adoption of an Effective Range of Teaching Strategies

E-tutors need to be clearly informed of the requirement to deal with the physical absence of students and the lack of face-to-face interaction, by implementing particular teaching strategies based upon carefully-designed materials for learning. There needs to be some consistency in the teaching strategies the e-tutors are expected and encouraged to adopt in this programme which can be incorporated into the e-tutors' induction sessions.

Given that pre-service education and pre-existing beliefs of language e-tutors are important, a recommendation for teacher educators might be to integrate pedagogical training related to distance education with language training in this specific cultural context. This will raise e-tutors' awareness of the differences between conventional classroom contexts and distance education settings and the pedagogical requirements of each. Having this early knowledge and experience will help to build their confidence when it comes to implementing aspects of distance learning in practice. Part of this

education can involve experimenting with a range of teaching strategies which can be effective in different settings. This is of particular importance given the nature of DL in the Saudi context, which is unlike most other DL settings.

Finally, in order to foster an autonomous culture in distance language learning environments, research needs to be extended into the types of teaching strategies that can be useful in this context while stressing the importance of autonomy in the teachers themselves.

Fostering Effective Learning Strategies

As this study focuses on the e-tutors' role to make their learners able to have control over their language learning, it might be worth pointing to Hurd's (2001) study in which she concludes that a key part of the e-tutors' role is *'to enable students to develop appropriate learning strategies that will lead to increased autonomy and more effective outcomes'* (p.6). E-tutors need to be familiar with a range of metacognitive and cognitive strategies to help learners with the management of their learning and the effective development of such strategies. Autonomy, through Benson's (2011) three levels of control considered in this study, calls for reshaping the e-tutor's role aiming at the autonomous outcomes of the learners. This requires a new positioning in on-line session interaction between DLs and e-tutors so that they can proceed together, creating several new chances of learning and promoting an autonomous approach to distance language learning.

Agreeing on an Understanding of Learner Autonomy and Control

The data from the study revealed that e-tutors' views on their students' exercise of autonomy and control over their learning is concurrent with White's (2003) views in that students must have freedom to make choices, they must have suitable support and they must have enough level of proficiency. The main obstacle as it seems from the e-tutors' perspectives is the environment itself. To help the e-tutors in this matter, the programme's policy makers and course designers have to be aware of this and make the necessary changes to accommodate for these needs if learner autonomy is to be promoted. In the absence of regular contact with their e-tutors, students must find their learning materials to be easy to read, user-friendly, study and comprehend in order to minimise the over-reliance on their e-tutors and allow them to have control over their learning. Using materials imported from foreign institutions without careful scrutiny of their cultural compatibility with the students might also cause cultural confusion and dissonance and

thus limit the exercise of learner autonomy. Establishing awareness of cultural differences needs to be part of the programme's policy and course design.

Moreover, e-tutors need to be prepared to promote learner independence and autonomy in their students, meaning that they must have awareness and personal experience of learner autonomy themselves in order to be able to offer the necessary support. Definitions of teacher autonomy as cited by Lamb (2008) have identified the significance of teacher autonomy in fostering autonomy in learners. Pedagogically speaking, although these definitions are meant for classroom teachers, they could be applied to the e-tutors of this distance language learning programme who need to be themselves autonomous to be able to encourage their DLs to become autonomous learners. Therefore, the programme's policymakers should be encouraged to allow the e-tutors some space and freedom to achieve this aim, and e-tutors need to have opportunities to reflect on their assumptions and to find ways of overcoming the constraints on their learners' autonomy. Collaboration amongst e-tutors would support that.

Furthermore, as e-tutors have induction in the use of the online system, distance learners should also be offered the same technical support to ensure that they are able to navigate the system and use it to its full potential without having to resort to the e-tutors for help. This support should be available for the learners at all times and will help decrease the burden on the e-tutors and restrict their roles to facilitating language learning and perhaps even resolve the time limitation issue in covering the course syllabus. E-tutors will thus be able to take on the role of facilitators rather than instructors and will not have to provide all details of how the course operates and how technology should be used.

Clear definitions for learner autonomy and control must be provided in job and course descriptions and during induction for both e-tutors and learners. This will allow for clear role expectations and an understanding of the qualities and skills they need to develop as part of the course requirements. Having learner autonomy clearly set out as one of the learning objectives of the DLLP and emphasising this throughout the course is essential. In addition, setting tasks and assignments to show evidence of students' learner autonomy will show students the value of it.

6.2.1.4 Suggestions and Guidelines Related to the Course Design, Educational Context, Support and Challenges

The Need for a Collaborative Approach in the DLLP Provision

In terms of the course design and educational setting, the Deanship as an organisation is responsible for the provision of the DLLP. Distance education, unlike other forms of education, requires the collaboration of a range of stakeholders from faculty members to technical and administrative staff to ensure its success and sound implementation. The process of developing DE versions of existing courses is not only time consuming but one that can entail confusion and frustration on the part of its main stakeholders, i.e. the e-tutors and the distance learners, if they have not been closely involved in the process from the onset. As a DE provider, Deanship of E-Learning and Distance Education at the university should be aware of this point. E-tutors with relevant theoretical knowledge and practice of DE as well as expertise in the planning and production of DE study programmes should be recruited, consulted and involved in the process of developing the DLLP and its course design. The contributions that e-tutors can make to its distance education programmes and their designed courses should not only be recognised but planned and administered as a regular part of their teaching duties. Students' ongoing feedback should be a vital component in the amendment and development of such programmes and curriculum design.

There should be institutional rules for moderating teaching loads if staff are expected to carry out distance teaching as well as classroom based teaching. This will allow for a more focused approach to teaching and dedication to the course being taught.

