

**CONVENTIONAL OR ONLINE MATERIALS: TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS'  
PERCEPTIONS IN AN ENGLISH FOUNDATION PROGRAMME**

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By

Fatema Al Feteisi

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this EdD thesis entitled '**Conventional or Online Materials: Teachers' and Students' Perceptions in an English Foundation Programme**' is my own work, and no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or qualification. Where other sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged.

Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a final flourish.

Date: 10<sup>th</sup> August 2020

## **Acknowledgement**

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## **Abstract**

The growing universality of the English language, coupled with increasing technology integration, has stimulated the creation of new methods of English teaching and learning. What were once labelled alternative forms of learning are becoming mainstream. However, many learning institutions around the world continue to use textbooks to provide the core material for English language courses, with electronic sources to complement them. The Sultanate of Oman is no different, with extensive use of electronic learning aids, including educational software, websites, and apps; online learning materials repositories, such as MReader; and entire course management systems, such as Moodle (Jayaron et al., 2015). This thesis examines the perceptions of teachers and students regarding learning methods in an Omani English Foundation programme and offers suggestions for improved curriculum design.

This study was conducted in the Language Centre (LC) at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman, to explore how the use of online and traditional materials are perceived by stakeholders. It employed a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. The study involved 277 level-three students enrolled in the language foundation programme and 13 teachers teaching this level. Two sampling stages were used for selection: systematic sampling (using both quota and systematic sampling methods) and purposive sampling for the whole population. Questionnaires and interviews were employed as the primary data-gathering methods. Quantitative data were analysed through calculation of mean scores that allowed the researcher to develop a mutual framework for comparison. Qualitative data were analysed via a content analysis approach in which key themes were identified from words and sentences. Most of the interview respondents supported technology integration in education; though a lack of computers, as well as low motivation and limited familiarity with online courses were among the challenges noted by the students. Overall, most of the students and instructors involved in the study reported positive

attitudes towards the use of both online and traditional learning materials for supporting language teaching.

### **Keywords**

*Technology integration, online learning, traditional materials, language teaching, Moodle, MReader*

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

### **1.1. Introduction**

The importance of English as the ‘the language of international communication’ (Svetlana & Vladimir, 2014, p 1), including in higher education, has never been more assured. These authors state that mastering the language allows both linguistic and cultural barriers to be overcome. Of relevance these days, more so than the importance of English, is the best method of learning the language. The development of digital technology has caused a shift from conventional ways of teaching and learning towards more modern approaches. These new technologies include both online and physical forms that now have the capacity to revolutionise education. Twenty years ago, language teachers began adopting new approaches including student-centred learning, online-based learning, blended learning and teaching strategies, and networked learning (Biggs, 2001).

The different methods of teaching that educators have adopted due to the advent of new technology are arguably more effective in some contexts (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Student-centred learning, for example, has become far more widespread since the Internet was launched. This has moved the focus of the lessons from the teachers to the learners, and it often makes use of learner-created content for learning purposes. The model is becoming increasingly popular around the world (Jacobs & Renandya, 2016). Taking advantage of online tools, educators may base a lesson around animations scripted and digitally created by students. Blended learning uses online materials to complement traditional face-to-face teaching and learning processes (Sharma & Barrett, 2008). MReader and Moodle are two common platforms that provide various online learning materials to tutors and learners outside the typical classroom context to aid student-centred and blended learning (Garrett, 2009; Alavi & Keyvanshekouh, 2012). MReader was developed by Thomas Robb, hosted by the Extensive Reading Foundation, to monitor

extensive reading through online quizzes ([www.mreader.org](http://www.mreader.org)). Moodle, originally developed in 2002 by Martin Dougiamas, is an open source online learning management system offering a range of learning tools ([www.moodle.org](http://www.moodle.org)). Sharma and Barrett (2008) assert that, as a result of these tools and knowledge of new approaches, teachers have begun to adopt a variety of blended teaching styles in order to improve learners' performances.

Technological advancement has shaped learning and teaching styles in Oman just as it has done elsewhere. Oman's Ministry of National Economy (2006) cites education as the key driver of the economy towards sustainable growth, and this has influenced the Omani government to implement several policies through its legislative branch to improve the national education sector. As a result, it is hoped that students gaining a tertiary education will help transform the country into a knowledge-based economy (Ministry of National Economy, 2006), which Nour (2014) defines as an economy in which technology, learning, and information are the most significant contributors. This is in contrast to a resource-based economy in which natural resources (such as oil, in Oman) are the most important contributors. As the rapid evolution of the education sector in Oman plays a crucial role in the state's long-term development plans, the government has welcomed the use of online materials to complement the teaching and learning process (Al Balushi & Griffiths, 2013).

Educators in Oman have long focused on traditional, teacher-centred approaches to teaching (Arden-Close, 1999). However, results have been poor and researchers have argued that education systems at all levels in Oman would benefit from 'integrating employability skills, including English language proficiency and communicative competence, into them' (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018, chapter 5, para 6). Oman, which was under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos for 40 years, until 2019, has not shied away from making changes in keeping with global education trends. In fact, many policies have been formulated and curricula reformed in an attempt to keep

pace with current philosophies, such as moving from ‘traditional teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning’ and focusing on ‘learn[ing] how to learn and acquire the tools for life-long learning’ (Alkaaf et al., 2011, p. 1). For the last two decades, the main education initiative driving educational reform by the Oman Ministry of Education has been a market-oriented system of education (Al Balushi & Griffiths, 2013). According to Lucas et al. (2008), market-oriented education sees not only the skills that a learner develops as the core of education, but also the eventual use for those skills in the workplace.

The level of English that learners acquire in any instructional setting depends on the aptitude and ability of the students, as well as the level of both students’ and teachers’ enthusiasm for and use of different teaching materials and modes of delivery (Jared, 2014). The goal of a student-centred curriculum such as that promoted – though not necessarily implemented – by the Oman Ministry of Education is to allow both students and instructors the freedom to choose the best practices, depending on their needs (Al Balushi & Griffiths, 2013). The result of this kind of focus, according to Dooley and Murphrey (2000), is that students improve their subject knowledge, as well as advancing their communication competencies and autonomy, thereby improving their employability and future prospects.

English-language teaching institutions must make decisions about the materials to use to best support instruction. One such decision concerns whether to use conventional or online materials and in what ratio. This choice depends on an institution’s understanding of the effectiveness of the materials on offer for fulfilling the needs of teachers and students. Moreover, the decision has to be based on the relevance of the online or traditional learning resources for the cultural and educational preferences of learners and instructors (Bailey, 2014). Hence, the selection of the most effective learning resources depends on the perceptions of both students and instructors (Jared, 2014). Barnard et al. (2009) discuss the rapid growth of supplementary online

learning materials to support traditional forms of instruction. They state that, since the 1990s, institutions have increasingly offered distance-learning courses, delivered wholly online via websites. These types of website have developed considerably over the years, increasing elements of interactivity and autonomy to assist learners in making the most of the online learning materials. Internet-based courses are useful as they offer students learning environments in a range of fields that overcome time and distance barriers through communication technologies such as messaging, video conferencing, and collaborative online tools (Armstrong, 2011). According to Atkinson (2008) the mode and content of teaching is undoubtedly affected by this method of presentation, as the teacher and students' perceptions of the teaching environment when they are physically separated and interaction is through a digital medium are fundamentally different to those in a classroom context. Atkinson (2008) maintains that students' perceptions of online learning materials can be at odds with the teacher's view of the educational experience that they believe they have created for their learners. However, research into online learning has typically focused on learners and the design of the learning context, rather than on teachers (Atkinson 2008; Lowenthal, 2016). Therefore, it would be useful to question the role and perceptions of the teacher as a facilitator in an online learning context, as one would examine their role in a classroom setting. Similarly, Barnard et al. (2009) believe that studies on learning and involvement from conventional learning models can inform understanding of online teaching.

In relation to curriculum design, it is vital to consider the perceptions of both teachers and learners, as they are the key stakeholders in the learning process. According to Doskocil (2008), various stakeholders take part in formulating curriculum design, but the task of implementation remains with teachers. Doskocil (2008) argues that most teachers look at the curriculum as their domain because it needs to closely align with the goals with which they have been tasked. Broekkamp et al. (2002) also conclude that the responsibility for implementing the curriculum and hence

promoting the learning process rests with teachers, but they stress that teachers and students perceive curriculum design differently. A learner often perceives a curriculum as something that is passively received and which comes with obligations to perform (Tomilson, 2008). Therefore, in many cases, and especially in Oman, the learners are tasked with achieving learning outcomes as outlined in a curriculum whose design and implementation is tasked to a teacher (Al Balushi & Griffiths, (2013).

Of course, many educational institutions have changed dramatically over time, with some researchers, such as Cole (2008), discussing the situation in the US, even suggesting that electronic study might push traditional mediums of education such as schools and classrooms to extinction. His work was designed to help reach students of all backgrounds and he began by questioning teachers and students on their perceptions of various factors, including the use of conventional and e-learning materials. He found that teachers and students have very different perceptions on their use. He and others have noted that extensive use of particular types of learning materials can result in the alienation of some students, which may undermine their social and academic achievement (Cole, 2008; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Hence, it is important to determine the most effective materials for creating an inclusive and positive learning environment; and Tomilson (2008) claims this can be done by researching students and teachers' understanding of particular materials and their perceptions of their use.

Identifying the most appropriate learning tools is challenging because of students and instructors' varying abilities and knowledge, as well as their different levels of interest in using particular learning resources. This is made yet more difficult by claims that curricula should employ a variety of resources so that students and teachers are afforded some choice as to which tool best suits their demands, capabilities, and interests (Aragon, 2010; Doskocil, 2008). Jared (2014) argues that there is a need for evaluation of the effectiveness of the materials (both in

comparison with others and in combination), claiming that although some students prefer specific materials, be they online or conventional, the implications of neglecting others must also be considered.

When establishing an English language programme, it is important that both types of learning methods and resources are considered (Mayer, 2004), and an English Language foundation programme is no different returned.

## **1.2. Background to the study**

This section describes the unique conditions under which tertiary language education in the Sultanate of Oman is provided, as well as the role of language centres (LCs) in higher educational institutions in general and the role of the LC at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in particular. The purpose of this section is to provide insights into the course examined in this study (the level three foundation English at the LC, SQU) to situate it in a broader context. The aspects discussed include the pathways available to Omani high school graduates wishing to study English language courses, the placement of students in different levels, descriptions of each of the levels, and the materials (both conventional and online) used to teach these students.

### **1.2.1. Education in the Omani context**

The Sultanate of Oman is an Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member country situated in the Middle East. The primary language of communication is Arabic. It is a developing country that has witnessed tremendous social changes over the past few decades. Prior to 1970, the country had only three schools and a total of 909 male students. However, when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, ascended to power in 1970, he set about revolutionising education in the Sultanate, with a goal of universal access to education for both genders. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Day

on 18 November 1972, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said highlighted the renewed importance of education, saying, ‘The important thing is that there should be education, even under the shadow of trees’ (Al-Issa & Al Bulushi, 2011), thereby emphasising the need to break the chains of ignorance using any resources available. Since then, the educational system has been transformed. By 1995, there were 1,000 schools, accommodating 469,849 male and female students (Al Musawi, 2010A).

### **1.2.2. Traditional learning in the Omani context**

Historically, education in Oman has been dominated by Quranic schools, with a total dependence upon memorisation, rote learning, and repetition (The World Bank Report, 2013; Peterson, 2005). Until 1970 in Oman, all school students and teachers were male. Teachers acted as the sole conveyers of information and ‘formal assessments dominated’ (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012, p. 143). Oman continues to be dominated by Islamic beliefs, and learning methods continue to be focused on an Islamic system of memorisation, with more structured teaching and a greater emphasis on memorisation than seen among its Western counterparts (Al-Saadi, 2011).

Perhaps owing to this historical context, a significant proportion of students, from primary to tertiary, still lack motivation for independent learning and remain narrowly preoccupied with grades (Al-Ani, 2013; Al Musawi, 2010A). Hence, Al-Ani (2013) states that while striving for a sustainable future, Oman is still grappling, at all levels, with entrenched, traditional, pen and paper, teacher-centric, and memorisation-dominant methods of education. She adds that these educational methods are incapable of meeting diverse learning needs or producing young people equipped to thrive in the workforce. In spite of this, the use of conventional materials in institutions of higher learning is expected to persist, as the government and most institutions have invested heavily in textbooks and other conventional materials (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018).



### **1.2.3. Education in Oman: structure, policy, and philosophy**

Education policies in Oman reflect the constitution of the state and the directives of the Sultan. The primary aim is to provide quality education for all, in the hopes of modernising the country as it seeks to meet the challenges brought about by globalisation (Al Balushi & Griffiths, 2013). The philosophy of the Omani education system is based on educational, national, and Islamic principles (Ministry of Education & The World Bank, 2013). It aims to nurture the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development of students, while preparing them for future challenges by equipping them with critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The policies of the Omani educational system are under the auspices of the education council, currently chaired by the Diwan of Royal Court and comprised of 15 members, who represent different government bodies across Oman. Under the council, the education sector is controlled in the various ministries, with the Ministry of Higher Education at the tertiary level, the Ministry of Manpower at the vocational level, and the school level run by the Ministry of Education (MoE) (Ministry of Education & The World Bank, 2013).

Moreover, the Omani constitution classifies education as a functional prerequisite of every citizen and provides free education from grades 1-12 (MoE, 2014). The World Bank, in 2001, lauded the Omani system for its achievements in spreading and providing education, in the transformation from its humble beginnings (Al Barwani & Baily, 2016).

### **1.2.4. Challenges and responses to policy reforms**

According to Lightfoot (2014), the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has presented policymakers in the Arabian Gulf with new challenges, including globalisation, increasing regional and global competition, internal pressure (in the form of ‘religion and local cultures’, p. 18), and a desire to

develop a knowledge-based economy. These challenges have led policymakers to reconsider the focus and priorities of the education system. Oman, like other developing countries, has been buffeted by the effects of globalisation, which include increased inequality, dilution of the local culture, and homogenised education reform (The World Bank, 2001; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010); and the education sector has changed, both directly and indirectly, as a result. This influence is evident from the implementation of the basic education system in 1998, when major reforms were made in response to technological, economic, and knowledge-based economy challenges (Al'Abri, 2011). The purpose of these reforms was to improve the performance of schools – and thus learners – and to equip them with skills that would make them competitive, both locally and internationally.

In pursuit of a competitive advantage, Omani policymakers prioritised the modernisation of the education system to meet the standards set by internationally accredited organisations such as the World Bank (Al-Barwani & Osman, 2011). At times, comparisons at the international level have been unfavourable. Two studies – the trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS) and the programme for international reading literacy study (PIRLS) – report that the scores of Omani candidates fall well below global results, with students performing as poorly as those in other North African and neighbouring Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Pritchett, 2013). According to Pritchett, despite the relatively high spending on education in Oman, the numbers of students capable of reading, writing, and solving mathematics problems to an acceptable level remains low.

In 1995, the Omani Ministry of Education prepared a report on the implementation of new education reforms, focusing on human resources development; and in 1997, the Minister of Education at the 'consultation council' stressed the importance of the reform and shared the proposed amendments with members (Al-Issa, & Al-Bulushi, 2012). The amendments included

changing the structure of the Ministry, revising educational aims, abolishing afternoon schools, and establishing a unified 10-year free education system with two cycles (four years for cycle 1 and six years for cycle 2) for all children of school age. The Oman school curriculum, based on the Kuwaiti and Qatari education systems pre-1995, was replaced by a national curriculum in an attempt to enhance the quality of education. This new curriculum introduced a multitude of new learning methods to the educational institutions (Al-Issa, & Al-Bulushi, 2012).

Besides curricula reform, the Oman Ministry of Education has also had to contend with a rapidly increasing number of students graduating from secondary schools every year and seeking places in institutions of higher learning. According to the Oman National Center for Statistics and Information (2015), the number of graduates increases by around 14% a year; and in 2019, there were 40,380 graduates (The Annual Educational Statistics Book 2018/2019). This has led to the acceptance of nongovernmental players in higher education; and from the moment the door was first opened to private investment, the sector has seen steady growth. The Sultanate now has more than 50 public and private higher education institutions (HEIs). The Ministry of Higher Education continues to offer students scholarships to study either at SQU (where Omani undergraduates pay no fees) or abroad. At present, Omanis are studying overseas on scholarships in Australia, New Zealand, the US, the UK, France, and Germany. Almost all other tertiary institutions in Oman require students to pay fees.

#### **1.2.5. The role of language centres (LCs)**

Due to what many perceive as the failure of Omani high schools to provide students with sufficient English proficiency, almost all tertiary institutions in Oman have a compulsory foundation – or ‘bridging’ – course requirement for incoming students (Al-Mahrooqi, Tuzlukova, & Denman 2016). Almost all institutions of higher learning have LCs, with English as the medium of

instruction in the majority of cases. These are intended to help students raise their levels of competency in English, mathematics, and information and communications technology (ICT) to levels sufficient to complete their degree courses (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). To ensure that these learners are offered effective instruction, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) has been tasked with creating and overseeing standards for these programmes (Tuzlukova et al., 2019). These foundation LCs are responsible not only for helping students before they begin their undergraduate degrees, but also for providing support for all other departments in matters related to language use and acquisition. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education to ensure that no students who apply for courses in Omani universities and colleges are rejected on the grounds of poor English language proficiency (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Communication plays an important role for a university in its role as a creator and disseminator of knowledge, thus foundation LCs are vital for ensuring the functioning of tertiary institutions in Oman. The importance of English as the only official foreign language in Oman – essential for researching, finding employment, and gaining social status (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012) – combined with the chronic underperformance of secondary schools (Al-Hadhrami & Amzat, 2012), together mean that these foundation programme LCs promise to be an important feature of Omani universities for a while to come.

The Omani LCs have several roles beyond merely the instruction of English, one of which is diagnostic. As Lucas et al. (2008) point out, learners often join universities from different linguistic backgrounds, and it is important to determine whether they have the required linguistic skills for English medium instruction. To measure the language ability of students entering university and to group the students based on their language proficiency, a language placement test is usually offered (Kumar, 2006; Tomlinson, 2011). Another objective of the LCs in Omani

universities, according to Tuzlukova et al. (2019), who draw from Dewey (1980) and Cornell (2002), is to develop the social skills of students by providing a sense of community and promoting interaction and social cohesion in university life. The theory here is that as students interact and share ideas with others via a shared foreign language, they will develop bonds that will help them navigate their new academic and social environments.

#### **1.2.6. The language centre (LC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU)**

Located in Muscat, the capital city of Oman, SQU holds a unique position as the only public university in the country. It offers a wide variety of courses and is made up of 10 colleges (e.g., engineering, medicine, science, etc.). Over the years, this university has grown tremendously. According to Al Balushi and Griffiths (2013), it had only 500 students in 1986 when it opened. According to its 2019 annual report, there are now more than 15,000 students enrolled. Today, SQU offers a wide range of courses in its 10 colleges and seven research centres, awarding bachelor's degrees and higher diplomas, as well as master's degrees and doctorates. The vast majority of these students are from Oman, but there are also a small number from elsewhere (SQU, 2019). To ensure that students meet the requirements of their colleges, the university has a LC that works in collaboration with the colleges to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary language skills.