Rethinking the Hierarchical Structure of the Deanship

The Deanship as a hierarchically-structured entity is solely responsible for the establishment of the institutional policy which governs the Deanship's relationships with its main components, including staff members and students. However, there is a need for these policies to raise awareness of the nature of distance education, and support activities which are different from those adopted by conventional institutions. The Deanship's policy provides the foundation for almost all tasks associated with the provision of training and education to the DLs including assessment and evaluation. Although there is some expectation of learner autonomy (e.g. group tasks), this is outweighed by the focus on strictly exam-based approaches to learning; as such, the underpinning values of

distance education, where learner independence and autonomy should be promoted, are contradicted. With everything geared towards passing these exams, students are denied the opportunities of planning, monitoring, and assessing their own learning and developing it further in light of this self-evaluation. Hence, steps should be taken to reach a stage where both teachers and learners realize that teaching and learning the language skilfully is more important than exams and marks.

Increased Practical Support for the Effective Implementation of the DLLP

More practical support for the DLLP implementation could be introduced. Although support is provided to the e-tutors in the form of a two-day induction, this was seen as insufficient for grasping all aspects of the course requirements. The induction was restricted to familiarising the e-tutors with the systems available for accessing lesson materials, communicating with the students during the online sessions and for class work and assignment submission. There is an urgent need to train e-tutors to address their contextual difficulties and situated experience with more hands-on tasks. The use of varied communication means, besides the email system, should be considered and incorporated into the training programmes. Therefore, e-tutors should not only be inducted into their role and responsibilities in the DLLP at the start of each course but there should be an on-going programme of staff development related to pedagogy in DE offered and provided at the institution throughout the year.

As well as induction, discussion among teachers should be encouraged for them to reflect on each other's experience throughout the different stages of the course. Further opportunities for one-to-one communication with the course coordinators could be created where possible. Communication could be focused on practical issues that are directly relevant to teachers' practices. A e-tutoring support system for monitoring all aspects of the DLLP during operation can be developed as a further form of assistance. Staff training needs to take into account the time limitations which were a main challenge for the e-tutors and assist them in developing their time management skills to counter this issue. It must be noted and appreciated that time is more of an issue in online programmes compared to regular classes. Programmes should be more flexible, allowing e-tutors more time to make up for any loss of time due to technical glitches or other unforeseen problems. Cultural constraints and their impact on communication also need to be closely considered, especially where non-Saudi e-tutors are involved. Certain issues need to be

fully clarified to the recruited e-tutors during the training time, because this topic is very sensitive and perhaps even non-negotiable in regard to the Saudi values.

Follow-up activities are in existence towards the end of each course; however, these are restricted to tracking students' and e-tutors' attendance and activity and checking exam scores. There was no indication from the data that results of these activities were considered or incorporated in any way to help modify and further develop any aspects of the DLLP. To ensure the effective conduct of the institution's DLLP, the administrative responsibility should include further follow-up activities on a regular basis and at different stages of the course not just at the end. As well as the use of questionnaires for students and e-tutors, face-to-face meetings (where possible) and discussion boards can be formed to allow for contextual concerns and situated experiences to be raised and shared. Data emerging from such platforms can be a valuable source of understanding and help to resolve issues and concerns in future courses

To sum up, this framework was built around an agenda that emerged from the e-tutors' perspectives about learning and teaching in the context of the DLLP. An institution that aims to improve the effectiveness of its teaching takes into account its teachers' concerns and positive views, satisfies the students it serves, and is an institution that is striving for academic excellence. Constructing and implementing frameworks similar to the one suggested by this research study is a vital step for creating and developing a solid institutional culture.

6.3   Limitations of the Study and Issues Experienced during the Research Process

One of the study's first limitations is that the sample only included e-tutors and excluded distance learners. One of the reasons was, as mentioned in chapter 1, my being outside the country (initially away from the context of the study when access and consent were being sought), which made it hard to contact the learners from abroad. The other reason was that in the Saudi society, it is normally inappropriate for parents to permit their daughters to talk over the phone with strangers even if they are females; hence, obtaining the distance learners' consent would have been challenging anyway.

Another limitation is that this study was conducted with female e-tutors only. Again this refers to the Saudi Education system where male and female learners and e-tutors are

segregated from each other in both schools and universities. This situation made it hard for me to contact or include male e-tutors on any similar or equivalent programmes.

The issue of generalizability and transferability of this study's findings is seen as one of its limitations. As a qualitative research study; the sample was not random, it was based on purposely selected techniques. The study's context (the University) was selected for practical reasons. These included my familiarity with the place and the programme as a staff member there and also knowing key members who I thought would help facilitate the process from the first stages of obtaining consent to the actual stages of data collection. The e-tutors were selected in accordance with their will to participate in this study. Also the number of participants, who volunteered to share their views, limits the transferability of the study. A 14 e-tutors sample cannot be considered representative of the whole Saudi e-tutors' population, yet due to time and access limitations, the sample was based only on these 14 female tertiary level e-tutors. As such its findings might not apply to other contexts such as private online universities. Further research is therefore needed in such contexts to be able to consider the feasibility of transferring the findings of this study. Furthermore, to be more confident of the findings, the sample needs to be more than 14 e-tutors and also include the distance learners as part of the DL programme. Nevertheless, the study was a case study of these 14 e-tutors' perceptions of their role within this specific context and can be read in this light and reflected on by others.

Another restriction might be related to the criticism of qualitative research is its lack of meeting the quality standard that quantitative research usually provides (Flick, 2009). Therefore, a research quality section was added to the methodology chapter in an attempt to address some of these criteria, including more epistemologically appropriate visions of validity and reliability; yet no claims for generalizability were made and indeed traditional measures of quality were questioned there. My purpose was to provide an image as faithful as possible to this case study's participants' perspective and I have used various strategies to reduce the effect of researcher bias. Triangulation of data collection administrating three instruments was one of these strategies. As such, I do not consider this restriction to be a limitation, as I was not aiming for a positivist approach.

In addition to potential limitations, there were issues related to the data collection and data analysis of my study. As I was relatively new in the field of qualitative research, considerable time was spent on my attempt to understand and development competence in the use of data collection and data analysis methods that were appropriate to my study.

However, I found the pilot study of the RJs and interviews helpful in supporting my skills and boosting my confidence in this specific area of research and, as suggested by Flick (2009), a researcher's *'competence may be increased by practical experience of making decisions necessary in interview situations, in rehearsal interviews, and in interview training* (p. 145).