The individuals offered entry to SQU are top-performing students, representing each governorate in Oman. The numbers of male and female students from each governorate offered places is balanced to avoid a disproportionate number of females entering the university owing to their markedly better overall high school academic performance (Osman et al., 2016). This selection policy results in students with a very wide variation in English language abilities – from beginners to near those with native-speaker levels (Tuzlukova et al., 2019).

The English language courses on offer at the LC are designed based on well-defined learning outcomes that reflect the skills and strategies learners are expected to have acquired upon completion. In 2016, management restructuring brought the LC under the umbrella of the Centre for Preparatory Studies, which is also responsible for mathematics and IT foundation programmes. The Centre for Preparatory Studies is the largest foundation programme in the Sultanate of Oman, with almost 2,500 new students each year (SQU, 2019). (This study concerns the perceptions of only those teachers and students on the English courses, with mathematics and IT beyond the scope of this research.) Once accepted to study at SQU, students are tested and either placed on an English course (levels 1-6) or informed that their English is sufficient that they do not have to take a course. The students begin by sitting the English placement test (PT) and then, depending on their scores, possibly the English exit test (ET). The PT is a proficiency test that places the students into six well-defined levels based on their score. These levels are benchmarked against the international English language testing system (IELTS), a global language proficiency test (IELTS.org, 2020), and the common European framework of reference (CEFR), a standard for describing language ability in Europe and around the world (Council of Europe, n.d). The ET is for more finely grained decision-making and it is given to students scoring over a certain threshold on the PT to determine whether they can be exempted from the English language courses. Hence, students can gain approval to begin their credit courses by one of three means: passing the ET by achieving a certain score; completing the foundation programme English courses up to level six; or presenting an IELTS certificate band 5, with a minimum of 4.5 on each of the four components of listening, speaking, writing, and reading.

The FPEL is further subdivided into the foundation programme for English for humanities (FPEH) and the foundation programme for English for sciences (FPES), and, as stated earlier, each programme consists of six levels, with a gradual increase in difficulty from one level to the

next. The pathway for student progression is shown in Table 1 (below). This outlines the possible courses in six contiguous levels (seven, including credit English classes).

*Table 1: Pathways to complete the six English foundation programme levels at the language centres (LCs) in Sultan Qaboos University (SQU)*

<b>English level</b>	<b>Course codes</b>		
<b>1</b>	FPEL 0120 (next course is 0340)		
<b>2</b>	FPEL0230 (next course is 0340)		
<b>3</b>	FPEL0340 (next course is 0560)		
<b>4</b>	FPEH/S 0450 (next course is 0603)		
<b>5</b>	FPEH/S 0560 (next course is Credit)		
<b>6</b>	FPEH/S 0603	FPEH/S0604 (writing-focused, for students testing at level 6)	FPEH/S0600 (summer)
<b>Credit language centre (LC) courses</b>	Credit courses		

Students in FPEL 0120, 0230, and 0340 courses take only English courses, whereas those in FPEH/S 0450, 0560, and 0603 study mathematics and IT alongside their English courses. Each English course (except for level six) covers two levels (e.g., 0120 covers levels one and two, then students move to level three). To equip students with the skills and the language required for their specialisation in college, FPEH/S 0450, 0560, and 0603 courses are offered under two departments, the Department of English for Sciences (DoES) and the Department of English for Humanities (DoEH).

By law, incoming Omani tertiary students must be allowed two years in a foundation programme to reach the level required to study in their colleges (Ministry of Education, 2014). Hence, courses are 15 weeks long (except level six) and consist of 18 hours per teaching week (for a total of 270 classroom hours). Progression from one course to the next is determined by a combination of continuous assessments (e.g., quizzes, assignments, presentations), midterm tests, and final exams. According to SQU (2019), level one students are ‘false beginners’, with almost no English. A level-two learner (elementary/beginner) has some knowledge of the English language, but they are basic users, mostly using it to fulfil personal needs. As learners progress from level three (lower intermediate) upwards, they begin to add to their vocabulary and are able to use the language increasingly independently. Students at levels four and five have begun to conceptualise and understand English language phrases and other language functions, and they have some idea of academic English. At level six (intermediate), a learner has some knowledge of the language, including its application in academia. At this level, a learner is assumed to be ready to apply the language in other areas. See Appendix D for more detailed information on these level descriptors. Jared (2014) states that the selection of resourceful learning and instructional materials to aid both teachers and students is of paramount importance. The sheer number of possibilities means that institutions must make many choices, even if they are not clearly articulated. In the following sections, some of the options available and the factors determining their selection are discussed.

### **1.2.7. The use of conventional learning materials in the global context**

Textbooks are often taken for granted, but, as Callison states, ‘No other institutional technology has had more influence on teaching over the past 100 years than the textbook’ (2003, para. 3). Swales and Feak (2000) suggest that much of the teaching that takes place in the modern world



would not be possible if it were not for the availability of textbooks in educational institutions. The advantages of using textbooks to teach languages in institutions are numerous. According to Howard and Major (2005), albeit talking from an East Asian perspective, a textbook provides the basis for the content, skills, and language practice taught in the classroom. Baumgarten (2013) says that a textbook provides students with an alternative contact with the language, in addition to interaction with teachers. Textbooks supplement instruction from teachers and enhance the quality of learning in an educational environment. For inexperienced language teachers, textbooks can serve as a training resource, guiding the organisation of the aspects of teaching that are essential for effective learning (Richards, 2001; Johnson & Christensen, 2010). Sheldon (1988) identifies three main advantages of the language textbooks. First, they provide structure and syllabuses for programmes; such that, without textbooks, it would be very difficult for learners to access content that is systematically planned and developed. In addition, textbooks help to standardise the content being delivered in different schools around the country, thereby ensuring fairness for competing students from different areas. Third, if used correctly, textbooks help governing bodies to maintain standards and – through the use of reliable materials – quality. Furthermore, according to Richards (2001), textbooks are efficient, providing an effective source of model input language for students. He argues that they are usually guided by explicitly stated principles of language learning and written by experts, which gives them – and the courses that use them – some degree of credibility.

However, textbooks have some disadvantages that limit their popularity. They can be relatively expensive, and they may fall short of meeting students' language needs or be culturally inappropriate (Baumgarten, 2013). Students and teachers have long expressed their dissatisfaction with the continued use of commercial textbooks in classrooms (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Gilmore, 2007; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2017). However, adapting commercial textbooks to

specific contexts such as Iran (Alibakshi, 2007) and Oman (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012) has, for decades, been commonplace to varying degrees. According to McDonough and Shaw (2003), even when a textbook claims to have learning objectives that align with a particular course's goals, teachers may adapt them for a variety of pedagogical reasons.

In the following section, we move to a more specific examination of the use of textbooks in Oman.

### **1.2.8. Conventional learning materials at the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) learning centre (LC)**

In the FPEL at the LC, implementation of the curriculum at different levels of the programme or course is overseen by the Curriculum Unit. Two of the Unit's main responsibilities are the development of in-house materials and the selection and use of commercially available textbooks.

The use of published materials requires very close scrutiny of the materials to verify the degree of alignment with the learning outcomes of the levels. Publishing company representatives regularly approach the head of the Unit to try and convince them of their own textbooks' suitability for their needs. The curriculum unit, therefore, has a very difficult role; but, according to Howard and Major (2005), it is an essential one, as the textbooks provide the bulk of the language-learning input a learner receives, as well as structuring the majority of the language practice that occurs in the classroom. However, as Garton and Graves (2014) state, while there has been much research into the design and selection of materials, much less attention has been given to how they are used.

Currently, the level-three English course at the LC (the focus of this study) has classes split into paired skills, namely reading/writing and listening/speaking. It utilises various learning materials, such as commercial textbooks and both in-house and online-access products. Jeng-Shyang et al. (2010) assert that in-house materials are very useful for supplementing the content from online sources and textbooks and they help address the gap between published sources and the syllabus

requirements. There are guidelines for teachers for designing in-house learning materials to ensure their effectiveness; but according to Bates (2005), speaking from a British perspective, in-house materials remain variable in quality.

The members of the LC Curriculum Unit at SQU receive training by visiting curriculum experts in the production of in-house materials. Classroom teachers at the LC also receive training and produce well-received in-house materials. For example, one writing book entitled, '*Explore Writing*', has been assigned an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) and made available for use outside SQU. Several institutions in Oman now use '*Explore Writing*' and teachers generally find it very beneficial in teaching writing, due to its vocabulary and grammar, targeted to Omani students, and its culturally relevant and interesting content. Following the success of '*Explore Writing*', LC teachers have attempted to design in-house listening and speaking materials, though these attempts have not been as successful. This lack of success may be due to the production skills required to produce such materials. In addition, some researchers have found that writers of materials for English for specific purposes, English for academic purposes, and general contexts are lacking in terms of their theoretical, practical, and pedagogical approaches (Waterman, 2015, p. 183). The English foundation programme, therefore, continues to use commercial textbooks for some skills, and the listening and speaking in-house book is used by teachers as supplementary material.

### **1.3. e-Learning in the global context**

The proportion of classrooms using technology continues to rise, especially in the US (Tondeur et al., 2017), and reliance on e-learning as a component of instruction is growing alongside (Masters, 2019). The use of different forms of learning materials has brought about mixed reactions from instructors and other stakeholders in education around the world. The perceptions

of teachers and students are especially diverse (Golanics & Nussbaum, 2008). Past successes with different materials may lead to preferences for one or another, which over time may cement the way teachers and students view various learning materials. These preferences may be manifest in the curricula design and implementation and they can strongly influence the learning that takes place (Lau et al., 2018). Anderson (2008), building on the research of Anderson and Garrison (1998) and Moore (1989), reaches the conclusion that, for effective language classes in any context, at least one of the following relationships must be of sufficient quality: student-student, student-teacher, or student-content. Anderson's model also includes less learning-centric interactions, namely teacher-teacher, teacher-content, and content-content (p. 46). He claims that, for higher level students in particular, high quality student-content interaction is only possible with online material due to its ability to distinguish between the backgrounds and cognitive abilities of learners at different levels in the same class. This personalisation – along with the freedom from time constraints – are the most important characteristics of e-learning, according to Bonk and Graham (2012), but they are not always prioritised in the design process. If instructors only use conventional materials, Anderson (2008) argue, the resulting homogeneous nature of the course will lessen its quality; hence, there is a need to develop guidelines on combining instructional materials for maximum effect.

The explosion in use of computers and mobile devices in recent decades has inspired a blended approach to learning, which is much more practical but far more complex (Dorskocil, 2008). While quality traditional materials can structure instruction and present interesting content, online materials can open up a plethora of options in terms of presenting and personalising content in a manner that books cannot (Ferris, 2011). For example, developments in technology have made video, adaptive quizzes, and fora widespread options for teachers.

According to Keengwe and Kidd (2010), the development and thoughtful combination of

materials for both conventional and online learning is fundamental to the design process of curricula for higher education programmes and courses. The researchers add that innovative online learning materials can compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication between teachers and students in distance programmes (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). However, Anderson (2008) observes that conventional forms of learning and online learning are not fundamentally different, in that internet-based sources replace students' interactions with the instructor and the traditional learning material. Therefore, as Emerald (2013) also argues, instructional design principles, at their core, have not changed, even with the advent of technology. This is echoed by Chang (2009), who states that institutions should provide learning tools that reflect the evolving understanding of the tools' effectiveness and ability to meet the needs of instructors and learners – regardless of whether they are online. Chang asserts that these needs are articulated based on cultural, educational, and personal differences, including past successes and failures, which play a large role in English language institutions' decisions about providing online or traditional materials. Arguments such as this underscore the significance of learners and instructors' perceptions in determining the most favourable curricula.

There are numerous advantages to using online materials to deliver content to students. Some argue that online materials are convenient and they enable students to learn at their own pace, relatively free of anxiety (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). Online materials may also improve motivation. Jeng-Shyang et al. (2010) suggest that 'gamification' in e-learning is especially helpful for enhancing learner engagement, which, in turn, enhances retention rates. They argue that the thousands of interactive educational tools currently available on the market are making it easier for teachers with very limited ICT knowledge to introduce gamification into e-learning platforms.

Garrison (2017) proposes that the most important skills for students in higher learning in the US are problem-solving, collaboration, and critical thinking, and these can be enhanced by online learning. However, Garrison cautions that, to facilitate this, designers of online content must create critical communities (Anderson & Garrison, 1995) and personalised e-learning experiences (Roberts-Mahoney et al., 2016). The reason students are not developing these skills, according to Garrison (2017), is that poorly designed or managed online course components limit opportunities for higher level skills development.

### **1.3.1. e-Learning in the Omani Context**

Despite the widespread adoption of IT in schools across the globe, public schools in Oman have historically not been well equipped with computers for language-learning (Al-Issa, 2006b; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012), and nor have Omani tertiary institutions (Al-Senaidi et al., 2009). This is despite the Oman Ministry of Education stating that ICT is essential for improving the quality of education (Jose, 2015). The use of computers for learning in Omani public schools has expanded in recent years, as technology-assisted learning gains popularity and the necessary technological infrastructure such as internet connectivity becomes more widespread (Al-Senaidi et al., 2009). Increasing competition for university spaces has led to demands from many in Oman for the government to allow more high school graduates to enter HEIs (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). This was even a core demand of protesters during the 2011 Arab Spring (Worrall, 2012). With improvements in internet access and e-learning, some have suggested the expansion of distance and electronic learning systems to alleviate the problem of limited university places (Nair & Patil, 2012). Over the last decade, most Omani educational institutions at all levels have adopted the concept of e-learning to some degree, with at least some components of the courses presented to students via the internet. Some institutions are even offering courses fully online, either as

independent study or with the assistance of a teacher and electronic communication, as part of the Oman distance education programme (Al-Musawi, 2002). The Ministry of Education reports that distance education is bringing new types of learning to isolated students and providing a lifeline for those wanting to learn specialised subjects (Ministry of Information, 2000). Some Omani HEIs are affiliated with overseas universities in India, the US, the UK, and Australia, through which they provide their students with distance learning courses and programmes. However, one of the most crucial aspects of a sound distance education solution – besides hardware and software – is the recruitment of trained teachers who are not only comfortable with computers and other technology, but have strong pedagogical knowledge in the use of technology to help students learn more easily and effectively (Al-Musawi, 2002). Planning for ICT-based teaching, therefore, must begin long before the teaching is offered to ensure that it is properly integrated and used to its full potential.

### **1.3.2. e-Learning at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU)**

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) first built the infrastructure required for the internet in 1997, and the country's use of e-learning has grown rapidly ever since. Akinyemi (2002) notes that the adoption of web-based instruction through Web-CT (an online learning management system) marked the beginning of a new era of instructional delivery at SQU. He predicted that this transition would be successful, provided the challenges of the new technologies were surmounted. Al-Khanjari et al. (2005) later conclude that web-based instruction, with an efficient course management system to supplement classroom education, would be a good alternative for SQU instructors. At that time, Web-CT was investigated in the context of classroom education and found to be a useful platform, particularly for SQU undergraduates. The researchers suggest that students trained in e-learning are better equipped to become life-long learners and more able to

apply their skills to solving problems in the workforce. Naqvi (2005) shows that SQU students exposed to the WebCT online learning environment have positive attitudes towards the digital programme, as well as better learning and understanding of the course material. The University switched from WebCT to 'Moodle' (modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment) for the delivery of e-learning in 2007 (Gawande, 2016). Moodle is an open source learning management programme that users can customise to their context. According to Brandl (2005), it was designed using a social-constructivist-influenced approach to learning, such as that championed by Vygotsky, who argues that knowledge is co-constructed by learners who are engaged in the process of learning together (Vygotsky, 1980). It allows the use of quizzes, fora, journals, wikis, and assignments to enable collaboration and interactions between students and teachers.

The Centre for Information Systems (CIS) at SQU is responsible for security, equipment, drafting computing policies, and enforcing information protection rules to guide students and staff in using on-campus IT systems (Sultan Qaboos University, 2002a and 2002b). The CIS regulates the use of all computer-related resources, including hardware, software, networks, and any other support facilities. Thus, it plays a key role in the implementation of e-learning in SQU courses. Alongside its degree courses, SQU offers third-party Cisco training programmes, which provide e-learning-based, instructor-led IT certification courses in subjects such as networking, and routing and switching. Other higher education universities in Oman also host such IT certification programmes and operate under the regional Cisco academy at SQU. This has expanded the opportunities for students and employees to gain vendor-based certification via e-learning (Information Technology Authority, 2007).

The University has also developed distance learning components for most of its undergraduate courses (Al Kindi et al., 2006). The use of IT for teaching any part of these courses



at SQU comes with a set of challenges; for example, Al-Musawi (2010a) highlights significant issues related to using instructional and learning technologies at the College of Education. One issue he mentions is that most of the students using these need supervision, as they care more about passing exams than acquiring knowledge, and they have limited experience using technology for learning as they are graduates of schools in which more traditional teaching methods are used. Internal reports from the College of Education (Al-Musawi, 2010b), as well as external reviews (Hannafin, 2008), contend that students generally do not read widely, they struggle with basic internet searching skills, and they lack experience in and motivation for independent learning. According to these reports, limited prior reading experience is predominantly due to cultural and linguistic factors. Moreover, learners' lack of ability in reading English has been attributed to the relatively high number of teacher contact hours that students have each week at the expense of extensive reading (Saleem et al., 2016). Al Musawi (2010b) claims that the general language weakness amongst the majority of learners limits the amount of reading and the depth of classroom instruction. Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness of the need for training among SQU students in becoming independent learners, with strategies implemented to enable them to become effective learners outside the classroom (e.g., Al'Abri, 2011; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012; Saleem et al., 2016)

Despite these negatives, there are reasons to be optimistic about SQU undergraduates' online learning (Al Kindi et al., 2006). It has been reported that most faculty members who use the internet in their instruction find web-assisted instruction to be as effective as face-to-face instruction, in terms of student achievement (Al Musawi & Abelraheem, 2004). Due to what Gawande (2016) calls the 'undeniable practical benefits', almost all institutions of higher learning in Oman are now shifting some focus towards online learning for staff and students. The LC at SQU is no different; teachers with a background in ICT – or who want to learn – are being

encouraged to develop online learning materials. Online materials are designed following consideration of the various combinations of in-house materials and commercial textbooks available for students. In most cases at the LC, the online materials are designed in the manner recommended by Anderson (2008), who, speaking from a North American perspective, suggests that the e-learning components of a course should aim to address the shortcomings of the conventional teaching materials.

A variety of online and conventional materials are used at the LC. Online materials in use include MReader (an extensive reading quiz platform); vocabulary learning courses (through Moodle); portfolios; and texts, videos, and quizzes supplied through Moodle. MReader and Moodle are both freely available, open source, online platforms tailored at the class-, course-, and programme-level to aid learning. For level three, most teachers use only MReader- and Moodle-based activities. The conventional materials used to teach at this level include two textbooks published by National Geographic, one titled, '*Explore Reading*', and the other a listening and speaking textbook titled, '*Pathways*'. Students also use extensive hard-copy reading books borrowed from the LC library collection and, as mentioned previously, '*Explore Writing*' – a writing and study skills textbook developed in-house. The following sections describe these materials a little more in-depth.

### **MReader**

There is much research backing the contention that extensive reading is highly effective for improving many aspects of language proficiency (Yamashita, 2008); hence, most LC courses include compulsory extensive reading programmes. MReader is one of the most popular online learning quiz sites, designed for institutions with extensive reading programmes (Al Damen, 2018). It allows teachers to verify students' understanding of graded reader texts, using a quiz

delivery and management system. Verification is performed through online quizzes comprising 10 questions drawn from sets of 20-30 items. Students at SQU borrow suitably difficult readers from the LC library, read them, then take tests on them, and receive marks calculated by the MReader grading system. MReader allows teachers to control the difficulty of the books that students can borrow and the frequency of the quizzes they take; and it enables students to compare their cumulative reading totals – in terms of books and words read – with those of other students (Al Damen, 2018).

### **Moodle vocabulary**

It has long been accepted that the number of words a student knows is reflective of their speaking, writing, reading, and listening abilities (Laufer & Nation, 1999). ‘Moodle vocabulary’ – also known as ‘What’s the right word?’ for foundation programme level three – is an online course accessible as part of the Moodle platform, which enables students to learn new words. The course was designed by LC teachers with expertise in developing online materials. It provides isolated vocabulary practice as well as ‘vocabulary-in-context’ activities, focusing on short reading passages and listening skills. Students complete the assigned exercises and obtain a grade. The pass mark is 85%. If the student obtains less than that, they can repeat the test until they pass.

### **Moodle students**

In this optional Moodle course, students can complete extra activities related to the content covered in the classroom. The course was designed by LC teachers who had taught the course and were experienced in preparing online materials. The course is not graded, but some teachers assign exercises from it as homework to encourage students to revisit work done in class. Exercises cover topics such as grammar points (e.g., past tense and ‘to + *infinitive*’), writing functions (e.g., topic sentences and transitions), and study skills (e.g., online research search terms and library virtual tours).

#### **1.4. Rationale for the study**

In the last 20 years, there has been a rapid growth in the worldwide availability of both traditional and online English learning materials (Howard & Major, 2005; Stahl, 2009; Swales & Feak, 2000). This has been fuelled by the rise of English as the primary language of education at many English-medium universities around the world, in countries where English is not the native language (Svetlana & Vladimir, 2014). The positives of online learning may make it appear to be an ideal method for conducting entire language courses; but Garrison (2017) argues that it is too early to discard traditional face-to-face learning completely, arguing that opportunities for learning would be lost. In reviewing the comparisons of online and conventional teaching, it seems the general consensus is that, with current technology, a blend of the two is most effective for learning. Dziuban et al. (2018) call this kind of blended approach the ‘new normal’ in US higher education. However, as concluded by Emelyanova and Voronina (2017), ‘more research should be devoted to exploring learners’ attitudes and perceptions, and in identifying the factors that should be analyzed and taken into account while integrating online education into language instruction’ (2017, p. 37).

According to Sivaraman et al. (2014), for Omani students, effective English communication skills facilitates educational achievement in university by enhancing collaboration and access to information and networks. Furthermore, Bouchefra (2015), speaking in an Algerian context, asserts that poor English skills, especially in writing and reading, can create problems all the way through a university career that are not easily overcome due to time constraints. He argues for the use of a framework known as ‘purposeful eclecticism’ to overcome this problem of low performance, with a wide variety of approaches chosen and combined to form a comprehensive strategy. This approach shares many similarities with the combined delivery approaches in LC

English foundation classes. However, the question remains as to the ideal combination of face-to-face and online instruction. It is also important to identify how students and teachers view the materials used in these types of instruction. This study makes use of educational theories on the importance of selecting the most suitable teaching material for a particular context and incorporating the perceptions of teachers and students of the learning experience. It draws on educational theories of independence and autonomy (Wedemeyer, 1981), industrialisation (Peters, 1988), interaction and communication (Simonson & Schlosser (2009), and behaviourism and constructivism to investigate the relative advantages – according to both teachers and students – of various teaching materials.

This study has value for people teaching on foundation programmes in Oman, as it investigates the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the impact of course design decisions and it offers suggestions as to the most effective aspects of a blended instructional design. Building on the work of Ahmad and Al-Khanjari (2011), who examined Omani learners' views on the use of online learning materials, this dissertation investigates the views of Omani students and instructors of the use of online and traditional materials in relation to listening, reading, and writing skills development. Furthermore, this study seeks to determine how the level-three FPEL course at the SQU LC is viewed, discussing the effects of this unique context on the results.

Al-Ani (2013), in a study conducted at SQU on students' perceptions of Moodle courses and face-to-face instruction, concludes that motivation can be significantly affected by the type of instruction and materials used. This finding underlines the importance of the current study, as students have very little time to achieve a level of English sufficient for independent study without extra assistance. There would be no benefit to offering blended learning without acknowledging the concerns of learners and teachers regarding the materials used and taking these into account

when designing the courses. Materials from various sources (online, commercially published textbooks, in-house productions, etc.) are in use in foundation programmes across Oman. Likewise, at level three at the LC, different categories of materials are used, including MReader; Moodle vocabulary; grammar activities software; and other reading, speaking, and listening activities. Al-Ani (2013) indicates that, to understand the motivation for using such materials, studies must attempt to explain what lies behind the decisions to employ them. Hence, the impetus behind this study is to give these two groups of stakeholders a voice in the future design of language courses in Oman.

### **1.5. Aims and objectives of the study**

Based in the context of level three at the LC, SQU, this study has the following aims and objectives:

- To investigate learners' and instructors' perceptions of traditional and online learning materials that support the language teaching and learning process
- To investigate the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using traditional and online publications in language teaching
- To probe the reasons for students and teachers' preferences for specific teaching materials
- To conduct a systematic study of the available literature, explaining the merits and demerits of using conventional and online materials in teaching

### **1.6. Research questions**

In light of the aims and objectives cited above, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are learners and instructors' attitudes towards the use of online and traditional learning materials to support language teaching?
2. What do learners and instructors perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of using the conventional and online materials employed in the level three language course at the learning centre?
3. To what extent do learners and instructors' beliefs influence the choice of materials at the learning centre?

### **1.7. The relevance of the study**

According to Cole (2008), the attitudes of students and teachers towards teaching materials strongly inform the decision-making related to curriculum development. The current study, it is hoped, can be used to inform the choice of instructors and curricula developers in relation to the most suitable teaching-learning materials and modes of delivery. As a result, this study could be of use to numerous stakeholders in the education system of Oman – not only students, but also teachers, material developers, policymakers, management, and higher learning institutions around the country. Over the years, researchers have tested methods of enhancing learning efficiency at all levels in Oman (e.g., REF). However, most studies have been limited to conventional methods of learning; and despite their numerous suggestions for improving the education system in the country, very little has been achieved and the quality of education remains largely the same (Carroll et al., 2009; Chapman & Miric, 2009; Martin, 2007). One reason suggested as to why results have not been very promising is that the studies have not taken technological advances into consideration or they have ignored the latest global trends in education (Al Musawi & Abdelraheem, 2004). This study goes some way towards filling this gap in the literature and provides suggestions for teachers, the government, and other stakeholders in the Omani education

sector seeking to review the blended learning options and design more effective instruction tools.

Another objective of this study is to investigate the reasons for students and teachers' preferences for certain learning materials. As a result, educational institutions, curriculum developers, and teachers may be able to identify why certain content is more effective than others and make informed decisions when selecting materials for online learning. Developers of both commercial and in-house content can employ the results of this study to remedy deficiencies and improve teacher training and accompanying materials.

This study is based on a thorough review of the available literature to explain the merits and demerits of using conventional and online materials for teaching in the Omani context. An examination of this literature is vital because it lays the foundation for analysing and situating the results and, along with the presented findings, may serve to help other researchers and otherwise interested parties.

## **1.8. Structure of the dissertation**

This dissertation is organised into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topic and supplies the background to the study. It also outlines the reasons for the study, describes the research problem, highlights the aims of the research, and presents the research questions. Chapter 2 includes an in-depth analysis of earlier research on issues germane to the topic and presents the views of different key researchers in the field. This is followed by Chapter 3, which outlines the research methods adopted in this study. The research purpose, research approach, and validity and reliability considerations form the subsections of this chapter. The findings and analysis are presented in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 contains the quantitative data analysis and discussions, and Chapter 5 outlines the qualitative data analysis and discussions. The final chapter, Chapter 6, presents the conclusions drawn from the research, highlights the implications, and provides



recommendations for maximising the benefits of language-classroom technology integration.

## **CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter discusses the research objectives and questions and evaluates the existing body of research to extract relevant key findings and theoretical contributions. The literature is evaluated and comparisons are made with the current study. Moreover, to ensure the relevance of the comparisons, there is a general focus on research in the context of Oman and the LC. The main area of investigation here is the attitudes and perceptions of teachers and students towards their learning experiences. More specifically, the literature review focuses on online learning, investigating how perceptions and attitudes are affected by the use of technology in education. This chapter also compares and contrasts online learning in relation to conventional and traditional methods of teaching. Finally, the advantages and disadvantages of using traditional and online materials for teaching in general, and language teaching in particular, as well as the reasons for teachers and students' preferences for specific materials are scrutinised.

### **2.2. Conventional learning**

Conventional learning entails physical attendance in class by a student at an educational institution. In this type of course, students are in direct contact with lecturers and possibly other academic advisors. Such a method of learning is most suitable for students who live on campus, as well as those who have limited resources in terms of computer access. Jeng-Shyang et al. (2010) describe conventional (or traditional) learning as the typical face-to-face classroom learning where students attend classes with an instructor, who is the facilitator of the learning process. Here, the learners often use commercially published and in-house textbooks as sources of information and to structure lessons. To determine the effectiveness of the learning activities, the teacher gives students formative and summative examinations that assess the learning that has taken place. Conventional language learning in the Omani high school context has received

widespread criticism. A lack of communicative language classes due to inadequate teacher training and poorly designed textbooks have been cited as reasons for tertiary students' poor English (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). These problems at secondary school (Al-Issa, 2006b) and tertiary levels (Al-Jardani, 2012a) have led many to suggest that properly designed e-learning options could improve outcomes (Venkataraman & Sivakumar, 2015).

### **2.3. Online learning**

Mohammadi et al. (2011) define 'online learning' as the use of internet-equipped, computer-based learning materials for learning. In this mode, an e-learning environment is created using a computer and other devices. The computer, in this sense, acts as a tool for providing access to learning resources as well as a means for interaction and presentation and distribution of knowledge. Mohammadi et al. (2011) say that online learning should be well-integrated and constructed in a manner that supports the learning process so as to meet learning objectives. Lowenthal and Wilson (2010) observe that the terms 'online', 'online learning', and 'e-learning' are often used interchangeably (as they are in this study) and can generally be defined as incorporating IT – and in particular the internet – into the learning process. These concepts include activities such as accessing texts and other media, practising and interacting, producing and sharing spoken or written material, obtaining feedback, and submitting assignments online. This form of education has been prevalent in most institutions of higher learning for at least 20 years, and it has been shown to contribute substantially to the learning process (O'Neill et al., 2004).

The majority of Oman's population is under the age of 25 years (Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2014), thus the government is faced with rapidly increasing numbers of high school graduates and a lack of resources, especially in higher education. It also faces challenges such as gender segregation and a lack of qualified teachers (Gwande, 2016). As a result,

the traditional system of classroom-based instruction is struggling to keep pace, and the adoption of e-learning appears to be one of the few viable solutions, with benefits in terms of instructional delivery mode (path), place, and flexibility of place and time (O'Neill et al., 2004). To understand online learning, one must consider the delineations of course and programme level. Each of these is examined in turn below.

### **2.3.1. Definitions of e-learning**

These definitions look primarily at online learning with regards to specific courses, and not entire degrees or certificate programmes. Conventionally, classroom-based courses are typically measured by the number of contact hours that learners spend with their lecturers in various forms of class meetings, such as lectures and workshops, or on other face-to-face learning activities, such as field trips, internships, and laboratory sessions. Some of these courses involve computer usage such as software simulation, engineering applications, and even design software, but they remain anchored by the time spent in face-to-face classes and are therefore considered classroom courses (Witt, 2003). Most HEIs in Oman, including SQU, offer these.

Web-based technologies are increasingly employed for offering classroom lectures and other activities to learners in remote locations (Lee et al., 2016). Web conferencing and other software can provide off-campus learners with access to a virtual classroom experience, while the usual face-to-face classroom programme is maintained for other students (Buhagiar & Potter, 2010). At times, these courses may consist of a mix of on-campus and remote students, with the on-campus students being in class face-to-face with the instructor and the remote students simultaneously participating in the lecture via technology. These are referred to as 'synchronous distributed courses' (Abdous & Yoshimura, 2010). There are also cases where online course activity complements the normal face-to-face class sessions, without reducing the number of class

meetings required for completion of the course. According to Abdous and Yoshimura (2010), where a smaller proportion of internet accessed activities supplement conventional classroom activities, the course can be described as ‘web-enhanced’. This is very similar to what Liebowitz and Frank (2011) call a ‘blended’ course, where online learning acts to complement classroom learning in an integrated fashion. ‘Blended’ is this term that this study will use to describe the hybrid style of instruction found in the SQU LC courses, where ‘the online component becomes a natural extension of traditional learning’ (Al-Ani, 2013, p 4). In this approach, some – or even most – of the course activity is carried out online; but activities such as lectures, discussions, exercises, and laboratory experiments are face-to-face (Miller et al., 2013). Blended learning is mostly suitable for students who are within commuting distance from their learning institutions. This is because although this increases flexibility in terms of learning, it does not entirely relieve students of the need to access campus facilities physically. In Oman, in the late 1990s, the LC at SQU began using blended learning, with students required to both attend classroom lectures and complete a variety of online components. Since 2003, all courses offered at the SQU LC have had a mandatory online component (Scully, 2006). Overall, according to the innovative Gawande (2015) research on the blended learning acceptance model, Omani students tend to have positive views on blended learning.

According to Miller et al. (2013), there is another form of online learning that offers both delivery modes (online and off), allowing students to select what they deem the best combination for their own learning purposes. Providing learners with this choice increases time and location flexibility. Students may choose not to attend class sessions and, instead, to utilise a learning resource centre that provides online materials and personalised assistance, accessible on demand. In most cases, this type of course is used by on-campus students who have control over when they study. These are referred to as ‘flexible mode courses’. One example is the HyFlex blended

learning model, developed at San Francisco State University. Its primary purpose is to give busy learners the option to choose their preferred mode of study (Miller et al., 2013). At the time of writing, there are no flexible course modes on offer in any Omani university programmes.

## **2.4. Theoretical framework**

This study examines the preferences, perceptions, and motivations of students and teachers regarding the use of various materials and technology for learning the English language. The study is concerned with blended learning in the Omani context; hence, the education system in Oman needs to be taken into account in any discussion of a theoretical framework, along with the role played by the SQU, and the type of materials used for instruction in the Omani education system from the high-school level and beyond.

Limiting course design decisions by drawing on just one theory may result in less effective learning. Snelbecker (1983) cautions educators facing practical course design decisions that they should not ‘limit themselves to only one theoretical position’ (p. 8). There are three learning theories of relevance here: behaviourism, constructivism, and cognitivism. These philosophical schools of thought have greatly influenced educators’ views of learning over the years (Barker, 2008; Rummel, 2008), but they are often not appropriately applied to learning (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). These theories are discussed below, especially in terms of the way they connect to instruction and curriculum design in both online (distance) and traditional learning environments.

### **2.4.1. Behaviourism**

Behaviourism, which focuses on observable and objective behaviours, has, for many years, influenced the development of curricula. Its advocates consider learning to be a process that arises from forming links in response to stimuli, creating the motivation to repeat reactions

and solidify links (Kim & Hatton, n.d.). Behaviourism looks at how learning is affected by changes in the environment and how behaviour can be controlled and predicted (Skinner, 1974). According to Sturdy and Nicoladis (2017), this theory of learning suggests that human behaviours can be explained without referring to thoughts and feelings, and that the best way to learn is to alter behavioural patterns. Learning is behaviour change, following modelled behaviour – or prompting – and reinforcement; thus, the behavioural responses of learners are made stronger by repetitions and rewards. Skinner (1974), a pioneer of behaviourism, advanced a model of learning called ‘operant conditioning’ in which the desired responses of learners are reinforced. To apply this model to the classroom, an appropriate teaching method would allow the teacher to prompt, monitor, and reward ‘correct’ behaviour from the learner. The acquisition of new practices emerging as responses to external stimuli and the use of punishments and rewards are widely accepted concepts (Bednar et al., 1992). The issues with this theory arise because of its disregard for mental activities and processes and their role in mediating external stimuli; in effect, it fails to consider the influence of mental activities on behaviour (Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009). For some scholars, the claim that *all* learning can be determined by measuring changed behaviour simply leaves too much out of the equation (Morrison et al., 2004).

Although this theory has fallen out of favour among researchers since the 1980s due to its one-dimensional nature, some believe it can be useful for describing some classroom-based teaching (Virués-Ortega, 2006). For example, the principle is evident in a school or university setting when a teacher employs (negative or positive) reinforcement to encourage certain behaviours in learners. Extrinsic behavioural motivators include privileges, grades, prizes, praise, and recognition (Kolak, 2010). The application of behaviourist learning theory is seen in classrooms where teachers focus on class management and discipline by reinforcing good behaviour and punishing misbehaviour. This is a common feature of education in schools in both

the US (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) and the Middle East (Bukhatwa, 2014). According to Raina (2011), it is suitable for describing learning contexts that employ a lock-step, micro-managed approach in which all students are working on the same tasks and being monitored by the teacher. Some advocates of behaviourism believe that it could be combined with other theories to form a unified approach, with behaviourism covering low-level cognitive skills. For example, Pange and Pange (2011) state that, in an engineering context, ‘the principles of Behaviourism could be used to teach the facts, thus the “what”’ (p. 934). They describe instruction that allows students to acquire skills in small manageable chunks and lessons that independently focus on learning skills. Similarly, Underhill (2006) states that, following this approach, teachers would employ direct instructional methods such as teaching skills and lecturing in isolation. Learning would be evaluated through frequent testing and other formative assessments.

Some educators believe that conventional teaching and learning processes have a stronger impact on learners than an artificially created external environment, such as an online learning context. According to Reus-Smit (2008), it is very difficult to apply behaviourism to online learning in most situations because students and teachers are separated by space and time, thus creating obstacles for the observation of behaviour. From the behaviourists’ point of view, cyberspace prevents instructors from developing relationships with their learners and providing them with positive reinforcement, as is done in face-to-face environments. However, technologies such as synchronous online communication, augmented reality, and gamification are increasingly allowing teachers to offer feedback and rewards in real-time (Lamprinou, & Paraskeva, 2015). Weegar and Pacis (2012) believe that many e-learning programmes are, in fact, based on behaviourism; for example, a vocabulary quiz which directs students to the correct answer through clues and keeps testing the same word until it is answered correctly.