Moreover, the data collected from the documents, RJs and SSIs were all qualitative, which made the transcription and analysis very labour-intensive. Considerable time was spent on manually analysing, coding and theme extraction across data from all three tools. No software (e.g. N-Vivo) was used because this required appropriate training and practice and I was already at the site where the study took place and needed to start the analysis while I was there. Also, the amount of in-depth data extracted from the methods, particularly the interviews, made the organization of the findings and discussion chapters challenging and time-consuming.

Gaining access to the study's participants proved to be challenging for many reasons. First, I was thousands of kilometres away from the place of the study as I was in Sheffield, UK and the participants were in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; as such I could not at that time have face-to-face interaction with my participants. Second, there was no specific list of names or contact details for those who were already engaged in the DLL programme so it was challenging for me to reach them easily. This meant that the organizational system of the programme had an effect on my access to the participants. Third, I was not very sure whether the e-tutors would be willing to participate in this study particularly as it was a critical and hectic period for them as they were involved in finalizing the curriculum and getting ready for the final exams. Fourth, I thought of the cultural and social factors that might hinder my accessibility and contact with the participants; fellow colleagues who previously carried out research in the same place mentioned they had a hard time during their field work as most of the participants seemed to lack enthusiasm and motivation. Fifth, as mentioned earlier, the participants have their own full-time teaching schedule and they did this distance teaching as an extra job. The participants were suffering from shortage of time and pressure because of work load as they were already very busy with their regular classes as well as their endeavour to fulfil the requirements of this extra job. Sixth, I was told that many new teachers were recruited while I was out of the country during my study scholarship which actually made my contact with the new e-tutors a hard job; culturally, having personal relationships with the participants makes it easier to get in touch with them. After discussing these concerns by telephone with my

close friends, I was advised to get in touch with the programme co-ordinator to facilitate my contact with the required participants.

There were other issues related to the research participants, which had more to do with the data collection activity itself. As the teachers had very strict and tight teaching schedules, the data collection phase was time–consuming. I had to organise and manage the interview timing in accordance with the teachers' demanding and overlapping daily timetables. There were several occasions when I would wait for hours before having to cancel interviews completely. This meant that the data collection process took much longer than originally planned.

Other issues stemmed from the embarrassment and hesitation of some participants to talk about the programme's deficiencies and the pros and cons of being an online e-tutor. This urged me in some interviews to sum up the questions and end the meeting. Although they were ensured confidentiality and were at most times comfortable in expressing themselves, I still feel that some of the teachers may not have revealed information which they might have seen as either personal at the time or would negatively affect their jobs. Despite having provided very useful insights into their roles in this programme, the depth of the data might have been impacted.

Another problem was related to the explanation and definitions of some terminology used in this study as there was no consensus amongst researchers and scholars regarding these and this tended to cause some confusion. E-learning, online learning, distance learning, autonomous learning, self-directed learning are examples of these terms. This confusion and sometimes overlapping of meanings might lead to different interpretations and findings in other similar studies. These terms were also problematic when explaining them to the teachers during data collection. Providing consistent definitions and explanations with all 14 teachers was ensured to best resolve this issue. Also, and to avoid researcher bias and influence, I was particularly careful to avoid influencing the interview data by offering any of my own views on their teaching practices and perspectives.

A final issue related to the DLLP itself is the recent change of the programme's software. When the data was collected for this study in 2014, the DLLP used to apply CENTRA System, but this has recently been changed into Blackboard Software. As this was implemented after the completion of the study's field work, it had no direct impact on this research. Nevertheless, following data collection I contacted the co-coordinator of the programme to enquire about the application of this new software and how it would

impact the programme in the future. She ensured that the difference between the two systems is slight and has no substantial impact on the course aspects including teacher roles, teaching hours and assessment. Also the means of communication (e-mail, Chat box) between the e-tutors and the DLs is the same.

6.4   Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the limitations and issues described above, the results obtained from the sample in this study can offer some useful insights into the chosen context and may encourage other researchers to conduct similar research in other educational contexts in Saudi Arabia or other Arab countries. I would like to consider some possible directions for future research. Some of them are issues that I was unable to cover in this investigation while other issues have arisen during my research and warrant further investigation.

The focus of this study was on female tutors; therefore, it would be interesting to conduct further research, which focuses on the role of the tutors and examines distance teaching and learning in the Saudi Context but with a sample of both male and female teachers. This will show how gender might have an influence on teacher views, perspectives and attitudes particularly in a country where gender segregation is the norm in educational contexts.

Furthermore, this study investigated a DLLP from teachers' perspectives. Researchers may wish to investigate and focus on the 'learner perspectives' in a DLLP, as this would provide greater insight into how learner autonomy is seen and encouraged within these contexts.

Further research might be needed to compare and contrast the e-tutor's role and the learner's role in both classroom-based and distance language learning contexts. I think this would enrich the knowledge and theories about English language learning and teaching as a foreign language in Arab countries. Learner autonomy can be further investigated and compared in these two contexts to explore the different factors behind its existence or the lack of it.

It would be interesting to investigate how my methods of data collection of document analysis, reflective journals and semi-structured interviews can be used in other settings. My line of enquiry might offer different possibilities and help gain a wide range of perspectives in different areas of research.

Finally, a teacher framework with suggested guidelines was constructed based on the findings of this study; other researchers may wish to test the components of this study's framework or further develop it to apply to other distance learning programme contexts. Having a number of skeletal or basic frameworks to start with are needed by programme developers as well; these should eventually be developed and implemented within the context of each institution's own vision core values and objectives relative to distance education.

6.5 Reflective Thoughts

It is essential for any social researcher to include her own experience and feelings in relation to the research topic and process (Matthews & Ross, 2010). In line with this, Wellington (2015) suggests that:

> *Part of being critical involves being critical of our own thinking, beliefs, faith and knowledge, not just other people's. This requires us to be sensitive to and to be aware of our own biases, prejudices and preconceptions. This is part of the requirement for our own 'positionality' to be included in a thesis, article or research report (p. 87).*

With reference to my positionality in the first chapter, this research has deeply changed my life. My PhD experience is unique compared to that of other students in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield. I have faced several difficulties and obstacles during this long journey and to simplify the events of my story, I shall divide these obstacles into two categories; personal factors and educational factors. I shall start with personal factors because they have had the major influence on the process of this research and sometimes they impacted negatively on my study progress.

6.5.1 Personal Factors

Since I completed my master's degree in 1994, I have had the dream of completing my PhD here in the United Kingdom. My circumstances were not ideal, but I never stopped dreaming and I have worked very hard to make this dream come true. I started by seeking a scholarship from my Government to cover the cost of this research and after a long journey, I was finally able to gain what I was seeking.

The journey began by realising that I had been away from the desktop as a researcher for almost 20 years. In addition, as a lady who has passed her 40s, I faced a few challenges

related to my physical health conditions, which have prevented me on a few occasions from taking the full and physically laborious responsibilities of research that I am supposed to do.

In addition, as a divorced mother of four children—two of whom are already students at university, one at school and one is married—it was a challenge for me to take care of them and simultaneously attend to my full-time studies. However, and with their understanding and support, I am proud to have managed to finish this piece of work and to be very close to fulfilling my dream.

My English language knowledge has never been a problem, but given the gap between studies, I admit to struggling when it came to understanding related topics and narrowing down the focus of the research. I spent a long time reading and consulting the literature to create a clear vision of it and to identify the research gap. Regardless of my methods of time-management, which I have always applied effectively in different contexts, time seemed to be my biggest challenge in relation to my PhD experience. I always needed more time to learn, to develop the required knowledge, and to establish the required skills to complete this research successfully.

6.5.2   Educational Factors

I reached England in March 2011 and I started my course in April 2011. By the time I arrived in Sheffield it was mid-term and there were no induction sessions. I had to spend a huge amount of time and effort to resume my postgraduate studies. To overcome this obstacle, I joined many modules and attended seminars and workshops to bridge the gap in my skills and knowledge.

Starting with modules, I attended 'Qualitative Methods Module, FCS670', 'Foundations of Social Science Research, FCS 660', 'Research Methodology and Methods', 'Thesis Writing: Principles and practice, GC6050', and a course entitled 'In What Sense is Educational Research Scientific'. These modules helped me as a doctoral research student to gain knowledge and skills in methods and methodology as well as to develop my academic writing skills.

In addition to these modules, I had the chance to attend a number of seminars and workshops that were held in the University of Sheffield and other educational institutions

in the UK to further enhance my skills as a researcher. The following are the seminars and workshops, which I attended:

1. The principles of reading and evaluating the scientific papers; the University of Sheffield.
2. Advanced Internet Searching for High Quality Research Information; the University of Sheffield.
3. Reading for Meaning & Research; the University of Sheffield.
4. Academic Writing; the University of Sheffield.
5. How to get through your PhD; the University of Sheffield.
6. Sheffield teaching Assistant programme: Assessment and Feedback; the University of Sheffield.
7. PhD movie at the Student Union Auditorium; the University of Sheffield.
8. APA Referencing Style & Endnote Web workshop; the University of Sheffield.
9. Preparing for Viva (Social Science); the University of Sheffield.
10. Designing and presenting effective academic posters; the University of Sheffield.
11. Using phone interviews: Methodological considerations and a comparison with face-to-face interviews; York University.
12. Qualitative data analysis using NVivo the University of Sheffield.
13. Alternative to Google: StarPlus, Scoups & Google scholar; the University of Sheffield.
14. Keeping up-to-date with RSS Feeds; the University of Sheffield.
15. Introduction to Referencing Styles; the University of Sheffield.
16. Introduction to Endnote Web; the University of Sheffield.
17. Searching for Researching; the University of Sheffield.
18. Research Writing Network-Publishing and the REF; the University of Sheffield.
19. Literature Search Tool Workshop; the University of Sheffield.
20. Managing Yourself Workshop; the University of Sheffield.
21. The research methods (beginners to advanced levels): Introducing all the methods applicable for the qualitative research'; Manchester University.
22. Jerry's Wellington's seminar on 'Writing and finishing your thesis with the Viva in mind'; the University of Sheffield
23. Reflecting on your PhD progress; the University of Sheffield.
24. Large Teaching Group workshop; the University of Sheffield.
25. Teaching Small Group Workshop; the University of Sheffield.

26. In addition to these, my supervisor held systematic seminars for his students, as mentioned earlier, to present and share their work. Mine was entitled 'The role of the e- tutors in supporting learners' autonomy in distance language learning context' and was held in the Education Department. My supervisor also advised me to keep a reflective journal to record details of my different experiences throughout the stages of the research process. As a new experience for me, I found this extremely useful; it enhanced my thinking and academic writing skills.

These workshops and seminars were of great help in supporting me with the information needed in different areas of research. Furthermore, to gain experience in editing and peer reviewing, I had the chance to attend the 'Track Changes Workshop on academic Publishing', held by postgraduates of Arts & humanities "Track Changes is an inter-disciplinary, peer-reviewed journal that celebrates the talent and diversity to be found within the Arts and Humanities in Sheffield" (TC Peer Review Handbook, P.3, 2016). I had the wonderful opportunity of being one of the peer reviewers of Issue 9: Summer 2016.

As ethical issues are of high importance for all research students at the University of Sheffield, I enrolled in a workshop of 'Ethics Action' and another entitled 'Ethical Internet Research' to raise my awareness of research ethics. In addition to reading research papers on ethics and submission of work, I familiarised myself with the University of Sheffield Website 'Code of Practice for Research Programmes 2014-2015'.

Throughout my study period, I was ambitious to attend and participate in a series of conferences inside and outside the UK. The following is a list of the conferences that I presented at and the title of the papers and posters:

1. On 18th April 2012, I presented a paper at 'the Eighth School of Education Research Students' Annual Conference'. Leeds University, Leeds. The title of the presentation was:
   'Understanding E-tutors' Perception about the Distance Language Learning Programme (DLLP), and its Role in the development of Learners' Autonomy'.
2. On 21st May 2012, I presented at the School of English and Linguistics Postgraduate Colloquium. The University Sheffield. The title of the presentation was:
   'How does the e-tutors' perception about the distance English language learning programmes affect their learners' autonomy?'