According to behaviourists, ‘meaning’ in the world is isolated from personal experience, and



instructional goals are organised in behavioural, observable, and specific terms. Therefore, this approach requires the instructor to focus on interaction with students and production (Sutton, 2003). The role of the student, on the other hand, is to utilise instructional materials and presentations to produce performances that show the acquisition of the appropriate mental models. Learning objectives are directly linked to structured assignments, and direct instruction is favoured over peer discussion. Evaluation and assessment are based on the performances and tests of an individual to show processes, activities, and mastery of functions.

Various useful instructional technologies have been developed using behaviourist approaches (Sutton, 2003). Those related to online instruction include computer-assisted drilling exercises and adaptive educational software, which can be useful for practising discrimination (recalling facts), generalisation (identifying common characteristics), association (grouping or matching), and chaining (following modelled steps) (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). According to Shield (2000), structured practice tutorials and drills are usually designed to reward learners using encouragement or points, before moving to the next learning objective. Shield observes that the learning process in behaviourist classrooms involves ‘individual instructions and feedback, drill, and practice’ (p. 73) and that students learn by memorising pieces of information before moving onto problem-based, higher-level learning. However, detractors claim that this higher level learning is where behaviourism falls short. Shield claims that, at all levels of education in the UK, until 2000, there was a focus on memorisation, which he argues shows that behaviourist practices have persisted. As mentioned previously, this focus on memorisation is also a feature of English learning in Omani secondary schools (Al-Qutaiti & Mohin, 2019) and the behaviourist approach continues in the digitised world today (Arghode et al., 2017).

Behaviourism remained a dominant model in the US field of psychology for many years, but, as mentioned, scholars have since identified limitations (Wakefield, 2007). Most researchers

now reject behaviourism and tend to focus on the role of cognitive processes in behaviours that are learned with time (Fisher, 2008). As a result, there is increasing attention on promising developments in the field of cognitive science related to perception, thinking, creativity, emotion, consciousness, and language (Harman, 2008).

### **2.4.2. Cognitive theory**

According to Willis (2009), cognitive theory views people as processors of information, rather than simple responders to stimuli; in other words, it deals with thoughts and not just behaviours. This theory has parallels with the information processing performed by computers. In terms of language learning, this school of thought focuses on learners' ability to acquire language through deliberate and logical introspection (Willis, 2009). Learner strategies, defined as particular ways in which learners process information, are thought to take a central role in helping learners to better understand, learn, and retain language (O'Malley et al., 1987). The type of learning best described by this theory involves problem-solving and reasoning, with clear objectives (Siemens, 2008). According to Suharno (2010), this theory is useful for describing language-learning activities such as discovery learning, project-based learning, and problem-solving tasks and strategies.

### **2.4.3. Constructivism**

Constructivism, on the other hand, views learning as a means of searching for meaning and understanding based on experience. Rather than focusing on what teachers do, it examines and predicts what learners understand at different developmental stages (Rummel, 2008). The constructivist movement has been developed by scholars including Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Lev Vygotsky. It emerged from Piaget's theory of cognitive development, to which Dewey

introduced the idea of thinking skills, such as critical and reflective thinking, which he argued should be taught in schools (Dewey, 1910), and Vygotsky championed the social aspect of the theory (Sternberg, 2008). Constructivism views learners as individuals who actively construct information as they interact with the environment. Its focus is on interpreting information; therefore, learning is an active and contextualised process that involves knowledge *construction*, rather than knowledge acquisition (Woollard, 2010). Knowledge construction is rooted in an individual's personal experiences and interactions within their environment. Learners test hypotheses by carrying out continuous testing through social negotiation; in effect, learners create knowledge through interaction with other people in the environment (Draper, 2002). For this reason, individuals reach their own personal interpretations through their knowledge-construction processes. Hence, learners do not arrive in the learning contexts as blank slates; they bring their past experiences and their cultures (Vygotsky, 1980). Supporters of the theory say that learning involves recursive and interpretive processes by active students through interrelation with the social and physical world (Fosnot, 1996). Adherents consider the teacher a 'guide on the side' who relinquishes some of their power and provides materials that allow students to actively engage and take responsibility for learning on their own (White-Clark et al., 2008). Instruction is facilitated through experimentation, open-ended issues, and cooperative learning, with students gaining knowledge via active participation with principles and concepts (Jonassen, 1994).

Instructors employing constructivist theory in their teaching focus on showing learners the relevance of the information being learned. For instance, constructivist teachers pose personally meaningful and suitably complex problems for students to resolve. Learners are encouraged to work collaboratively until they reach possible solutions and then to develop the solutions and report the results (Carbonell, 2004). Common elements of the constructivist philosophy applied to education include discovery learning; critical thinking; cooperative

learning; and the use of manipulatives (physical objects), distributed (spaced) practice, hands-on activities, and differentiated (targeted) instruction (White-Clark et al., 2008). Curricula designed using a constructivist learning approach are intended to engage learners in their studies. Their learning takes into account internal cognitive activities that allow students to construct knowledge from their experiences in the classroom. The role of the teacher is to negotiate and facilitate meaning, not to dictate interpretations (Driscoll, 2005). According to Kumar (2006), in a constructivism-oriented instructional framework, strategies encouraging self-discovery and interaction facilitate independent construction of understanding in learners. This construction of knowledge and new ideas is based on previous experience inside and outside the classroom and involves making decisions, assigning meaning, and organising and building hypotheses.

In online learning, instructors can facilitate critical thinking activities and discovery learning via problem-based projects and threaded discussions. These types of assignments can be done synchronously or asynchronously and can offer powerful learning experiences to students collaborating with their peers or instructors. According to Brandl (2005), many of the activities made possible through Moodle are designed within a socio-constructivist approach. However, for effective learning from a constructivist standpoint, these activities require the online instructors to have insights into online learning environment design and implementation (Huang, 2002).

To understand the impact of constructivist theory on instructional design, it must be acknowledged that students construct their understanding based on their own unique experiences. Instructional goals are met by designing specific problems with real-world features, building feedback into the process, and clearly defining roles. These activities aid learner acquisition through discovery, construction of understanding, and reflection on their findings (Camp & Doolittle, 1999).

The integration of constructivist approaches into online learning programmes is increasing as more instructional technology options become available (Kumar, 2006). One method of incorporation involves the use of technology for interactive problem-solving, with learners taking some degree of control over their learning. A productive learning environment can be created in blended courses with complex yet scaffolded assignments for students to complete at home (Shield, 2000) and by flipping classrooms (González-Gómez et al., 2016). A ‘flipped’ class usually requires students to interact with some kind of media at home and then complete related interactive activities in class. Constructivist ideals play a significant role in educational practices today because the real-life situations inherent in constructivist learning allow learners to develop practical knowledge and skills. Some argue that there is a need for memorisation along with constructivist learning, as real-world activities require the application of both concepts (Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009).

There are several theories relevant to the world of online education, and advances in the educational technologies are shifting the balance from behaviourism to constructivism (Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009). The Omani educational system is gradually incorporating the use of technology in its curriculum, with various e-learning programmes included in its English language teaching (ELT). However, Gasmi and Thomas (2017) note that the move towards constructivist-based applications in the Sultanate is slow due to a lack of training in regards to curricula and assessment, limited resources, student resistance, and teacher training issues.

#### **2.4.4. Features of the three theories**

The following table (adapted from Siemens, 2008) provides an overview of the features of the three learning theories introduced above. As highlighted, the type of learning best described by these theories is different in each case.

Theories	Behaviourism	Cognitivism	Constructivism
How learning Occurs	Black box-observable behaviour main focus	Structured, computational	Social, meaning created by each learner (personal)
Influencing Factors	Nature of reward, punishment, stimuli	Existing schema, previous experiences	Engagement, participation, social, cultural
Role of memory	Memory is the hardwiring of repeated experiences - where reward and punishment are most influential	Encoding, storage, retrieval	Prior knowledge remixed to current context
How transfer Occurs	Stimulus, response	Duplicating knowledge constructs of “knower”	Socialization
Types of learning best explained	Task- based learning	Reasoning, clear objectives, problem solving	Social, vague (“ill defined”)

**Table 1.** *Overview of learning theories (Siemens, 2008, p. 8)*

#### **2.4.5. The theory of independence and autonomy**

The theory of independence and autonomy was proposed by Wedemeyer (1981). His vision of independent study is concerned with the self-directed nature of learning and self-regulation. Gunawardena and McIsaac (2003), who discuss the characteristics of independent study systems as mostly relating to separation and time, state that the earlier definitions of ‘distance learning’ borrow substantially from this theory. For example, Simonson et al. (1999) describe learner independence as being at the core of distance learning. Studies have shown that student perceptions of e-learning are strongly influenced by the level of independence offered; for example, increased positivity has been associated with the autonomy to decide on the pace of learning and responsive – but not intrusive – teacher involvement (e.g., Liaw et al., 2007). Studies of Omani tertiary students have shown that they are heavily reliant on teachers, due to high-school experiences of teacher-dominated classes, and that online components greatly increase their feelings of independence and ownership (Chikwa et al., 2018).

#### **2.4.6. The theory of industrialisation**

Peters (1988) describes distance education as an industrialised form of teaching and learning. He compares this to the industrial production of goods and claims that, before the industrial age and its associated concepts, distance education could not have existed. Peters proposes that the theory of industrialisation can be applied in terms of rationalisation, division of labour, mechanisation, assembly lines, mass production, preparatory work, planning, organisation, scientific control methods, formalisation, standardisation, change of function, objectification, concentration, and centralisation. Of these, Simonson et al. (2006) assert that division of labour is the key concept; and with the advances in mechanisation and automation, the teaching process, as described in Peter's theory, remain relevant.

#### **2.4.7. The theory of interaction and communication**

Borje Holmberg's approach to distance education, which he calls 'guided didactic conversation', falls into the general category of communication theory (Simonson & Schlosser, 2009). Following some modifications over the years, Holmberg's theory of distance education now consists of eight parts (Holmberg, 2005):

- Distance education serves individual learners who cannot or do not want to make use of face-to-face teaching.
- Distance education promotes students' freedom of choice and independence.
- Society benefits from distance education.
- Distance education is an instrument for recurrent and lifelong learning and free access to learning opportunities and equity.
- Distance education may inspire metacognitive approaches.

- Distance education is based on deep learning as an individual activity.
- It is possible to base distance education on behaviourist, cognitive, constructivist, and other theories of learning.
- Personal relations, learning for pleasure, and empathy between students and those supporting them are central to learning in distance education.

Holmberg (2005) suggests that, in general terms, a dialogue between the learner and the teacher creates the foundation of distance education and plays a large role in facilitating learning.

## **2.5. Students and teachers' perceptions of traditional and online learning materials for language teaching**

Many researchers in Western contexts have investigated the attitudes of students and teachers to traditional and online learning materials (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2008; Dooley & Murphrey, 2000; Dorskocil, 2008). Studies have found that the attitudes of students in a collaborative online learning context (designed on constructivist principles) are significantly affected by teaching approaches and instructional materials, which, in turn, affects their academic performance. Studies from higher education contexts in Oman have reached similar conclusions (Hussein, 2017). Thus, in light of these findings, it is essential to explore the perceptions of learners and teachers regarding online and traditional materials.

Hinkel (2006), providing an overview of global instructional trends, is of the opinion that it is not necessarily the education model that affects the quality of learning, but rather the students' perceptions of the chosen model; in effect, positive views of traditional or online materials are vital to their success. Young et al. (2003) found that the learning model is not a significant determinant of learning outcomes; rather, the decisive factor is the students' preference for



particular learning styles and related instructional tools. Young et al. (2003) conclude that traditional and online learning tools can be equally beneficial and efficient. More recent studies, such as that of Lee and Yeung (2016) on Hong Kong university students learning English online, agree that the primary determinants are students' perceptions of the learning environment, learning styles, and the instructors' adaptability to the different materials.

Therefore, as Thomas et al. (2014) argue, we can assume that either of the two models (traditional classroom or online) can produce positive results in the higher education teaching and learning process. However, the choice of material should be determined by sound pedagogy and the manner in which students react to it (Young et al., 2003). This is a complex topic; most learners and instructors, according to Fraser (2015), believe that online education is useful for overcoming geographic and monetary limitations on access to education. However, there are studies, such as that by Clayton et al. (2010), which show a preference for traditional over online learning due to increased engagement and interaction. Notably, they conclude that perceived usefulness has no bearing on preferences. Czerkawski (2010) asserts that online learning is supplementary, and not a substitute for conventional classroom learning. Czerkawski (2010), in a study of open-source learning, found that learners and instructors perceive online learning to be an avenue for creating independence and interaction that gives rise to learning communities. However, some learners consider online learning to be less effective than conventional learning when there is no one to supervise them. Czerkawski found that, in the absence of tutors, students procrastinate much more than they would in a classroom (2010).

Dooley and Murphrey (2000) argue that students can feel alienated by online learning. Furthermore, Cole (2008) suggests that although web-based lessons are designed in a similar manner to conventional classroom lessons, students often find it difficult to make sense of the materials with which they are presented. While Cole (2008) asserts that learners prefer

conventional learning materials, he highlights that the perceptions of different groups of students are context-specific. Care must be exercised when interpreting studies conducted many years ago, as, according to Hussein (2017), advancements in technology can overcome limitations such as those mentioned by Dooley and Murphrey (2000) and Cole (2008).

Jared (2014), in a comparison of traditional, online, and blended forms of instruction, concludes that familiarity with web-based learning activities should be facilitated to foster positive attitudes towards them. Additionally, Jared (2014) asserts that web-based learners grow in confidence over time and progressively favour online learning. Richards and Renandya (2012) claim that successful online learners are more mature than their traditional counterparts, due to their loose schedules and often complicated social lives, which call for motivation, organisation, and self-regulation. They contrast this with situations in which students accustomed to classroom learning are exposed to web-based learning for the first time, and, as a result, often suffer anxiety and frustration. Similarly, Stahl (2009) observes that the use of web-based materials by previously conventionally taught students can be difficult, as these students view online learning with apprehension and struggle to manage their time for web-based learning. Likewise, Anderson (2008) concludes that students' desire for flexibility is outweighed by their desire for structured in-class instruction.

Howard and Major (2005) claim that learners view online learning as useful when the e-learning environment allows them instant access to information resources, easy navigation, repeated production opportunities, ample time for assignments, and communication between peers. Jared (2014) argues that students' preferences for web-based learning can be attributed to the ability of these resources to move in tandem with the pace of individual learners. However, according to Ferris (2011), there is a general view among both in-class and online categories of learners that a blended approach is ideal.

## **2.6. Perceived advantages and disadvantage of online and conventional materials**

Clayton et al. (2010) gathered valuable information about the perceived benefits of online and traditional learning materials in an American tertiary context; and they conclude that teaching materials play a significant role in the perceptions and success of language programmes. Tomlinson (2011) asserts that ELT materials differ in their linguistic blueprint, focus, and objectives. Thus, these aspects must be cautiously examined when choosing suitable materials so as to achieve maximal gains (Tomlinson, 2011). Additionally, Tomlinson (2011) asserts that a critical analysis of teaching methods is vital if the quality of students' learning experiences is to be prioritised. Clayton et al. (2010) add that the experiences of teachers and learners when using either traditional or online materials influences their perceptions of the benefits of the learning resources. Furthermore, they state that, for effective learning to occur, both students and instructors must be familiar and comfortable with the materials provided for instruction, as learning is dependent on their attitudes.

Jared (2014) explored the perceptions of students and teachers regarding the benefits of online and traditional learning materials, concluding that students are capable of evaluating websites as accurately as conventional learning materials. Jared emphasises that, following online experiences, students are more positive when given guidance in the form of handbooks or checklists. Similarly, Yang (2013) argues that training in evaluating ELT materials gives students the confidence to handle real-life situations of web-based language learning, providing a powerful learning tool that allows students to gradually increase their knowledge of the target language. Hinkel (2006) argues that students do not always have the skills required to access information from a website; and even if they are competent in website navigation, they may receive no guidance on which material to access and how to analyse it. For this reason, Hrastinski (2009)

suggests that, when students are asked to navigate online learning environments, an instructor is required to offer guidance and aid students to meet learning objectives. According to Gulati (2008), the motivation of teachers and students when using different materials are determined by their levels of need. Gulati claims that online learning helps learners do well in other courses, as well as developing their communication competency, which in turn improves confidence in social situations.

Jolliffe et al. (2012) suggest that the integration of new technology into traditional learning has markedly advanced the practice of teaching English, but it also has its share of disadvantages. For example, Shelly and Rosenblatt (2011) found that students considered the use of online materials to supplement traditional tools to be time-consuming, as learners must analyse large volumes of information before determining what is accurate and what contravenes the learning objectives. In the same light, Chang (2009) identifies time-saving as a distinct advantage of traditional learning tools, as, in most cases, a single standard text is used, rather than multiple sources. Additional negatives of e-learning are cited by Gulati (2008), who argues that it can be time-consuming and expensive, with major negative psychological impacts on learners. Therefore, Gulati argues, it may be worthwhile to use conventional learning techniques and to integrate them with online tools.

The advantages of using online tools in teaching, according to Gulati (2008), is that they grant learners greater flexibility and easier access. The use of online learning for reinforcing traditional learning is also advantageous in that it provides both synchronous and asynchronous activities (Gaebel, 2013). Synchronicity means that students have the opportunity to share information in real-time, even if they are in different geographical locations, while asynchronous activities occur when students share information at any time convenient to them (Barker et al., 2011). Moreover, Fraser (2015) examined worldwide trends and concludes that online materials

provide students with a sense of anonymity, which enables them to say or write what they feel or think. This is in contrast to classroom situations, where students may feel anxious about expressing themselves in the presence of their fellow students. This has been shown to be the case in most university language classrooms worldwide (Horwitz, 1988), including Oman (Khan & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015). However, Shank and Sitze (2004) argue that this anonymity could be disadvantageous, as it gives individuals an opportunity to express ideas that may be culturally or personally offensive or otherwise objectionable.

Further positive features are identified in a meta-analysis by Luppicini (2007), who argues that online learning materials reduce the cost of education by lowering travelling expenses, subsistence costs, and time spent away from one's job or family. If learners cannot afford to take time away from work, online learning provides an alternative (Luppicini, 2007). Furthermore, Daniel (2012) argues that e-learning increases the flexibility and capacity of management to respond to evolving organisational requirements. Wright (2017) found that most Malaysian undergraduate EFL students rated in-class lessons as more engaging, allowing more interaction with teachers and fellow students and increased guidance from instructors. The students who preferred online classes cited speed, flexibility, and convenience as the key benefits.

According to Luppicini (2007), both instructors and learners feel positive overall about hybrid modes of learning. Luppicini (2010) concludes that the combination helps to improve communication ability. A study of SQU undergraduates found that, in all courses using Moodle (not just language learning classes), students found the tool advantageous in terms of motivation, collaboration, and communication, though they reported problems with hardware and connectivity (Al-Ani, 2013).

In conclusion, there is evidence to support both sides of this argument. Perhaps, as Brady et al. (2010) suggest, the choice of teaching methods should be determined by availability,

preferences, gaps in learners' abilities, and other contextual factors. According to Brady et al. (2010), online materials do not work best in isolation and should be used in combination with conventional tools to support student learning. With this combination, Brady et al. (2010) argue, online materials reinforce the sources provided in class and increase students' self-awareness and independence in learning the English language.

## **2.7 Beliefs and perceptions of teachers and students regarding conventional and online learning**

### **2.7.1 Beliefs**

If a teacher has negative perceptions of an instructional method or learning material, they may opt not to employ it as recommended. This could have far-reaching effects with regards to educational outcomes for their students. Abdous and Yoshimura (2010) claim that ignoring available online instructional techniques can result in reduced effectiveness of teaching and learning. The same is true for students; for instance, if a student believes that online learning materials are ineffective, they may be more inclined to use conventional tools. Such a belief could ultimately affect their performance, especially in courses where using online materials is required (Witt, 2003). The importance of this issue is underscored by the fact that, in some institutions, including the LC at SQU, course materials, assignments, and deadlines are sometimes delivered using web-based applications; therefore, holding negative beliefs about these methods could result in a student not meeting the grade threshold of a certain course, which could lead to failure (Graham, 2006).

To understand teachers' beliefs about technological integration in instructional practice, a definition of 'beliefs' is required. According to Pajares (1992), beliefs are deeply held convictions or opinions that rarely change in adults. Perceptions (noticing and understanding) and judgements

are influenced and filtered by beliefs, which greatly influence behaviours but can be unreliable. Beliefs – or ‘definite viewpoints’ (Horwitz, 1988) – influence individuals’ interpretations of and interactions with general day-to-day issues. Richardson (1996) describes ‘beliefs’ as ideas or conceptions that individuals consciously or unconsciously consider to be true.

Rokeach (1968) identifies five different types of belief: primitive (with 0-100% consensus), authority, derived, and inconsequential. Primitive beliefs with 100% consensus are those opinions that an individual has in common with their close acquaintances, colleagues, or friends. These beliefs are fundamental and, in most cases, they are rarely discussed. As such, they remain entrenched unless there are unique occurrences that might compel the holders to confront them. On the other hand, primitive beliefs with 0% consensus are those which evolve from an individual’s personal experiences and which may or may not be shared with one’s close associates. Authority beliefs and derived beliefs are similar in that they derive from figures in authority, including influential groups with whom one associates on a regular basis. Finally, inconsequential beliefs are similar to the personal preferences of the individual (Rokeach, 1968).

Pajares (1992) argues that beliefs are intangible and only become evident through individuals’ speech and actions. He states that the relationship between beliefs and actions is complex and multi-directional. Richardson (1996) notes that beliefs can change and new ones can be added as individuals reflect on their actions. This reflection can occur as an individual questions their existing beliefs or perceives new truths that are incompatible with their preconceived ideas (Pajares, 1992). The likelihood of change depends on the specific belief in question. Pajares (1992) argues that core beliefs rarely change when an individual reaches adulthood, as they are deeply rooted in an individual’s psyche or consciousness (Pajares, 1992). The scholar also argues that beliefs are classified according to their affiliation with other beliefs, giving rise to values and attitudes that strongly influence an individual’s decisions, perceptions, and behaviour. He

concludes that cultural transmission is the typical method of attaining beliefs, and these are reinforced as a result of individual experiences. However, Rokeach (1968) notes that other authority and derived beliefs can change when the sources of these beliefs lose credibility. When related beliefs are grouped, Rokeach describes this as the formation of a belief system (1968). It is important to note that, in his research on beliefs, Rokeach does not specifically mention teachers. This is addressed in the next section.

### **2.7.2 Teachers' beliefs**

Many studies on the beliefs held by teachers have focused on identifying whether beliefs have a direct impact on a teachers' use of particular instructional methods, with some scholars arguing that teachers' core beliefs affect the manner in which new information is processed (Kagan, 1992). It is important to begin this discussion by setting out a definition of teachers' beliefs.

#### **2.7.2.1 Definitions of teachers' beliefs**

To fill a gap in the literature, Pajares (1992) conducted a benchmark review of approximately 35 empirical studies that examined teachers' beliefs. He laments that the topic of beliefs and belief structures is rife with problems related to vague definitions and poor conceptualisations. Elen and Lowyck (1999) define teachers' beliefs as suppositions regarding educational issues of teaching, learning, and curricula. Another definition is offered by Hudgins (2008) suggests that teachers' beliefs can relate to pedagogy, as well as ideas on how factors such as technology enable teachers to translate pedagogical beliefs into classroom practices. Pajares notes that people have beliefs on all subjects of which they have knowledge, and teachers are no exception. They have beliefs (conscious or otherwise) about aspects of their profession



such as their roles and responsibilities, pedagogy, and student learning (Elen & Lowyck, 1999; Pajares, 1992). Since the ground-breaking Pajares (1992) study, the literature investigating teachers' beliefs, cognitions, and perceptions has grown rapidly, not only in the field of teacher education but also in that of language education. Some of the studies specific to language teaching are discussed in this section. Other studies will be discussed that explore how beliefs may hinder the usage of computer technology within classrooms in general (Chan & Elliott, 2004; Ertmer, 2005; Niederhauser & Stoddart, 2001; Thornton, 1989) and in language classes in particular (Tuzlukova et al., 2013).

#### **2.7.2.2 Instructional practice and teachers' beliefs**

There has been much research related to teachers' beliefs and their importance for teaching practice, specifically in relation to language teaching (Borg, 2006; Freeman, 2002). Many studies have shown that the beliefs of teachers in institutions of higher education influence almost all of their instructional choices (e.g., Kagan, 1992; Kern, 1995; Tarman, 2012). Such beliefs almost certainly have an impact on students' beliefs and therefore – in the short- and long-term – are likely to affect students' motivation, choices, and knowledge acquisition (Abdous & Yoshimura, 2010).

Teachers' beliefs about instructional practices can be derived from two sources: educational literature on decision-making and the personal practical knowledge of the teacher. Both shape the events that take place within a classroom. However, the decision-making perspective is more technical and considers the background and qualifications of the teacher. On the other hand, personal practical knowledge is more holistic, incorporating a wide range of factors, such as the function of effective, emotional, and moral in shaping classroom practices (Borg, 2003).

Borg (2003) examined teacher cognition in relation to language teaching. He states that language teacher cognition is what teachers believe, know, and think, as well as the relationships between these three mental constructs and instructional practice. Borg claims there are three primary areas influencing teacher cognition: previous language learning experiences, teacher education, and classroom practice. This aligns with the findings of other researchers, such as Richardson (1996) and Butt et al. (1992), who also maintain that personal, cultural, and professional experiences play a key role in shaping the beliefs, classroom knowledge, and practice of a teacher. In relation to previous language learning experiences, Borg (2003) claims that the beliefs an individual establishes in their early life are typically resistant to change, even in the face of contradictory evidence. These beliefs are shaped by memories that are stored episodically from critical incidents in one's personal experience. Hence, teachers' practices are influenced by the experiences they recorded when learners themselves. This is called 'apprenticeship observation' (Borg, 2003). This conclusion is supported by Knowles (1992) and Lortie (1975), who claim that the experiences that seem to have the greatest influence on teachers' beliefs and instructional practice are personal experiences of one's family and school life. Studies by the two scholars reveal that teachers have a complete conceptualisation of the role of a teacher in a learning institution before they even begin formal training.

To identify how prior learning experiences underpin teachers' cognition and classroom practice, Numrich (1996) studied novice teachers and found that they either utilised or avoided the instructional strategies they had been given, depending on whether their own experiences of them as learners had been positive or negative. Numrich found that 27% of the novice teachers reported attempting to incorporate a cultural component into their instructional practice because they found such a practice enjoyable in their own second-language learning experiences. The arguments for technological integration as a product of teachers' beliefs (e.g., Thornton, 1989) are analogous

with those that associate the beliefs and actions of teachers. For example, some teachers avoid correcting grammatical errors made by their students primarily because of the negative experiences that they had suffered when learning English as a second language (Numrich, 1996). In the same way, teachers who had positive experiences of technology during their own learning may be more inclined to use it with their students, and vice versa. Chan and Elliott (2004) identify a similar relationship between teachers' beliefs and their choices of instructional methods. Furthermore, other studies have demonstrated that the beliefs of instructors may influence the choices that they make with regards to technology integration for instructional purposes (Ertmer, 2005; Niederhauser & Stoddart, 2001).

A study conducted in Oman by Borg and Busaidi (2012) investigated English language teachers' beliefs about 'learner autonomy', or learners taking charge of their own education. They found that teachers had strong beliefs about the connection between learner autonomy and the integration of technology in the learning process. The main reason for this belief was reported to be the greater learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom. Similarly, Lam (2000) examined teachers' beliefs around the incorporation of technology into learning. The teachers in Lams' study taught primary school in Western Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia. She notes that most participants were well informed of the merits of technology; and this greatly influenced their personal convictions regarding its use in instructional practice. Lam concludes that the claim that many teachers avoid using technology in the classroom due to 'technophobia' is unfounded. While most participants in her study were computer-literate, they often chose not to employ technology for instructional use because they believed its effectiveness was limited compared to that of conventional methods (Lam, 2000). Lam (2000) suggests that the age of the teachers and the type of students being taught strongly influences the beliefs of those teachers who are less likely to use technology. Lam notes that teachers who actively employ computer

technology in their instructional practices tend to be younger. Notably, years of teaching experience was not a factor. However, a study conducted by Yang and Huang (2008), concerning Taiwanese high school ESL teachers, found that less experienced teachers implement technology more frequently than their more experienced counterparts, whereas age was not a factor. Furthermore, Yang and Huang (2008) argue that computer literacy is a significant influence on beliefs relating to the use of technology in English as a foreign language. They state that the more computer literate the teacher, the more positive they tend to be about technology and the more likely they are to adopt technology in their instructional practice. The results of Yang and Huang (2008) call attention to the influence of teachers' backgrounds and training in relation to technology integration decisions.

Scholars such as Tillema and Knol (1997) point out that teacher training programmes in Western countries have a variable and often superficial impact on teachers' instructional practices, which are more closely related to personal beliefs than to training. Further support for this finding comes from a study by Russell et al. (2003), which indicates that novice teachers in the US initially depend on the theory learnt during their training in planning their instruction, while experienced teachers tend to formulate personal theories on the basis of their classroom experiences. Therefore, teachers' beliefs may change with time spent in class (Russell, et al., 2003). Furthermore, Ertmer (2005) suggests that US university lecturers who take a student-centred approach are more open to the use of technology in their courses, especially as a method of communication outside the class. According to some researchers, belief in student-centred, collaborative, or 'learning-through-doing' approaches based on constructivist principles also leads teachers to design courses that allow students more choices and control (Bruer, 1993; Richardson, 2003). Kim et al. (2013) investigated how the pedagogical and epistemological beliefs of US teachers relate to the use of technology in instruction. The findings of their four-year study suggest a connection between the beliefs of

teachers regarding the effectiveness of teaching practices and the implementation of technology in courses. The teachers who believed in more student-centred pedagogy were more keen to integrate technology. However, Kim et al. (2013) caution that, until more evidence is available, the connection between student-centred beliefs and the integration of technology should not be considered correlation and not causation.

According to other researchers such as Beswick et al. (2006), the beliefs of Australian K-12 teachers regarding the use of technology are influenced by its perceived value for instructional purposes. Likewise, in a study conducted in Canada by Wozney et al. (2006), expectancy-value theory was employed for an analysis of the technological practices of teachers. The results revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that teachers who valued – and were confident in – the implementation of technology used it more in their teaching. These sentiments are echoed by Russell et al. (2003), who argue that teachers' beliefs about the benefits of technology for instructional purposes and learning are the strongest predictor of their use. Taking an even narrower focus, some researchers in the US have claimed that, as a teacher's belief in the potential of a particular tool to meet instructional needs increases, it becomes more likely that this tool will be used by the teacher (Ottenbreit-Leftwich et al., 2010).

On the basis of this literature review, it is concluded that beliefs play a pivotal role in teachers' decisions. In fact, Bandura claims that behaviours are much easier to predict based on beliefs than on what actually happens following the choices and actions (Bandura, 1986). It seems that the integration of technology into the learning process is no different, with beliefs often overriding sound pedagogy. Now we turn to look at the issue from another perspective, with some empirical studies investigating the perception of learners with regards to integration of technology in learning.

### **2.7.2.3 Using technology in teaching a foreign language**

The integration of computers into the teaching-learning process began in the 1960s, and computer-aided language learning, technology, and language learning have evolved in conjunction ever since (O'Neill et al., 2004). In recent times, ICT has become commonplace in learning environments around the world, including Oman, with multimedia learning resources being available on the internet at low cost (Gawande, 2016).

According to research conducted in an Oman university by Wheeler et al. (2008), the application of online resources in language instruction is very valuable. In addition to employing learner-generated content, educators can avail themselves of an array of instructional alternatives to provide learners with the student-centred environment lacking in many classrooms. To maximise the benefits of ICT, foreign-language learning institutions must consider the availability of computers, internet access, infrastructure, and teacher training (Pirani, 2004). This last factor is important because language teachers in Omani higher education who lack technological proficiency are more inclined to use conventional learning materials, according to Al Musawi and Abdelraheem (2004). Another factor important for technology integration – in Gulf language-learning contexts especially – is the attitude of the instructors (Albirini, 2006) and the students (Elango et al., 2008).

### **2.7.3 Student perceptions of technology integration**

As mentioned earlier, most institutions of higher learning have incorporated the use of technology, including online resources, to facilitate blended learning (e.g., Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). Many researchers have investigated the views of students regarding technology integration in the language-learning process – both worldwide (e.g., Numrich, 1996) and in contexts similar to that of the present study (e.g., Ahmad, & Al-Khanjari, 2011; Saleem et al., 2016).

Generally, student perceptions of technology integration in learning concern three dimensions: interaction, knowledge, and flexibility (Schwartzman, 2007). Findings on the first two dimensions can be contradictory, but Schwartzman argues that students overwhelmingly perceive integration of web-based technologies into the learning process to offer increased flexibility when compared to conventional methods of learning, at least in Western contexts. Similar findings were uncovered in a study by Leasure et al. (2000) on nursing undergraduates, in which most students reported that they preferred online learning because of its cost, convenience, and flexibility. In terms of knowledge acquisition, many inconsistencies have been reported. For instance, Koory (2003) found that US university students perceived online learning of literature to result in greater knowledge. On the other hand, some US pre-service teaching students held the view that conventional learning methods result in students gaining more knowledge (Mentzer et al., 2007). Despite these divergent views, albeit in different contexts, research from the US that combines data from various studies and ignores student perceptions has found that the two approaches are comparable in terms of learning outcomes (Benoit et al., 2006; Jahng et al., 2007). Furthermore, when online learning was first implemented in institutions of higher learning, researchers such as O'Malley and McGraw (1999) argued that some students initially perceived web-based techniques to be less effective than face-to-face instruction. However, this has changed, and there is now research from around the world – including East Asian (e.g., Lai et al., 2016), Middle Eastern (e.g., Kok, 2008), and Omani (e.g., Shaikh et al., 2011) contexts – demonstrating that students perceive they can learn equally well using web-based techniques and conventional learning. Other researchers have observed that students prefer the methods to be blended within a particular course or entire programme. For example, Neuhauser (2002), which investigated the perceptions of students with regards to

the use of online and conventional learning by investigating two sections of the same business course.

Yang and Durrington (2010) found that students in online courses viewed teacher feedback and course structure as the key determinants of quality. The findings of this study and others suggest that, although the convenience of online learning is its primary advantage, students are also interested in the learning opportunities that it offers (Kirtman, 2009; Yang & Durrington, 2010) and their performance is directly related to their appraisal of these opportunities (Abdous & Yoshimura, 2010)

Turning to the disadvantages, Deimann and Bastiaens (2010) found that some German university students perceive online learning to negatively affect their performance and compromise their ability to complete a programme. Robyler (1999) reports that US high school and college students believe online learning leads to procrastination as a result of the freedom that comes with it. Atkins and Griffiths (2009) found that some Omani teachers in training perceived online learning to exert higher academic demands (hours spent on personal study) than the preferred traditional classes. These students argued that traditional learning is preferable since teachers are obliged to move at a more suitable pace.

Bruer (1993) found that US business school undergraduates perceived online learning to result in less interaction between students and instructors, which they deemed detrimental. Furthermore, some college students suspect that the use of technology in learning leads some to take advantage of the ample opportunities for 'cheating' on assignments due to a lack of oversight (Yang & Durrington, 2010).

Armstrong (2011) draws several conclusions about students' perceptions of online learning. First, some students prefer online learning because they find the materials to be more accessible and familiar and they report that it fosters independence and self-regulation, while others perceive



faculty members to communicate less effectively online. This indicates that communication has a significant role to play in shaping perceptions of learning methods.

Kretzschmar et al. (2013) observe that, in many studies comparing readers' perceptions of and preferences for conventional and electronic methods of content delivery, it is frequently asked whether it is more difficult to read electronic material. In their 2013 study, Kretzschmar et al. explored the reading comprehension of participants using traditional and online materials. They found that all the participants preferred reading on paper to digital media, though they reported no difficulty reading electronic material. In an interesting twist, the study found that the older participants had a greater preference for reading on screen. They hypothesised that this may be due to the brightness, contrast, and resolution. The study concludes that a preference for digital material over print is more reflective of attitudes towards digital media, rather than the reading experience itself. Similar studies (e.g., Lauterman & Ackerman, 2014; Mangen et al., 2013; Stoop et al., 2013) generally agree that the problem is more psychological than technological. For example, Stoop et al. (2013) compared how well students learned using print material and web-based pages. The web-based group accessed content that required no scrolling, and for which a dictionary could be accessed by clicking a mouse. The paper-based group was given a dictionary and study questions at the back of a book. The study found that the digital group performed significantly better than the paper-based group (more than 90% better on six questions out of 24). These findings support the notion that student perceptions of media type are psychological and can be overcome. Al Saadi et al. (2017), in a study of Omani tertiary students, found that 69% cited an aversion to reading digital content as a reason for preferring paper books over e-books. However, Pajares (1992), in his synthesis of empirical studies regarding teachers' beliefs, suggests that students enter institutions of higher learning with firm belief systems already in place. It is important to consider, therefore, that preferences for text types may fall into this category.

## **2.8 Reasons for students and teachers' preferences for certain materials**

Wedemeyer (2010) argues that learning is an innate trait and a survival mechanism, and teachers and learners are naturally predisposed to judge the merits of certain materials for learning. He notes that conventional materials (pen, paper, and textbooks) remain the most commonly used tools for learning, but this is changing rapidly. For Czerkowski (2010), this preference is due to the wide range of readily available options, with which all students are familiar. However, Park et al. (2006) dispute this, pointing instead to the common practice of institutions using standard textbooks recommended by publishers or upper management, while disregarding other useful resources.

According to Wedemeyer (2010), the contextualised nature of in-house content makes it preferable for users, compared with published textbooks. In an examination of Omani elementary English programmes, Al-Jardani (2012a) states that in-house English teaching materials are more relevant than commercial options: they can be easily adapted to suit learning conditions, including integration with available online learning tools; they better engage the students; and they lead to better outcomes. Unfortunately, however, the visual design of in-house materials in Omani secondary schools and universities can make them less attractive to users (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012).