3. On 29th November 2012, I shared a paper at the USDLA (United States Distance Learning Association). It was about **'The Role of the female e-tutors on promoting learners' autonomy at the distance English language learning programme at Saudi Universities'.** Bonita Springs, Florida, USA. This conference was about **'International forum for Women in e-learning 2012'**.

4. On 7th March 2013, I presented a paper entitled '**How to help e-tutors at the distance English language learning programmes to promote learners' autonomy?'** at the 'Gulf Countries Community Symposium' held at **The University of Sheffield**.

5. Furthermore, and as my supervisor is a pioneer in multilingual teaching and learning, I was honoured to offer contributions in two of his many projects: the first was: **'*Why Languages Matter! Multilingualism throughout the Sheffield City Region,* Awarding Body: ESRC Festival of Social Sciences (2013)'**, the University of Sheffield; the second was: **'The World in our City'** which was held also in Sheffield as part of **'the Festival of Mind Event'**, September 2014.

6. During the 1st and 2nd of February 2014, I participated with a poster in the 7th Saudi Students International Conference held in Edinburgh.

7. During the period of 4-5 February 2014, I attended the **'Inaugural Sheffield Linguistics Post-Graduate Conference'**, **the University Sheffield**.

8. On 2nd and 3rd June 2014, I attended **'the Second Research Student Conference'** held at the University of Sheffield.

9. On 31st January-1st February 2015, I presented a paper at **'the Eighth Saudi Student Conference'** held in London, 2015. This paper synthesized the application and the analysis of reflective journals as a data collection method and was entitled title '**My Reflective Journal Data Collection Journey'**. This paper was published in the Conference's Proceedings by the Imperial College Press, 2015.

10. On 26th -28th March 2015, I had the honour to share a paper in **'the World Congress of Modern Languages'** at Niagara Falls, Canada. The title of the paper was **'The Role of the E-tutors in Prompting Learners' Autonomy in Distance Language Learning Environment'.**

11. On 3rd - 4th June, 2015, I attended **'the Third Research Students Conference'** held at the University of Sheffield.

12. Recently and to gain experience in organizing conferences and colloquiums, I took part in **'the EGH611 Conference Organisation'** which took place in the University of Sheffield on 2nd June 2016. My role was to select the papers to be presented at **'the**

University of Sheffield, School of English Postgraduate Colloquium' and I was a chair of one of the workshops.

13. Most recently, my paper of **'Understanding E-tutors' Perceptions about the Distance Language Learning Programme (DLLP) and their Role in the Development of Female Learners' Autonomy: An Empirical Study at a Saudi University'** was accepted for inclusion in the conference entitled: **'Focus on the learner: Contributions of individual differences to second language learning and teaching',** held in Konin, Poland October 17th -19th 2016.

I need in this sense to acknowledge that I have learned a lot from attending and presenting at these conferences; it was a good opportunity to meet scholars, fellow researchers, and pioneers in my field of study and share my work and experience with them during my PhD journey in Sheffield. I also had a chance to attend their disciplinary plenaries and workshops to strengthen my competence in my own discipline.

6.6   Final words

Finally, this journey has come to its end with all its ups and downs and its hardships and blessings; a journey that has definitely left a strong impact on my social, personal, and academic life. Socially speaking, I have had the chance to meet people from different societies and backgrounds and I enjoyed their company. On a personal level, I have done things which I would have never done if I were not here (driving is one example).

Academically speaking, this journey will have an effect on my career as a language e-tutor at the tertiary level. I will keep in mind that students (distance and regular) must be given a chance to have some control over their language learning. Moreover, they should be trained to develop some learning strategies that might help them to be independent learners. I truly hope this study will be of some benefit for those who were involved and I hope it fulfils the expectations of my colleagues who handed me the responsibility to explore distance teaching in this specific environment with the aim of enhancing it. I still remember the words of the programme coordinator saying "Maha, after getting back to your academic advisors, I expect you to come back with a result, with a solution for some of our problems in distance teaching". I hope I did.

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Appendix 1: The Distance Learning Teachers' Job Duties in the DLLP

Distance Learning Teachers' Job Duties (Spring 2011):

Teachers of the Distance Learning Program are responsible for the following tasks to be carried out throughout the semester:

1. Give all the CENTRA lectures assigned. The lectures are meant to be for discussing any questions from the students. The discussion meetings are going to be held only **ONCE** a week as scheduled.

2. Give students **5 HW assignments each worth 2 marks**. The assignments are to be scheduled according to the time plan. The assignments are to be corrected manually by the teacher and discussed with the students.

3. Give **5 quizzes throughout the semester; each one worth 3**. This makes **15 marks**. Giving the quizzes is also to be done according to a time plan. The quizzes are to be corrected automatically by the EMES program.

4. Post at least **10 different discussion topics** for the students to comment on. Each student gets a half mark for commenting on each topic. This makes **5 marks.**

(10 + 15+ 5= 30 semester work + 70 Final Exam = 100 marks)

5. Post at least **10 frequent questions** and their answers that students usually ask. This is to be done according to a time plan as well.

6. Communicate continuously with the students on the EMES Email system; at least an email per week till the end of the semester.

7. Enter all the detailed marks on an Excel sheet and if needed on ODUS to be given to the Coordinator at the end of the semester.

8. If needed, submit samples for the final exam to the DL coordinator.

9. Invigilate the final exam.

10. Correct the final exam and add up the Final exam marks with the semester work marks and put into ODUS following the exam instructions that will be announced before the exam.