Sun et al. (2008) argue that online learning allows for greater student and teacher engagement, which can influence individual preferences. They state that, for Taiwanese MBA students learning online, individual interaction with tutors was appreciated by students and encouraged those who may otherwise have been less interactive in class. In addition, students who usually do not participate in class may prefer online discussions, where there is a degree of anonymity. Clayton et al. (2010) agree with this sentiment, suggesting that online materials

allow for meaningful personal interactions through the use of webcams, fora, and instant messaging applications. Sun et al. (2008) propose that the choices of learners and teachers may depend on their personal psychological idiosyncrasies; for example, some students are naturally extraverted, while others are drained by human connections. In terms of online learning spaces, Gaebel (2013), Luppicini (2007), and Fraser (2015) are in agreement that students' cultural differences and varying abilities and processing speeds – as well as the attractiveness, cost, and flexibility of learning materials – are the main drivers of preferences for particular environments. Gaebel (2013) notes that many tertiary institutions have begun developing learning instruments such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) that take into account the preferences of students and instructors.

Krajcik et al. (2008) raise the interesting point that standardised learning instruments prevent the development of different materials for individual learners. They argue that for each learner or instructor's preference to be observed, there would need to be one classroom for each person. Thus, the ideal solution is the incorporation of both online and traditional materials into teaching to meet the individual needs of students (Krajcik et al., 2008).

## **2.9 e-Learning at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU)**

There are more Omani high school graduates entering university each year, as the pressure to obtain a degree to find employment intensifies (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). Due to increasing competition for the fee-free tertiary education on offer at SQU, the only national university in Oman, only a small fraction of high school graduates are admitted to the University. This has placed a burden on SQU and other tertiary education providers, and, as a result, the Ministry of Education in Oman has declared that e-learning integration must be prioritised (Al-Barwani & Osman, 2011). This move to develop blended learning in higher education began in

the early 2000s and is now considered essential (Gawande, 2016).

Back in 2000, Canning-Wilson claimed that, in the future, technological proficiency would be demanded by educators in the Arabian Gulf, and, in foreign language teaching, it would be regarded as vital (2000). Few would argue with this today. Abdelraheem and Al Musawi (2004) state that, in the early days of ICT integration in language learning, Oman's results were promising. However, studies from this period note the underutilisation of learning technology due to teachers' perceived lack of preparation time, their resistance to change, and their unsatisfactory training (Al Khawaldi, 2000; Osman & Ahmed, 2003). Despite this, the use of technology in learning has continued to grow over the last two decades, significantly affecting both students and instructors in the country (Jose, 2015). There has been an expansion of e-learning platforms, such as Moodle (Ahmad & Al-Khanjari, 2011), and online grader reader quiz platforms, such as MReader (Al Damen, 2018). However, studies have shown that teachers in various faculties at SQU are not using the internet to its fullest potential, and there is a need for training to maximise their proficiency in use of the internet for educational purposes (Gawande, 2015).

## **2.10 Omani in-service teacher training and development**

Huge advancements in prosperity over the last five decades (United Nations, 2010) has brought huge investments in education at all levels (Al Balushi and Griffiths, 2013). However, despite progress in areas such as teacher training and student access, the school system of Oman has been marred by poor student outcomes (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Pritchett, 2013). Four causes of this problem at the school level have been identified. First, the Omani educational curriculum is not based on real-world scenarios and therefore does not prepare students for the workplace (AL-Maskri et al., 2012). Second, there is a need for more practical teacher training to prepare trainees for actual classroom life, as opposed to theory-heavy training (World Bank,

2001). Additionally, and perhaps related to the previous two problems, there is a need for more learner-centred methods of instruction than are currently provided (Al-Jardani, 2012b). Finally, the assessment process in the Oman education system requires the incorporation of more formative and alternative assessments to reduce reliance on exams (Al-Maskri et al., 2012). According to Chapman and Miric (2009), these issues have resulted in a mismatch between the skills possessed by graduates and the needs of the labour market. There have also been individual student factors cited as possible reasons for poor performance, such as the impact of family background and other socio-economic factors (Al-Sharbati et al., 2005; Ermisch et al., 2012). Gender is also an important factor, with girls outperforming boys at every level (Ermisch et al., 2012). However, it seems that technology could be part of the solution to all the above issues, to varying degrees. Curricula upgrades, teacher training, learner-centeredness, and alternative testing are all areas in which technology plays a role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **2.11 Conclusion**

The research reviewed here combines studies from the Middle East and Omani contexts with studies conducted in the Western world. Although a large amount of the research presented here comes from the West, it remains relevant to concepts of concern in Oman, which Grigorenko (2007) describes as a non-Western culture adopting Western education reforms. Debates around students' and teachers' perspectives of traditional and online learning materials have attracted significant interest from researchers. Authors such as Chang (2009), Daniel (2012), and Jared (2014) in the West and Al-Ani (2008) and Al-Ani (2013) in Oman report contradictory findings on how learners and instructors feel about different learning materials and modes of instruction.

Authors such as Brook and Oliver (2003) argue that online learning can lead to feelings of isolation and detachment, reducing participation and interaction, unless the courses are designed

to foster social presence. In a classroom, Brady et al. (2010) argue, teachers can more easily monitor students and determine how much they have learned, allowing more attentive student supervision and more personal interactions. This may be due to teachers' lack of familiarity with online environments. More than half of the students in the Brady et al. study (54%) said they preferred face-to-face instruction. Many studies (e.g., Bonk & Graham, 2012; Lucas et al., 2008; Shank & Sitze, 2004) conclude that online learning is more effective because it allows for flexibility, reduces the cost of interactive learning, and is time efficient. In any case, both modes of learning have their own benefits and shortcomings. However, the general perception of teachers and students at learning institutions around the world is that the incorporation of the two can aid them in achieving their English language learning objectives (Sharma & Barrett, 2008). Similarly, the most common view in tertiary education in Oman is that a hybrid of traditional and e-learning models is the best facilitator of student performance (Al-Ani, 2013; Ahmad & Al-Khanjari, 2011), from the perspectives of teachers (Gawande, 2016) and students (Gawande, 2015). Sun et al. (2008) and Richardson (2010) suggest that tailoring materials to students' level of understanding is hugely important in blended contexts; and as students' proficiency improves and they become more familiar with the general principles of a course, it is hoped that individual learners can begin to self-select the material best suited to their needs.

## **CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Kumar (2010) defines a research methodology as a system of methods used during research to collect data and information for analysis and decision-making. This chapter discusses the methods used in this study to gather the data required to meet the research objectives and answer the research questions. There are sections dedicated to sampling techniques and data collection instruments. This study was designed to gather data on the first-hand experiences of the target respondents, using data collection techniques such as case studies, questionnaires, and short interviews.

### **3.2 Research purpose**

As English continues to spread around the globe, discussions of the most suitable learning methods become increasingly relevant. Considerable sums of money are spent on language learning in universities in Oman, as the government offers public higher education for free, and it is the ‘major source of funding’ even for students at private tertiary institutions (Wilkinson & Al Hajry, 2007, p. 179), making it a subject of interest to many scholars (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). Thus, the viewpoints of Omani tertiary language teachers (Gawande, 2016) and students (Gawande, 2015) in regard to decision-making on language-learning resources could be highly valuable. The above factors inspired the researcher to focus on the advantages and shortcomings of online and conventional materials, taking into account the views of different stakeholders on the use of the different materials. Equally important, the study explored the use of different types of material and the motivations for these usage patterns.

### **3.3 Research design**

A research design is the strategy employed by a researcher to organise the components of the work in a coherent and logical manner, to ensure that all the evidence collected will enable the researcher to address the research questions (Brown, 1988). A research design guides the process of collecting, measuring, and analysing data. The research design adopted in a study was dictated by the objectives and nature of the study.

For this study, the primary objective was to investigate students and instructors' perspectives of online and conventional learning materials, thus the researcher opted for a descriptive mixed-methods research design (Zohrabi, 2013). Mixed-method research combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Gordon and Marian (2006) delineate a qualitative study as an exploratory work that investigates a phenomenon by seeking to understand the underlying phenomena, opinions, motivations, and constraints. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) add that a qualitative study also provides in-depth insights into various problems to facilitate the formation of a hypothesis. In a qualitative study, the data collection instruments are either structured or semi-structured in nature; and the most commonly used are interviews, focus groups, and participant and scenario observations (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011).

Quantitative studies, on the other hand, are used to quantify a given problem by gathering numerical data that can be converted into useful statistics (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Gordon and Marian (2006) suggest that a quantitative research approach can be taken to quantify opinions, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours of a research sample, and, in certain cases, the results may be used to make generalisations about an entire research population. Unlike with qualitative studies, data-collection methods in a quantitative study are structured, which arguably makes them more precise. Some commonly used quantitative data-collection methods include surveys, questionnaires and polls (online and paper), and



systematic observations (Gordon and Marian, 2006).

A mixed-method research design was chosen for this study due to a number of factors. First, the nature of the study included both qualitative and quantitative aspects, thus both techniques were required to answer the research questions adequately (Greene, 2007). The research on the attitudes of instructors towards online and conventional learning materials was so complex that it was decided to use research methods that could validate one another (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the researcher wanted to address the issue from the perspectives of different stakeholders: the students and the teacher. For these reasons, only mixed-methods research could enable the researcher to conduct an appropriately in-depth investigation of the issue.

Mixed-methods research provides several benefits. Gordon and Marian (2006) suggest that the method can have strengths that offset the weaknesses inherent in either qualitative or quantitative studies. For instance, quantitative methods can be used to identify the views of students and teachers about online and conventional learning, since attitudes and perceptions cannot be easily quantified (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015). However, the qualitative methods facilitated interactions between the researcher and the research participants, thus providing more in-depth responses that could not have been collected using a quantitative approach. A mixed approach provides a deeper understanding as it allows the examination of one phenomenon using several methods and creates an opportunity to develop context-specific instruments (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015).

A qualitative approach may introduce unintended subjectivity as the researcher interacts with study participants. However, by comparing the qualitative study data with the quantitative findings, a researcher can significantly reduce this potential bias (Heath, 2001). Another advantage of the mixed-methods approach is that it usually provides a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem than could be obtained by using either of the individual

approaches independently (Emerald, 2013). Furthermore, the mixed-methods approach gives an opportunity to adapt data-collection instruments to ensure they are suitable for the specific context.

Despite the numerous advantages of mixed-methods research, there are also weaknesses. First, these types of study can be very complex. For example, if the qualitative component employs a method such as thematic analysis, this may involve gathering and analysing a large amount of information (Clarke et al., 2015). Similarly, the collection and interpretation of numerical data in the quantitative strand is time-intensive. The complexity of the design process can make it difficult to plan and execute the work and to draw inferences from the findings of the different methods (Creswell, 2016). For the purpose of triangulation, the quantitative and qualitative analyses in this study were conducted separately, as recommended by Subedi (2016), and the results were then compared.

### **3.3.1 Thematic analysis**

#### **3.3.1.1 Introduction**

Data require interpretation, meaning they need to be supported with explanations to be considered useful. This is especially true of qualitative research, which tends to produce large quantities of information. Cassell and Symon (1994) argue that the collection of qualitative data and its analysis should be treated as a single process. In other words, in qualitative methods, the process of analysis begins immediately after collection begins, and the two proceed in parallel until completion. Thematic analysis is one method used for this purpose (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method used to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes within data. Daly et al. (1997) define it as an examination of themes considered important for explaining certain phenomena. According to Rice and Ezzy (1999),

thematic analysis requires the recognition of themes or patterns within a set of data, with the emerging themes used as categories for analysis. The theme identification process involves a series of careful re-readings of the data being collected, referred to as 'coding'. For this type of analysis, the data are examined in detail, and, as such, the method has the potential to be exhaustive.

A theme or pattern captures an important characteristic of the data that addresses the overarching research question. A theme represents concepts or patterns of meaning within a set of data that occur more than once. During the coding process, the researcher identifies what does and what does not constitute a theme or pattern within the data set. In a thematic analysis, the question of prevalence is crucial for identifying a pattern or theme. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that, although prevalence is important, all prevalent themes are not necessarily of importance to the study (or vice versa). Researchers are mostly in agreement that quantity alone is not the major determinant in a thematic analysis process; the key issue of importance is whether the theme has captured something crucial with regards to the overall research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In an analysis of this kind, the judgement of the researcher is paramount as they engage in rigorous coding to identify the themes and patterns.

Loffe and Yardley (2004) consider thematic analysis to be highly effective for many qualitative studies as it ensures accuracy and precision due to the way in which particular themes are analysed in relation to the data as a whole. Furthermore, Loffe and Yardley (2004) argue that since an analysis of this nature requires an understanding of the issue at hand and the collection of varied data, it allows a researcher to understand the issues from a broader perspective. The method also allows for the determination of the relationships between specific concepts at specific times and in comparisons with similar studies.

Many scholars argue for the inclusion of thematic analysis in various research contexts

(e.g., Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001). In support of this argument, some cite data interpretation, which is an essential aspect of any qualitative research. For such research to be considered valid, it must draw interpretations that are consistent with the collected data. In this way, researchers can accurately detect and group the relevant ideas generated by the participants in the study; and, as a result, the interpretation of the information provided by participants with regards to their actions, behaviours, and thoughts should reflect reality. Hatch (2002) argues that thematic analysis allows for reflection on the data, as well as flexibility in interpretation, and it is suitable for studies such as this one where the views of multiple participants are required.

Furthermore, researchers argue that the method is also suitable for analysis when there are two or more strands to the research questions (Holloway & Todres, 2003). For instance, the method could be useful in studies that seek to understand an individual's current practices and how these practices may be influenced by a participant's point of view, as is the case in the current study, where the beliefs and perceptions of teachers and students regarding technology integration in learning are under investigation. However, many other variables may also influence attitudes – and these unknowns may be unearthed in the research process. This approach to the analysis of data can also be useful in other phases. This was the case in a study by Alhojailan (2012), in which thematic analysis was employed to compare data before and after the integration of web-based learning tools. This approach was also employed by Miles and Huberman (1994), who argue that because thematic analysis allows data to be collected separately at different instances, it is a highly flexible tool. By analysing data at multiple stages and processing them multiple times, thematic analysis allows the detection and analyses of similarities and differences within a dataset.

A researcher's approach to thematic analysis can be deductive or inductive, which is further evidence of its flexibility as a method. In an inductive or 'bottom-up' approach, themes emerge from the data and theoretical frameworks take shape as a result of data interpretation (Braun &

Clarke, 2012). This is thought to be useful as it ensures that the themes highlighted are linked to the data in an effective manner. For this to work, the researcher should have a variety of theoretical options in mind for the exhaustive analysis of the collected data.

In instances where thematic analysis is employed to compare data on participants' perceptions, deductive approaches and questionnaires are often required. Deductive approaches differ from inductive approaches in that the data analysis begins with an idea of the expected themes in mind, before moving on to examine specific data to investigate these preconceived theories. This means that a researcher first conceives of the topics of interest and incorporates them into the coding process, as well as the data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Because this approach begins with the theory from which themes or patterns are derived, it is considered 'top down'.

Finally, thematic analysis is useful for coding and categorising data into themes. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that it allows the display and classification of data according to either differences or similarities. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that this coding and categorisation is done with attention to themes. Thematic analysis is appropriate for the coding and organisation of different sets of data collected using different instruments – such as questionnaires and interviews – in a single study. Furthermore, participants may be in varied environments; and, in such cases, thematic analysis is often most suitable as it allows for the more effective production, presentation, and comparison of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **3.3.1.2 Conducting a thematic analysis**

A thematic analysis often entails analysing data without any pre-conceived themes as a guide. Thus, the approach is appropriate for research that relies on its participants for uncovering the issues at hand and generating the themes (Cassell & Symon, 1994). Braun and Clarke (2006)

suggest a six-phase approach to conducting a thematic analysis. It begins with the researcher familiarising themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the qualitative survey responses and interview transcripts. A review of the audio recordings and video can also be useful for achieving data familiarisation. To highlight points of interest during initial observations, a researcher may opt to take notes in some form or another. With these notes, the researcher can familiarise themselves with the dataset and potentially establish connections with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) stress that familiarisation is key to accurate thematic analysis, noting that this becomes easier with practice and experience. The second phase entails the generation of initial codes. These codes are considered the building blocks of any thematic analysis, as they are useful for identifying information that can describe the contents of a set of data. Thematic analysis coding requires background knowledge of the topic, and the codes are considered shorthand for the researcher in the sense that they identify points of interest without the need for explanation, which comes later. Once a code has been identified, it is noted down, along with the text with which it is associated. Once all the data have been coded, the next step is to search for the themes. This entails reviewing the coded data to identify any similarities or overlaps between the identified codes. This phase involves the grouping of identified codes that seem similar in terms of their unifying features. As a result, it is hoped that coherent and meaningful patterns will emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The next phase is to review potential themes in relation to the identified codes within the entire dataset. This phase can be considered quality control: if a certain theme does not seem relevant, some of the related codes might be relocated to other relevant themes or even discarded. The themes are reviewed in relation to the entire dataset and all the data are finally re-read to confirm the relevance of the identified themes. This phase is followed by defining and naming the identified themes after considering what is unique and specific to each one. These steps require a thorough

analytical investigation to produce fine-tuned details. Once the above phases have been completed, the final phase is the production of a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A review of the entire process of thematic analysis reveals an important difference between qualitative and quantitative research: in quantitative research, the analysis begins only after the data collection is complete, whereas data collection and analysis can be interwoven in qualitative research.

On the basis of the points cited above, a thematic analysis was deemed highly suitable for the current study. However, some of the weakness of the approach were taken into consideration. For example, Gordon and Marian (2006) suggest that, in some instances, it is difficult to quantify qualitative data. As a result, a researcher may produce results that do not address the research questions. Furthermore, there is no mandated way of dealing with discrepancies that occur in the process of combining data from both qualitative and quantitative instruments. Hence, the researcher may have difficulty resolving some of the inconsistencies that arise during a typical process of interpretation.

To avoid discrepancies in the data collection and analysis phases of this study, a sequential explanatory design was employed. Jeng-Shyang et al. (2010) define the sequential explanatory design approach as a mixed-methods approach in which the researcher begins by collecting and analysing quantitative data, then moving onto the qualitative data. In this approach, priority is given to quantitative data, and the findings are integrated during the interpretation phase. This method was chosen to help explain, interpret, and contextualise the quantitative findings. It also enabled a detailed examination of the unexpected results that emerged from the qualitative study and allowed the researcher to assess divergent views (Caldas, 2003). The strengths of a sequential explanatory design include its ability to simplify results and make them easier to understand. The method is easy to implement and helps to reduce complexity in a mixed-methods research project. One disadvantage of the method is that the data collection process requires a long period of time

to complete because it is divided into two phases. However, the issue was not insurmountable, as adequate time was allocated to this in the research design.

### **3.3.1.3 Research philosophy and perspective**

Gordon and Marian (2006) define a research philosophy as the beliefs regarding the method applied to gather, analyse, and report data in connection with a given phenomenon. The terms ‘epistemology’ and ‘ontology’ are frequently used in this context.

‘Epistemology’ is the theory of knowledge and separating belief from opinion, while ‘ontology’ refers to the nature of reality and existence and the grouping of things that exist. The purpose of research is to transform what is *believed* to be true to what is *known* to be true. The most common philosophies in modern social science research are the positivist and interpretivist approaches (Lin, 1998).

Lin (1998) describes the positivist research paradigm as an approach that views reality as usually stable. Positivists believe that social reality can be reduced to statistics and studied without interfering with the phenomena under study. They maintain that researchers can employ an objective point of view during the research process. This can be done by manipulating reality using a variation of an independent element, with the objective of identifying trends and irregularities and the relationships between various themes.

On the other hand, an interpretivist research approach contends that it is only by employing a subjective interpretation that an interpretation can be formed. The two pillars of interpretivist philosophy are, first, the acknowledgment that scientists cannot avoid influencing the phenomena they are studying, and second, that a phenomenon should be studied in its natural environment. It is based on a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Emerald (2013) suggests that an interpretivist acknowledges numerous potential interpretations of reality,



normally produced through social constructions. Hence, the focus is on humans as social creatures. These social constructions may be achieved in the form of language, symbols, and shared meanings. Therefore, the researcher, being a social actor, interacts with participants and interprets the differences between these constructions of different people. Interpretivist approaches use combinations of methods to interpret issues. An interpretive approach is based on more ethnographic approaches to collecting data; thus, it is relatively easy to understand and adopt, as the researcher obtains an insight into the whole study towards the end of the work (Risjord, 2014). In the interpretivist approach, underpinned by subjectivist epistemology, a researcher has no 'correct' theory in mind and understands that participants cannot be separated from their knowledge (Risjord, 2014).

This study employed a mixed research philosophy, with both naturalist and positivist research theories. According to Babbie (2015), positivists use quantitative tools and techniques that emphasise measuring and counting. In contrast, interpretivists use qualitative tools such as observation, questioning, and description. This research involved the collection and use of statistics as scientific evidence for one portion of the study (a positivist approach), alongside interpretivist techniques of collecting and interpreting quantitative data from questionnaires and interviews for another.

### **3.4 Adopted research approach**

A descriptive research design was adopted to achieve the research purpose. Babbie (2013) defines descriptive research as that which includes both survey and interview data. In the current work, this method was employed to identify the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the learning methods adopted in an English foundation programme. Primary data were analysed to investigate the most convenient instructional method. This approach was chosen to collect data

from a large population sample within a short period of time. It was helpful for obtaining first-hand information from the participants, which Creswell (2009) considers a means of improving reliability.

### **3.5 Data collection**

As noted in Chapter 1, this study was conducted at the LC in SQU, Oman. At the LC, approval must be obtained from the Professional Development and Research Unit before undertaking any research. As part of the process of gaining permission from the committee, the researcher submitted the following documents: a research proposal (a brief research plan); a research permission form (once completed by the committee, this form allows a researcher to undertake a study); a research ethics form (a document outlining the procedure of participant recruitment, ethical considerations, etc.); a research support form (instrument development, methodology, etc.); and samples of the instruments used. These documents are attached as appendices. The participants involved in this research are foundation programme level 3 students and teachers. All were informed that their identities would not be revealed at any stage, and the teachers were given a pseudonym (from 'P1' to 'P13'). All the participants were 18 years of age or older. Data collection from a larger group of participants ensures better population representation, which is vital for a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation. To ensure a reasonable return rate, the questionnaires in this study were administered to students during class time. A total of 310 questionnaires were disseminated to 15 level-three classes. In each class, there were two or three absentees. The students from two sections who piloted the questionnaire were removed from the data analysis. A total of 277 completed questionnaires were received and analysed. For the qualitative part of the study, 13 teachers were recruited to take part in interviews.

### **3.6 Mixed-methods study**

As stated, this study used a mixed-methods approach, in which qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed to provide representation of the whole population under consideration. The purpose was to provide comparative data, while allowing for open-ended analysis. Combining these two methods allowed the researcher to overcome the limitations of relying on a single approach and provided in-depth responses, data from various sources, and a comparison of responses. This all helped to increase what Golafshani (2003) describes as the validity and reliability (in quantitative terms) and credibility (a more qualitative term). A detailed rationale was presented in section 3.3 ('Research design').

### **3.7 Research methods: case study and primary research**

According to Berger (2015), it is vital to choose a research method that takes into consideration the objectives and purpose of the study. Berger (2015) states that primary research involves the direct collection of data by a researcher, without relying on the findings of others. Primary data for the present study were collected through interviews and questionnaires. The surveys comprised both closed and open-ended questions and provided an efficient means of gathering both qualitative and quantitative information. Additionally, open-ended questions allow respondents to give their opinions, which would otherwise be excluded from the research (Denscombe, 2007). Interviews were used to obtain the opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of the respondents regarding the use of technology in language learning.

Creswell (2009) describes a case study as a detailed, in-depth investigation that examines an occurrence in a particular real-life situation, particularly when the limitations of the situation are not evident. There are several types of case study: illustrative, exploratory, particular instance, programme implementation, programme effects, and cumulative (Creswell, 2009). The context

for this study, which features both descriptive and critical instance case study features, is the LC in SQU, one of the leading foundation programme language institutions in Oman (Al-Hadhrami & Amzat, 2012).

### **3.8 Sampling methods**

Levy and Lemeshow (2013) define ‘sampling’ as the process of selecting participants from a large population in a manner that enables the extrapolation of the sample results to the population as a whole. The authors note that sampling should be conducted such that information from the entire population is fairly represented. Proper sampling is required to avoid biases and ensure valid conclusions (Subedi, 2016). In this case study, the elimination of biases was achieved through randomisation, with samples selected objectively, rather than subjectively. The interviewees were categorised in two sampling stages. The first involved the use of systematic sampling to identify the respondents for the interviews. Babbie (2013) describes systematic sampling as a random sampling technique involving the selection of participants in an ordered sampling frame. This group was eliminated from the second sampling stage to ensure that they did not participate in both stages. The second stage involved both quota sampling and systematic sampling methods. Babbie (2013) defines quota sampling as a non-probability sampling method that involves the selection of samples based on judgment. This process ensures that the essential characteristics of the population are presented, thus preventing overrepresentation or underrepresentation in a sample.

The research study also used purposive (or ‘subjective’) sampling to select teachers and students. The sample of teachers was comprised of 13 individuals, chosen on the basis of their experience with both traditional and online learning materials at level three. The study also made use of purposive sampling methods to select students with the desired characteristics (i.e., all level-three SQU foundation programme students). Thus, the study combined random sampling and purposive sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Care was taken not to include the two

classes of students with whom the questionnaire was piloted. A total of 277 students returned the completed questionnaire.

### **3.9 Research procedure**

The first step in the research procedure was to seek permission from LC management to conduct the research. The ethics approval forms were then completed. Once permission had been granted, two level-three sections were chosen to pilot the questionnaire. This helped to determine the time needed to complete the questionnaire and the difficulty level of the questions, allowing them to be adjusted accordingly. The researcher then planned and initiated a briefing session on which respondents were informed that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and they were at liberty to withdraw at any point during the research period. Copies of the questionnaires were distributed to selected students on the level-three course, and 277 individuals completed the documents and willingly agreed to participate.

Students who expressed interest in completing the questionnaires were given ample time to do so and to hand them back to their instructor. The researcher was available in person to answer any queries. Permission to record the interviews was sought from the 13 teacher participants. These interviews took place at different times, within the LC, and lasted around 20-30 minutes each. Each participant was asked to select a convenient time and day to be interviewed in a closed-door session; and they were interviewed alone. The interviews were recorded and the interviewees were assured that the recordings would be destroyed after the research had been completed. Prior to the commencement of the research process, permission was obtained from all relevant authorities. There were no vulnerable people or people with special needs involved in this research, thus the researcher did not seek permission from the government authorities concerned with the rights of special needs groups. After permission had been granted, the researcher contacted the selected participants and informed them of the rights they had while participating in the research. This was

to ensure respondents were not negatively affected by participation in the research and that their involvement remained entirely voluntary. The researcher also ensured that the participants were aware of the ethical considerations, such as the protection of identities and the right to withdraw at any time. Of the 310 students included in the sample, 277 returned usable responses that were viable for analysis. Hence, upon completion of the sampling process, there was a total of 290 respondents, including 13 teachers.

The researcher addressed the students in each section before distributing the questionnaires. In this address, the researcher raised the important issues, such as the purpose of the research, the types of responses required, and the time allocated to complete the questionnaires, as well as providing a confidentiality assurance. Most importantly, the researcher informed the students of their right to decide whether to participate in the research and to withdraw from the study at any time. The questionnaires were administered to the students in the presence of the researcher, who was present to address any queries.

A great deal of planning was put into the development of the questionnaire to ensure a high return rate and a wide variety of responses. The questionnaires were not sent via email, to avoid late or inaccurate responses, as some of the intended student respondents did not have convenient access to internet facilities. As recommended by Hammersley and Traianou (2012), the questionnaires contained both open-ended and closed questions. Open-ended questions, which do not limit the respondents (Subedi, 2016), were asked where more detail was required. Closed questions, on the other hand, limit the nature of the possible responses, thus giving the advantage of simplicity as they are easy to respond to and usually not taxing for respondents (Baumgarten, 2013). In this study, the closed questions were multiple-choice, with respondents required to answer an array of 'yes' and 'no' questions and Likert-scale questions. McMurray (2004) suggests that Likert-scale questions are useful for gaining understanding of the attitudes of respondents.

The Likert responses in this questionnaire were occasionally limited to three possibilities (*Agree, Not sure, Disagree*), which was designed to identify simple agreement or disagreement with the statements, rather than the strength of the participants' opinions (Albaum, 1997). The English teacher questionnaire was written in English, and the student questionnaire included both Arabic and English translations, presented side-by-side. See section 3.7 for more details of the language choices and translations.

The teachers were given the interview questions in advance to allow them to familiarise themselves with the topics and identify any ambiguities. Following the interviews, their responses were categorised, and similar responses bundled together for the purpose of thematic analysis. The data collected from the student questionnaires were analysed using a quantitative approach. That is to say that all responses were coded, analysed, and represented graphically.

To complete the data collection process, the interview and questionnaire processes were completed over the span of one week. The administration of the questionnaire took just one day, while the interviews were conducted over a four-day period.

### **3.10 Data analysis**

Data analysis involves the systematic application of mathematical and logical approaches for the evaluation of data, allowing inferences to be made (Shamoo & Resnik, 2003). The current study, as discussed earlier, involved both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data collected from interviews were analysed thoroughly using thematic analysis. The transcribed interview responses were assigned numerical values, themes were extracted, and the findings were presented in tables for interpretation. Braun and Clarke (2012) acknowledge that the process of analysing and presenting qualitative data may be confusing; thus, there is a need to research widely the use of the thematic analysis method.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed through coding. The coding process involves the grouping of similar data. Mean scores were calculated for questions, which enabled the researcher to develop a framework through which conventional and online learning materials could be compared (Boyatzis, 2009). Finally, inferences were made based on relevant literature and the quantitative and qualitative data to address the research questions.

### **3.11 Teacher interviews**

Interviews were conducted with a sample of 13 male and female teachers from the LC in the SQU foundation programme. The teachers had a variety of nationalities and backgrounds, in similar proportions to the culturally diverse body of 220 teaching staff at the LC (Al-Mahrooqi & Risse, 2014). The teacher interviews took place in a single session, and the responses and findings derived from them are presented in Chapter 5.

### **3.12 Student questionnaires**

The respondents were level-three students at the LC. Usable data were obtained from 277 respondents, from a total of 310 students asked to participate (a return rate of 89%). The survey had a number of closed and open-ended questions, under different categories designed to investigate the research questions. The analysis of the responses is presented in Chapter 4.

### **3.13 Validity and reliability: triangulation**

According to Baumgarten (2013), ‘validity’ is the accuracy of the decisions made regarding an assessment or instrument, and reliability is the degree to which the instrument produces consistent results. Validity is an important aspect to consider to ensure the accuracy of research findings and the prevention of biased data interpretation. The validity of findings in this study



was ensured by cross-checking the information obtained from the interviews and questionnaires with that from past research on attitudes and perceptions of teachers and students on the use of technology in language learning. The triangulation method can facilitate data validation by cross-verification between two or more methods (McMurray, 2004); for example, in this study, open-ended and closed questions were used. The validity and reliability of the data were enhanced by piloting the surveys and making adjustments before the final distribution (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). To strengthen the validity and reliability, the equivalence and naturalness of the survey translations were checked by the researcher's colleagues, as suggested by Dörnyei, and Taguchi (2009).

### **3.14 Ethical considerations**

Hammersley and Traianou (2012) emphasise that the consideration of ethical issues is essential in any research, as the rights of all parties involved – both directly and indirectly – must be respected. The rights of the authors whose work was consulted during this research were protected by conscientious citing of references. Furthermore, great efforts were taken to avoid plagiarism by rephrasing any content taken from outside sources, without intentionally changing the intended meaning. Any identifying information provided by the participants was treated confidentially, used solely for the purpose of the study, and destroyed when the research had been completed.

The LC research unit is responsible for giving consent to master's degree and Ph.D. researchers to conduct research projects in the foundation programme at the LC. Informing the LC about this study was a compulsory first step for the protection of students, teachers, and SQU itself from research malpractice. The research unit gave consent for the study and also gave permission for the university's name to be mentioned in any publication associated with the study. The LC

enrols approximately 3,000 new students each year and has around 40 teachers at level three (Sultan Qaboos University, 2019); thus, it was determined that any unintentional identification of participants by anyone reading this thesis was highly unlikely. The researcher began by approaching teachers to request the distribution of questionnaires in their classes. Two classes were chosen for the pilot to investigate the time needed for completion of the questionnaire. The two selected classes were later excluded from further participation in the trial. In the absence of the researcher, the teachers informed the students about the questionnaires and explained that participation was entirely optional and they could withdraw at any time and without any repercussions. Students who chose not to participate could be physically excused from the classroom during survey completion. The researcher was physically present when the questionnaires were being completed, available to answer any questions. The classes began the questionnaires in the last 20 minutes of the session to avoid using up the spare time, as agreed by the teachers.

The participants in the teacher interviews were those instructors identified as on a full schedule and with experience of teaching level three. This was because the interview questions required knowledge of the materials used to teach level-three students. Those teachers not on a full schedule were excluded from the selection. All were informed that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and they were able to withdraw for any reason and at any stage. They were also informed that their responses would be kept entirely confidential and used for research purposes only, with the recordings destroyed after the research had been completed. The teachers were given the interview questions in advance (in hard copy) to encourage them to give detailed answers and to provide an opportunity for clarification of any ambiguous items. The teachers were told that the interviews would last up to 30 minutes, conducted in a time and place of their convenience.

The teachers' anonymity was also preserved using pseudonyms, with no names or confidential information recorded that could link the individuals to their responses. Assumed names were used in every phase of the research. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) note that respondents are more likely to provide accurate and reliable information when they feel their privacy is protected. Moreover, in this study, attempts were made to protect the participants from potential emotional harm or embarrassment by allowing them to skip any questions that they were uncomfortable about answering and to retract any responses they wished to be voided.

### **3.15 Language choice and translation**

The present study was conducted in an Arab-speaking country, and all the student participants spoke Arabic as a first language. Some, but not all, of the teachers spoke Arabic. Due to their low (pre-intermediate) level of English, many students found it challenging to understand and express themselves in English. Therefore, the student questionnaire was translated into Arabic to ensure the students fully understood the questions and were able to provide clear and comprehensive answers. This is in line with the recommendations of Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009), who state that, to avoid inaccuracies, it is imperative that the questionnaire is presented in a language with which the respondents are very familiar. The use of Arabic was also useful for building rapport between the researcher and the participants, which can be important for obtaining truthful and detailed responses (Polkinghorne, 2005). In addition, as some of the classroom teachers whose students were included in the trial were not acquainted with the Arabic language, the inclusion of both English and Arabic side-by-side in the questionnaire was helpful during the administration phase.

The two most important characteristics of a translation, according to Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009), are accuracy (ensuring no change in meaning) and naturalness (using native language,

rather than stilted or odd translations). They note that many researchers choose a ‘do-it-yourself’ approach that can often lead to inaccurate translations and problems that are only discovered after data have been collected. Post hoc analyses of questionnaires may uncover these problems, and more often than not, the only solution is to exclude the problematic questions from the study (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). A comprehensive framework for translation recommended by Harkness (2008) is the ‘committee-based language approach’, which consists of five procedures: translation, review, adjudication, pretesting, and documentation (TRAPD). This is very time- and resource-intensive and requires several translators to read the questions repeatedly and negotiate a final product (Harkness, 2008).

For researchers with ‘limited resources’ (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009, p. 50), two useful techniques for ensuring accurate and natural translations of questionnaires are ‘back-translation’ (Brislin, 1970) and external reviews (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). Back-translation involves recruiting an external translator to translate the questions back from the target language to be checked against the original. External reviewers were used in this study, with groups of people fluent in both languages double-checking the translations for accuracy and naturalness. All the questionnaire translations in this study were verified in this way, and multiple teachers confirmed the accuracy of the translations. The translations of the student responses were checked by one other Arabic-speaking volunteer teacher.

Brislin (1986) outlines a series of suggestions for effective question-writing with items translated from English. These recommendations include the use of passive voice; the avoidance of colloquialisms; the repetition of nouns, rather than using pronouns; and the avoidance of words such as would, should, and may. These guidelines were followed as far as possible within the constraints of the survey context.

### **3.16 Limitations of the study**

There were a significant number of challenges encountered during the course of this study. First, as this research involved a case study situated in a specific course in an Omani LC, the applicability of the study's results to other levels and institutions may be limited, according to Donmoyer (2000). Furthermore, Baumgarten (2013) argues that it is difficult to ensure the accuracy of data obtained from interviews and questionnaires. Respondents may provide biased information, especially on issues about which they are uncertain or feel stressed. To limit this risk, the questions were kept simple, the respondents were encouraged to ask for clarification on issues they found ambiguous, and the interviews and questionnaires were completed in locations where the participants felt comfortable. The respondents were also told to skip any questions they preferred not to answer. However, self-reporting has been shown to elicit inaccurate responses from participants (self-report bias). This can often reflect an attempt by the participant to please the researcher or make themselves appear more virtuous (social desirability bias) (Van de Mortel, 2008).

### **3.17 Conclusion**

This study used qualitative and quantitative research techniques and analysed data obtained from primary sources. Sampling was carried out to select participants from the whole population in two stages. Thought was given to the ethical issues involved in a study of this nature, especially concerning confidentiality and unfair treatment of the respondents. The researcher also identified the limitations of the study and outlined some of the ways in which they were addressed. The next section presents the findings of the study in tables and graphs, discusses these results, and attempts to consider this information in the context of the existing literature.

## **CHAPTER IV - THE QUANTITATIVE STUDY: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Chapter 3 provided a detailed description of the methodological framework used to conduct the present study. The core aim of this research was to evaluate students and instructors' attitudes towards the use of online and traditional learning materials for language teaching, along with exploring the perceived benefits and disadvantages of e-learning. As noted in the previous chapter, a mixed-methods research approach was employed. This chapter presents and analyses the quantitative study results, concerning the student respondents and the questionnaire data.