11. Check with the DL coordinator for any updates.

Instructor's name: _____   Signature: _____

Appendix 2: Cover Book of the Booklet
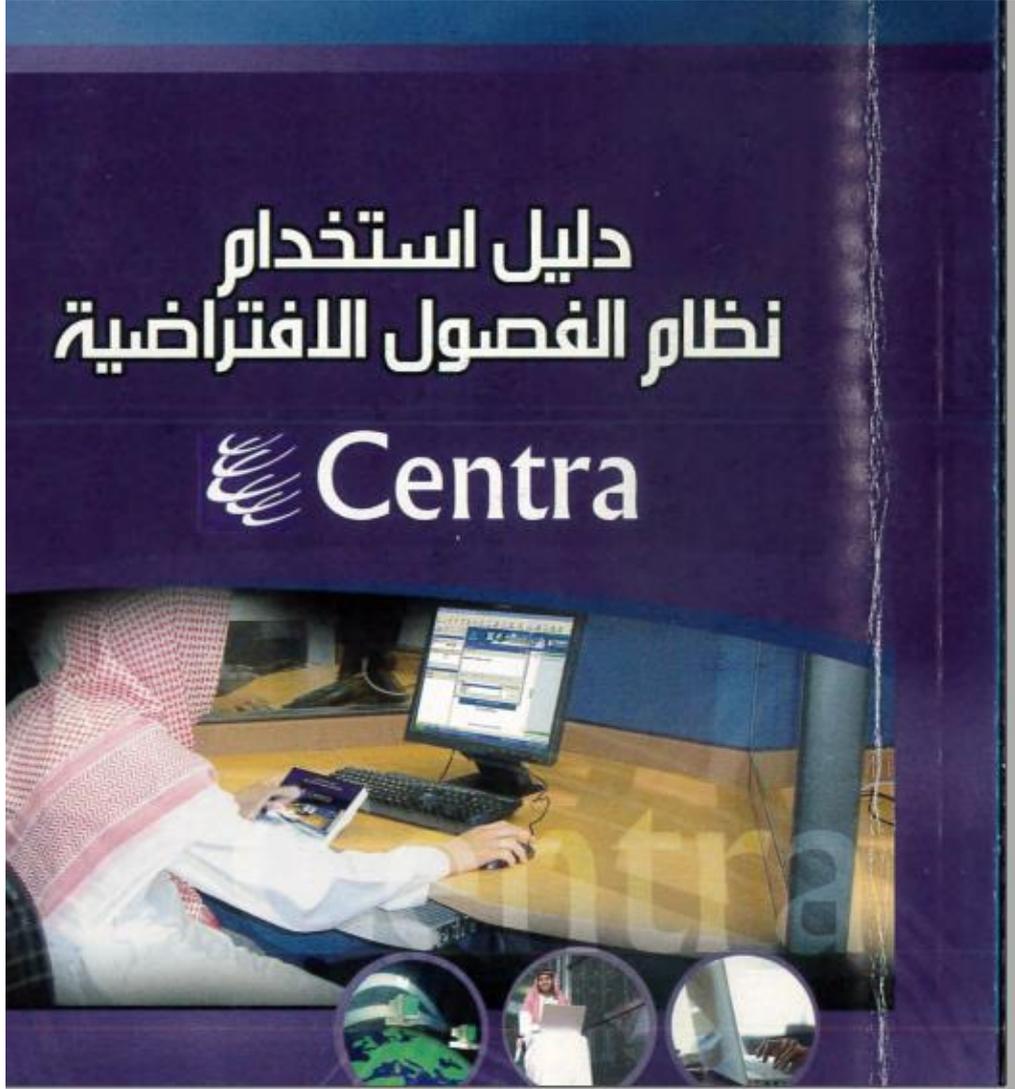
Appendix 3: The DLLP Weekly Plan

Distance Learning Program - Weekly Plan Fall 2016 **ELCA 102**

This is a suggested weekly plan to cover the assigned units and tasks throughout the semester.

102 New Headway Plus for Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate levels (Special Edition)

Pre-Intermediate Book Units 3 – 11   Intermediate Book Units 3 – 10

Total 17 Units from the two books.

NB: Responding to the Students' email is a weekly-based task that has to be done regularly either to send an email to the whole section and to reply to your students' emails individually.

Week	Week starts	Part to be covered in BB Collaborate meetings	BB weekly tasks
1	August 23/ AlQi'da 8	---------------	
2	August 30/ AlQi'da 15	Introduction	
3	Sept 6/ AlQi'da 22	Pre-Intermediate Book. Units 3+4	Forum 1 (Ungraded)
4	Sept 13/ AlQi'da 29	Pre-Intermediate Book Units 4+5	Course Content 1 (Student booklet) Forum 2
Al-Hajj Break			
5	Sept 29/ AlHajj 16 (Tuesday)	Revision – Practice booklet	HW 1
6	Oct 4/ AlHajj 21	Pre-Intermediate Book Units 6+7	Quiz 1
7	Oct 11/ AlHajj 28	Pre-Intermediate Book. Units 8+9	HW 2 Course Content 2 (Sample test 1)

<center>**Appendix 4: The Research Information Sheet**</center>

1. Research Project Title

The Role of the Tutors in Supporting Learners in a Higher Education Distance language programme Environment in Saudi Arabia.

2. Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please feel free to ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the project's purpose?

To solve the problem of overcrowding students in university classes in Saudi Arabia (SA) and to cease "spoon-feeding" methods of teaching, many distance language learning programmes were initiated at different universities in SA. For the purpose of this study, the researcher is interested to find out how tutors support their learners to adapt themselves to this relatively new environment of learning and how they help them to take control over their learning, it is challenging for teachers (e-tutors in this context) to help their students to develop new learning strategies, as there are no clear guidelines or frameworks to be followed and consulted. In addition, it has been observed in the literature that there is no standard framework or guidelines that can be used by e-tutors to practise e-tutoring effectively. So, this project is aiming to develop a framework for e-tutors to help their distance language learners to manage and control their learning of the foreign language at the higher education distance language programme environment. The study will investigate the actual and the perceived role of the involved e-tutors.

4. Why have I been chosen?

Tutors involved in the distance language learning programme were approached to participate in this project. You have been chosen because I think you can help me in getting the required data for this study. I am aware that you have enough experience and knowledge which can definitely help me to achieve the goals of my research. Other voluntary participants will be recruited.

5. Do I have to take part?

It is completely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

6. What will happen to me if I take part?

I am interested in your views and these will be sought through written reflective journals and the use of face to face interviews. You will be also asked to complete a reflective journal

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which will include your perspective and events about the studied phenomenon. The interview will take the duration of approximately 45 minutes and should not exceed 1 hour. Questions asked will be about your experience with distance language learners. Any audio recordings of your replies will be used only for the analysis of this study. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. The schedule for the researcher's visit to your university will be discussed with the head of the department in advance. You will not suffer any travelling expenses as I will visit you at your site.

7. What do I have to do?

You will need to complete a reflective journal and attend the interview's session as arranged. Your participation in this study will not impose any restrictions on your lifestyle.

8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Participating in this research should not incorporate any risks, your identity will not be revealed and all data collected will only be used for research purposes.

9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There is immediate benefit from taking part in this research as I promise you to make the interview's session an interesting experience which will increase your awareness to a few concepts you are dealing with every day. You will have the chance to think about them and share them with me which will make you able to visualize ideas and concepts you did not discuss before. In the long term, the findings of this research will be used to create a framework to help e-tutors practice tutoring in the online environment more effectively. This can be considerable benefit to you and to other colleges and students on this programme.

10. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

As a participant in this research you will be informed that the study was stopped and I will let you know the reasons but there will be no consequences or harms.

11. What if something goes wrong?

Before accepting the participation in this research, as participants you have the right to put forward any complaints. I will make sure that you feel that your complaints are respected and will be treated as expected. In addition, you will be provided with my supervisor's contact details and with the Sheffield University Registrar and Secretary's contact details to be used if you feel that your complaints have not been handled to your satisfaction.

12. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

13. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The research results will be included in the written thesis in partial fulfilment of the degree of doctorate of philosophy. If any research papers are published during the study,

participants will be informed in due course how they can obtain a copy of the publication if they wish.

14. Who is organising and funding the research?

I am a sponsored student at the University of Sheffield in the UK. The research is being funded by the targeted university of the study in Saudi Arabia.

15. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the Department of ethics review procedure.

16. Contact for further information:

My supervisor: Terrance Lamb

His Address: 388, Glossop road, Education Department, Sheffield University.

His contact Number: 0114 2234567

Finally, I would like to thank you from the depth of my heart for giving me your time and effort. Without your help and participation this piece of work would not be achieved.

Appendix 5: Participant Consent Form

Title of Project: The Role of the Tutors in Supporting Learners in a Higher Education Distance language programme Environment in Saudi Arabia.

Name of Researcher: Maha Saeed S. Halabi.

A PhD student in the School of English at the University of Sheffield, and has been given this ethics approval form from this school.

Participant Identification Number for this project:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 20/12/2013 for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. *Insert contact number here of lead researcher/member of research team (as appropriate).*

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature
(*or legal representative*)

_____   _____   _____
Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature
(*if different from lead researcher*)
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Maha Saeed S. Halabi_____   _____   _____
 Lead Researcher   Date   Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant.

Appendix 6: The Reflective Journal Form

Dear participant, thank you for taking part in this research, your contribution has a great value to me. Please write in this journal about your role as an e-tutor in the English distance language learning programme. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me on my email address (egp10msh@sheffield.ac.uk) or my mobile number 0505506403.

This reflective journal aims to encourage you to review your role as an e-tutor. It will help you conceptualize your role; it will also enable you to find out about the learning strategies used by distance learners. Moreover, it will be a personal space to you to reflect on your experience in each session you present. You can keep a copy of it for yourself and enjoy the ideas and thoughts you recorded. For me as a researcher, this journal is important because it will allow me to gain general understanding of the ideas, concepts and thoughts generated by you as an e-tutor after each session. It will also help me to identify the teaching strategies deployed in these on-line sessions. I would like you to complete these questions after each session you perform each week.

1. Your name (optional):

2. Years of teaching in this programme:

3. Course number:

4. Session date and duration:

5. How did you find this particular session in general?

6. What was the most interesting part of the session? Why did you name this specific part?

7. What was your role/s as an e-tutor in this particular session?

8. In your opinion, what was the students' role in the session?

9. During the session, what particular strategies do think your distance learners employed to enhance and manage their learning of the language and to communicate their ideas?

10. In which ways did you allow your distance learners to take control during this particular session?

11. On reflection, what changes would you make to future sessions to improve the students' learning? What might you do differently and what would you wish your students to do differently?

12. What are the problems you face during the session that may influence your role as e-tutor in this programme?

13. In general, how did you find the experience of teaching language from distance?

Finally, please feel free to reflect openly on this session and tell me what you have learnt from it. Your responses and feedback are highly appreciate

Appendix 7: The Coordinator's E-mail

Deleted

POP 18

My Phd Documents

Search Results

New folder

Categories

Dear colleagues,

Trust this email finds you well. Please find attached a copy of a reflective journal designed by one of our ELI colleagues, Ms. Maha Halabi as a tool to collect data for her research. Please, take a few minutes to fill up the attached journal and send it back to Ms. Halabi's email found on the cover letter.

Thank you very much

Regards,

Appendix 8: Reflective Journal Guidelines

1. Reflective journal writing is widely defined and used as a mean of data collection. Here are examples of some definitions of the term:

Rolfe et al. (2001, p. 42) describe reflective writing as '*processes involved in writing that can be utilized as a means in themselves to help us learn from our experiences*.' While Hecker et al. (2000) define Journal entries as '*... reflections, which often evoke more questions than answers. The purpose of forming questions is to help focus on personal meaning and interpretation in the reflective moment.*'

2. Reflective journals are neither right nor wrong. They are simply spaces for self-expression.

3. My role here is not an evaluator, but rather facilitator and guide to promote the critical thinking writing.

4. The purpose of this journal is to facilitate clearer, smarter thinking of your role as an e-tutor in this specific programme and to help you to visualize this role.

5. You are free to skip the question you might feel unwilling to reply.

6. Confidentiality will be highly maintained between you and me.

7. I will consider the tutors' responses as their truth and will use them without any changes in the analysis of the study.

8. I am taking into consideration the ethical nature of the study and will never force any participants to conduct the reflective journal process.

9. The tutor will be encouraged, in the reflective journal, to use her own voice and style. The concentration will be on the thinking process. The purpose is to focus on your perspectives and opinions of your distance learners' process of learning. No correction of writing style will be conducted.

10. Tutors are most welcome to seek help and assistance at any time from the researcher during the process of writing the reflective journal. (A whatsApp account was generated by me to facilitate the interaction between me and the participants during the data collection process).

11. Abednia et al. (2013) point out to some benefits of reflective journal writing for teachers. Some of which are: a) Fostering self-awareness; b) Constructing and expanding personal understanding; and c) Developing reflection and reasoning skills.

Hence, it is hoped that your responses to the attached reflective journal questions will be of great benefit for both of us to develop a clear picture of your actual role as distance language tutors and to practice a new experience of interacting with your ideas and opinion

Appendix 9: A Copy of One Participant RJ

Dear participant, thank you for taking part in this research, your contribution has a great value to me. Please write in this journal about your role as an e-tutor in the English distance language learning programme. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me on my email address (egp10msh@sheffield.ac.uk) or my mobile number 0505506403.

This reflective journal aims to encourage you to review your role as an e-tutor. It will help you conceptualize your role; it will also enable you to find out about the learning strategies used by distance learners. Moreover, it will be a personal space to you to reflect on your experience in each session you present. You can keep a copy of it for yourself and enjoy the ideas and thoughts you recorded. For me as a researcher, this journal is important because it will allow me to gain general understanding of the ideas, concepts and thoughts generated by you as an e-tutor after each session. It will also help me to identify the teaching strategies deployed in these on-line sessions. I would like you to complete these questions after each session you perform each week.

1. Your name (optional):
2. Years of teaching in this programme: 3 years
3. Course number: ELCA 101
4. Session date and duration: Wednesday – 6:00 – 7:50
5. How did you find the session in general?

   Teaching distance learning students is a little challenging, but over all a very good experience.

6. What was the most interesting part of the session? Why did you name this specific part?

   Doing listening exercises was the most challenging part of the lesson. Listening exercises are challenging due to technical facilities on students' end and availability of online resources is always a difficult task.

7. What was your role/s as an e-tutor in this particular session?

   I tried to manage by providing extensive listening exercises from websites and by uploading tracks on download centre.

8. In your opinion, what was the students' role in the session?

   Students were contributing by asking lots of questions and directing the teacher towards their needs.

Appendix 10: Semi-Structured Interviews Questions

1. How did you find the experience of completing the reflective journal?

2. How long have you been working as a regular teacher and as an e-tutor in this programme? How do you describe your role in the programme?

3. What in your own understanding does 'distance language teaching and learning' mean; how would you define the terms?

4. What are the differences between teaching in a regular classroom and in distance learning sessions?

5. Some of your colleagues mentioned in the reflective journal that the teaching experience in such an environment is very interesting. Do you agree?

6. As an e-tutor, what are the duties you are expected to do?

7. Some of your colleagues used the term English language instructor to name their roles, do you agree with this term and why?

8. What other names or descriptions would you give to your role?

9. What skills do you think the e-tutors should have to be able to teach in the DL environment effectively? In other words, what skills do you think e-tutors need to be able to perform their role effectively?

10. What is your role in making the students' learning more effective?

11. How do you usually assess your DLs in this programme?

12. Do you think being capable of communicating with the students in both languages Arabic and English is part of your job? What differences would be using both languages make in enhancing the students' learning experience?

13. Do you think that an e-tutor should take part in the process of selecting and directing the used learning materials?

14. Do you think the technology or the used system has any influence on both yours and your learners' roles?

15. Many of your colleagues again, in their reflective journal, mentioned the use of specific websites which they use to help their students in learning the language; do you know anything about such sources; if yes can you tell me more about them, if not what else do you use when you seek your resources?

16. What's the process of the lesson? How do you usually run your session?

17. Some of your colleagues mentioned the use of Agenda, what is Agenda, is it the same as guidelines or is it something else?

18. How do you usually present the materials to your students?

19. How would the use of PowerPoint Presentation add to your role as an e-tutor?

20. What are the problems you face during your session and influence on your role as e-tutor?

21. Let's move to another set of questions. As an e-tutor what are you expecting from your distance learners?

22. What are the different roles you think your students should play to complete the session successfully?

23. When can you describe your students' contribution as positive? And when can you describe your students' contribution as negative?

24. What strategies do you think your DLs employ to enhance and manage their language learning in this programme?

25. As an e-tutor do you provide your students with a guideline, if yes how do you create your guideline and if not why do you not provide a guideline?

26. What in your own understanding does the term 'autonomous language learner' mean and do you think your learners are autonomous?

27. How far do you allow your DLs to have control over their learning of the language in this programme? Do you think they are able to take control over their learning?
28. From Your opinion, do your learners have any control over their learning content?

27. Self-directed learning is a common term in our distance learning programme. What do you think this term might mean for your learners from your perspective?

28. What level of interaction do you usually expect from your DLs and how do you identify such specific level?

29. Do you provide your students any chances of collaboration with their peers?

30. Do you think teaching in the distance learning environment is challenging? If yes, which part of the experience is the most challenging and why?

31. How do you think the current regulations in the institution could influence on your role?

32. Do you believe that the DL Deanship has good control and mentoring over the DLL courses that guarantee the programme efficacy? If there is any … is it efficient?

33. Do you believe that the current course helps your distance learners to fulfill the essential components/learning outcomes of the course?

34. What might you do differently and what would you wish your students to do differently in the distance learning context?

At the end of this interview, I would like to deeply thank you for your time and effort. **The researcher:** Maha Saeed Halabi

Appendix 11: Research Ethical Approval

	The University Of Sheffield.	School Of English.

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Dear Maha

THE ROLE OF THE TUTOR IN SUPPORTING LEARNERS IN A HIGHER EDUCATION DISTANCE
LANGUAGE PROGRAMME ENVIRONMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you
that on 1 July 2013 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you
will adhere to the following document that you submitted for ethics review:
- University research ethics application form (dated 20 December 2013)
- Participant information sheet and consent form (dated 21 March 2013)

If during the course of the project you need to deviate from the above-approved document please
inform me. Written approval will be required for significant deviations from or significant changes to
the above-approved document. Please also inform me should you decide to terminate the project
prematurely.

Yours sincerely

Emma Bradley
Ethics Administrator