### **4.2 An overview of Omani student profiles**

The demographic characteristics of the students surveyed in this study were mixed. There were more men in the sample, as females perform better in high school than their male counterparts (Saidi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2012) and, as a result, more often avoid the lower levels of the foundation English programme. Most students in the LC foundation programme are Omanis, with some coming from Arabic-speaking GCC countries, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia. However, all the students selected for this study came from Oman. Owing to the SQU policy of selecting students from every governorate, there were students from many different areas in level three. Perhaps because students growing up in more remote regions have limited exposure to both technology and English, they tend to be overrepresented in the lower levels at the LC (Islam, 2014; Islam & Al-Ghassani, 2015). For instance, almost none of those residing in the Al Wusta region had ever been to the cinema to watch an English film, nor had they attended a school that used computers in the learning process. The Al Wusta region is a desert area, with a slow rate of development in the area. On the other hand, students who attend school in the cosmopolitan capital

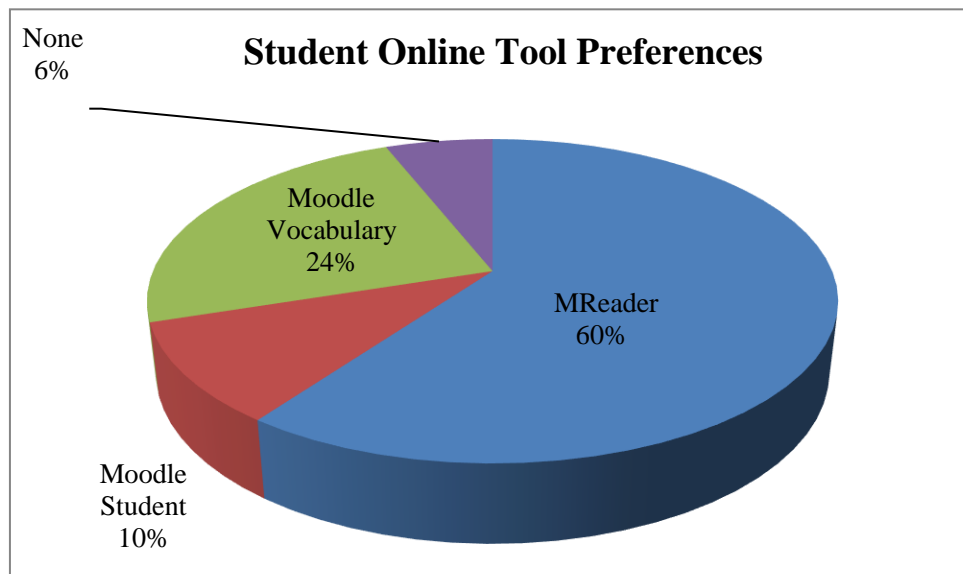
city of Muscat have plentiful opportunities for exposure to English, due to rapid development, private schools, and a greater emphasis on education (Sivaraman, 2014). The participants involved in this study were also from different socioeconomic backgrounds, which, along with past schooling and geographical differences, may have affected their education and attitude (Al-Issa, & Al-Bulushi, 2012). The preferences and opinions of these learners regarding conventional and online materials were collected to shed light on these key issues.

### **4.3 Omani students' attitudes towards the integration of online learning**

This section presents data on Omani students' perceptions of the use of online learning and conventional teaching material. The online learning tools used in level three are MReader, Moodle Vocabulary, and Moodle Students.

#### **4.3.1 Omani students' attitudes towards online materials**

Data were obtained on the students' opinions of Moodle materials, including Moodle programme preferences, online material usage, the perceived role of online instruction in English, and the challenges and benefits of online activities. As shown in Figure 1, MReader was the most popular online tool, with 60% of the students preferring it over the Moodle courses. Almost a quarter of the participants (24%) selected Moodle Vocabulary as their favourite online tool, and 10% opted for Moodle Student. Just 6% of the students reported that they did not like any of the online tools used.



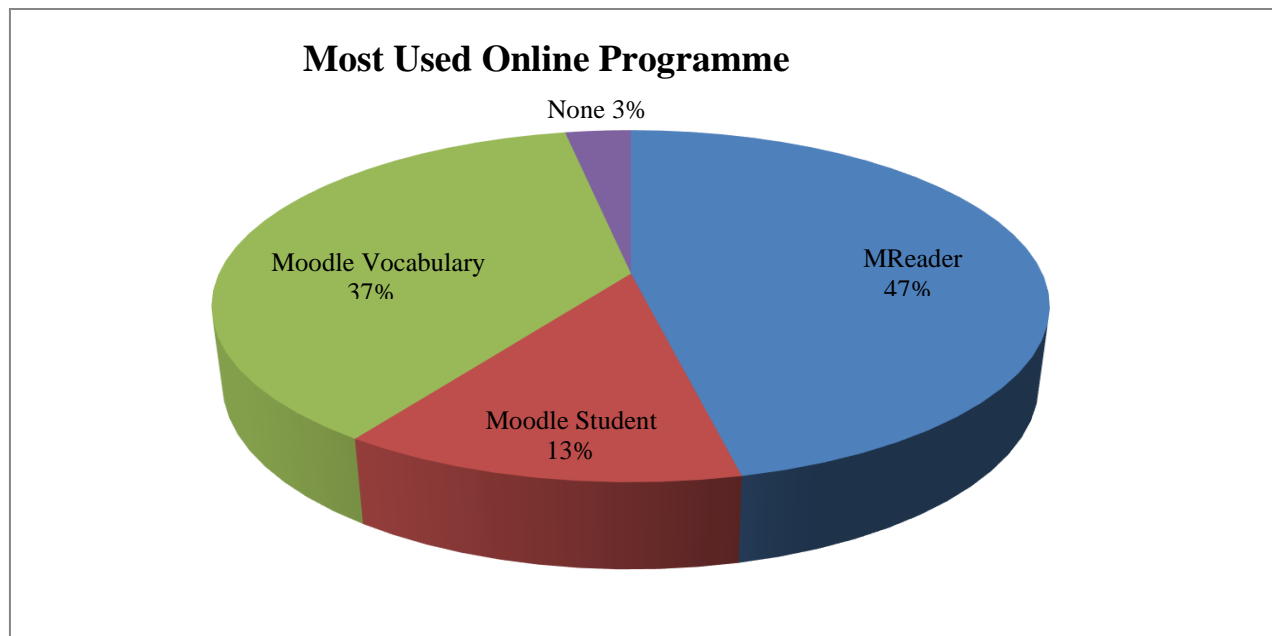
**Figure 1:** *Online tool preferences of level-three students (n = 277)*

The MReader quiz management site has more than 6,000 quizzes, covering popular graded reader series, adapted literature, and youth literature (Extensive Reading Foundation, 2020). There is a fairly large degree of student autonomy involved in using this website, as users select the stories to read (within their set level) and then complete a quiz based on what they have chosen to read. This type of autonomy has been shown to correlate with positive responses to online instruction (Liaw, 2007). Moodle Student provides a platform for students to practise reading and listening, answer quizzes related to class content, exchange ideas, and get involved in discussions. Few of the respondents chose Moodle as their preferred tool, which may be because it is not graded and completion is entirely optional. Moreover, the pressure of meeting the time and work commitments of the other components of the level-three programme could be a factor. As teachers are free to use this component as they wish, it is very difficult to determine which features made it so unpopular. Moodle Vocabulary, on the other hand, allows participants to learn vocabulary in context from short texts and listening passages and to take quizzes on the meanings of words. The 24% of the students who chose this as their preferred tool seem to prioritise the benefits of vocabulary exposure and practice. The two tools based on a behaviourist



approach (MReader and Moodle vocabulary) are the preferred options among students, which lends support for the idea that this is the approach students become accustomed to in high school, while the more constructivist-based online discussions (Carbonell, 2004) offered by Moodle are more ‘alien’ and challenging for students. As mentioned in the literature review, Oman has not yet embraced constructivist-oriented online activities, due to student resistance and a lack of teacher training, which is in line with the findings here.

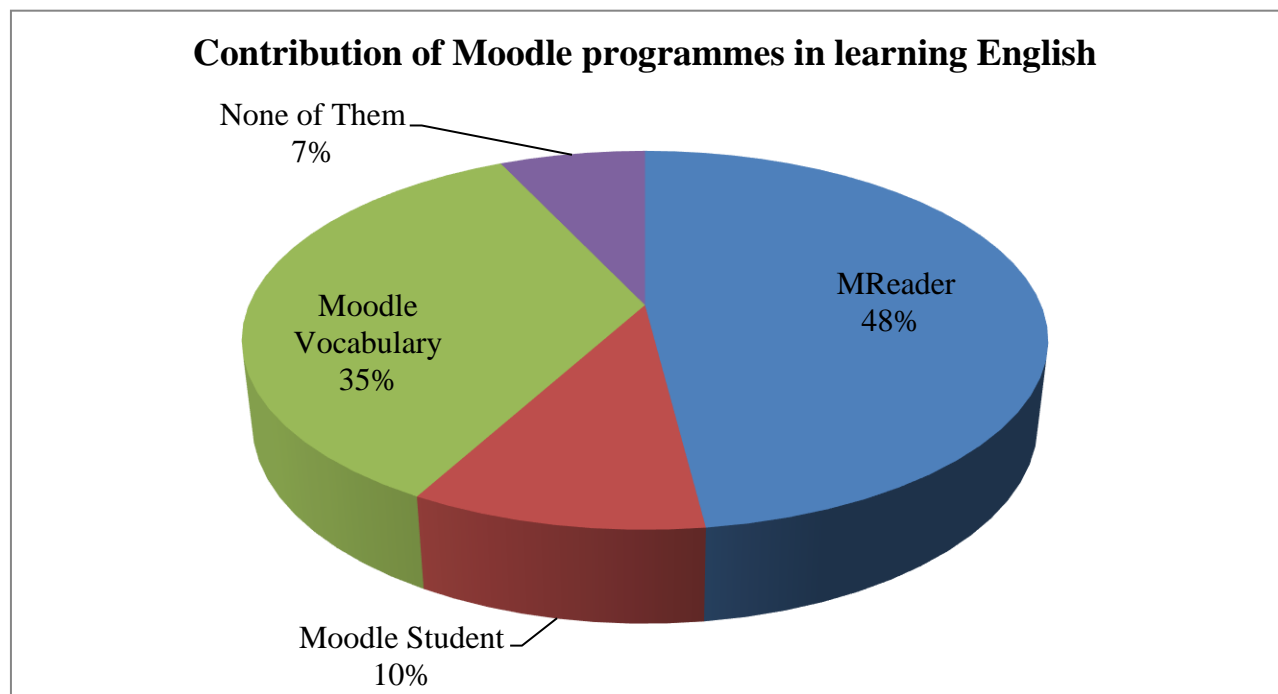
It is perhaps unsurprising that the relative popularity of online tools is reflected in their usage. Almost half of the participants (46%) indicated that they used MReader more often than the Moodle programmes in their level-three courses. Conversely, 13% indicated that they had used Moodle Student more often in their learning, while 37% cited Moodle Vocabulary. Surprisingly, despite some being graded, 3% of the sample said they had not used any of the three online tools in their studies. Figure 2 shows a graphical representation of the above statistics.



**Figure 2:** *Most frequently used online programmes by students (n = 277)*

In terms of how students perceived the usefulness of the online tools (see Figure 3), 48% found MReader to be the most helpful for improving their English language proficiency. This is

perhaps unsurprising, considering it was also the most popular. One in 10 of the participants selected Moodle Student as the most effective online resource, and 35% opted for Moodle Vocabulary. A small percentage (7%) indicated that none of the online resources had helped them, which is similar to the number who said that they had not previously used any of them. These proportions of perceived usefulness reflect the students' preferences for and usage of the online tools. Again, this could be evidence of a preference for behaviourist-based approaches to instruction as this is the model with which students are most familiar, or it could simply be a reflection of use – in effect, the more students use an online tool, the more learning they believe has been accomplished.



**Figure 3:** Perceptions of the contribution of online tools to learning English (n = 277)

Many respondents (42%) claimed that they needed help when using Moodle Vocabulary, while just 15% and 20% said that they had experienced challenges that required help with MReader and Moodle Students, respectively. The substantial proportion of students who have needed help with Moodle Vocabulary highlights an issue raised by the teachers in interviews –

namely that many believe cheating is a significant issue with Moodle Vocabulary quizzes. Hinkel (2006) argues that difficulties with using online tools are common in such learning environments, thus teacher guidance is vital (Hrastinski, 2009).

It also emerged that most respondents were content with the online resources. One hundred and sixty-eight students (60%) were of the opinion that none of the online tools were a ‘waste of time’ and were all in some way helpful for their studies. Just 9% viewed MReader as a waste of time, but slightly more (11% and 17%, respectively) viewed Moodle Students and Moodle Vocabulary negatively. This majority support for online learning tools is backed up by the literature. For example, Gowande (2015), using the blended learning acceptance model, found Omani university students to have highly positive views of online learning. The negative impressions of Moodle Vocabulary could be attributed to the small grade percentage allotted to these quizzes in relation to the effort made by the students and the difficulty that some had with the platform (reflected in the level of help required for this tool, compared to that of the others). Table 1 below presents the combined data discussed above.

**Table 1:** *Student's Moodle preferences*

Questionnaire questions	Responses provided								Total	
	MReader		Moodle Students		Moodle Vocabulary		None of them			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Which type of online tool do you like?</b>	182	60	31	10	74	24	17	6	277	100
<b>Which online tool have you used more at this level?</b>	140	46	38	13	113	37	8	3	277	100
<b>Which online tool helped you improve your English?</b>	151	48	30	10	110	35	21	7	277	100
<b>Which online tool do you usually need help with while using it?</b>	42	15	57	20	123	42	65	23	277	100
<b>Which course do you think is a waste of time?</b>	23	9	30	11	45	17	168	63	277	100

As shown in Table 2 below, most of the students (88%) used MReader by themselves, while just over 67% reported using Moodle Vocabulary without outside help. Whether this assistance constituted cheating was unclear, as it was not revealed whether the help was of a technical nature or whether it concerned the answers. However, teachers reported that cheating was a significant problem with MReader, the online quiz platform. Alienation has been cited as a problem when engaging in online activities (Cole, 2008), and students may be seeking help as a result of this.

**Table 2:** Responses regarding online tool preferences

Questionnaire questions	Responses provided								Total	
	My own		With help		On campus		Off-campus			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>How do you use MReader?</b>	245	88	32	12	-	-	-	-	277	100
<b>How do you use Moodle Vocabulary?</b>	185	67	92	33	-	-	-	-	277	100
<b>What is your preference for studying Moodle?</b>	-	-	-	-	216	78	61	22	277	100

Most respondents reported a preference for studying online on campus (78%), and a relatively small proportion said they preferred to complete online activities off campus (22%). The preference for on-campus study may be due to some audio files not opening off campus and internet services being free and generally better on SQU campus, compared to outside. Additionally, for some students, home computers and internet access remain unaffordable. Almost all the females studying at SQU live on campus (where men are not allowed), which could be another reason for most students preferring on-campus study. Al-Ani (2013) revealed that problems with devices were the biggest challenge for SQU students when using Moodle; thus, further probing in this area could reveal whether this was another reason for this preference.

Regarding the challenges students reported with the online tools (see Table 3), some 21 of the 142 respondents (14%) strongly agreed that the instructions provided for the online exercises were often unclear. Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not provide an opportunity for

the students to specify which online tool they believed had unclear instructions. In contrast, 58% of respondents disagreed that the online materials had unclear instructions; and around 27% were unsure about the clarity of instructions. Therefore, the instructions appear to be clear for most students, which could be taken as evidence that the online tools – designed by teachers from SQU (Moodle courses) and outside (MReader) – were designed with the needs of the lower level students in mind. This is despite some researchers claiming that the material design in Oman is often lacking in quality (e.g., Waterman, 2015).

**Table 3:** *Challenges encountered while doing exercises on Moodle*

Challenges encountered while doing exercises on Moodle	Responses provided						Total	
	<b>Strongly agree</b>		<b>Disagree</b>		<b>Not sure</b>			
	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Unclear instructions for Moodle exercises</b>	21	14	83	58	38	27	142	100
<b>The laboratories at the language centre have poor services</b>	31	21	45	24	51	34	148	100
<b>Moodle content is difficult</b>	17	11	86	58	45	30	148	100
<b>Insufficient time for completing Moodle</b>	37	26	51	36	55	39	142	100
<b>Poor computing skills</b>	25	24	44	42	35	34	104	100
<b>Poor English proficiency</b>	34	20	78	46	58	34	170	100

Approximately 21% of the participants said that the LC computer laboratories had poor services, while 45% disagreed and a third (34%) were unsure. This high level of satisfaction with the laboratories could further explain why most students opted to conduct online activities on-

campus, rather than off. As mentioned earlier, this aligns with the findings of Al-Ani (2013), who concludes that ‘frequent disturbance in computer devices’ is one of the greatest challenges for SQU students working on Moodle assignments. Therefore, students wishing to avoid these issues may choose to complete their online activities on campus in the computer laboratories.

Very few students held the opinion that the online content was difficult to manage. Just 11% of the participants agreed with this statement, while 58% disagreed. Around 30% of the participants were unsure. The fact that most students do not find the Moodle content excessively difficult can be taken as further evidence that the materials are designed at an appropriate level. Once again, this is supported by Al-Ani (2013), who found that most SQU students did not view difficulties with Moodle as a hindrance to their finishing the online exercises.

Asked whether the time given to complete the courses was insufficient, around 26% agreed that it was, while 36% disagreed. A further 55 students (39%) were unsure. This question yielded the closest level of agreement between the participants. This perceived lack of time may partly explain why, according to the teachers, many students fail to complete the online activities. Al-Ani (2013) found that Omani tertiary students were not strongly concerned about having sufficient time to complete Moodle homework, and this is reflected in the above results. Several factors could be contributing to the lack of time reported by 26% of the students, including poor time management and excessive pressure from tests, homework, projects, presentations, and reports. Many students are unaccustomed to self-directed work (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012), and they may find it difficult to work autonomously on these online activities. Procrastination has also been cited in studies as a problem with online learning (Czerkawski, 2010).

A quarter of the students (24% of 104) reported having poor computer skills, which may affect their ability to submit work on time. Computing skills are obviously vital for a student to effectively utilise online resources. As touched on earlier, limited proficiency in this area could be

a result of students coming from remote areas in Oman where technology is less prevalent in homes and schools. A large proportion of students, however, either disagreed (42%) that poor computing skills were a challenge for online learning, or were unsure about this (34%). Similarly, Al-Ani (2013) found that computer skills were not a major factor in struggles with online components of blended courses.

Some students (20% of 170 respondents) felt that their poor English proficiency affected their ability to complete the online exercises. However, 46% of the respondents disagreed with this suggestion and 34% were unsure. As previously mentioned, some students came from remote areas where high school English teaching and general exposure to English is less comprehensive than in other areas (Al-Issa, 2006b; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012), which may inhibit their abilities and confidence in completing the English-language learning activities.

The questionnaire also included a section comprised of six questions on the benefits and perceived usefulness of the online activities. The results from this section are presented below in Table 4 below.



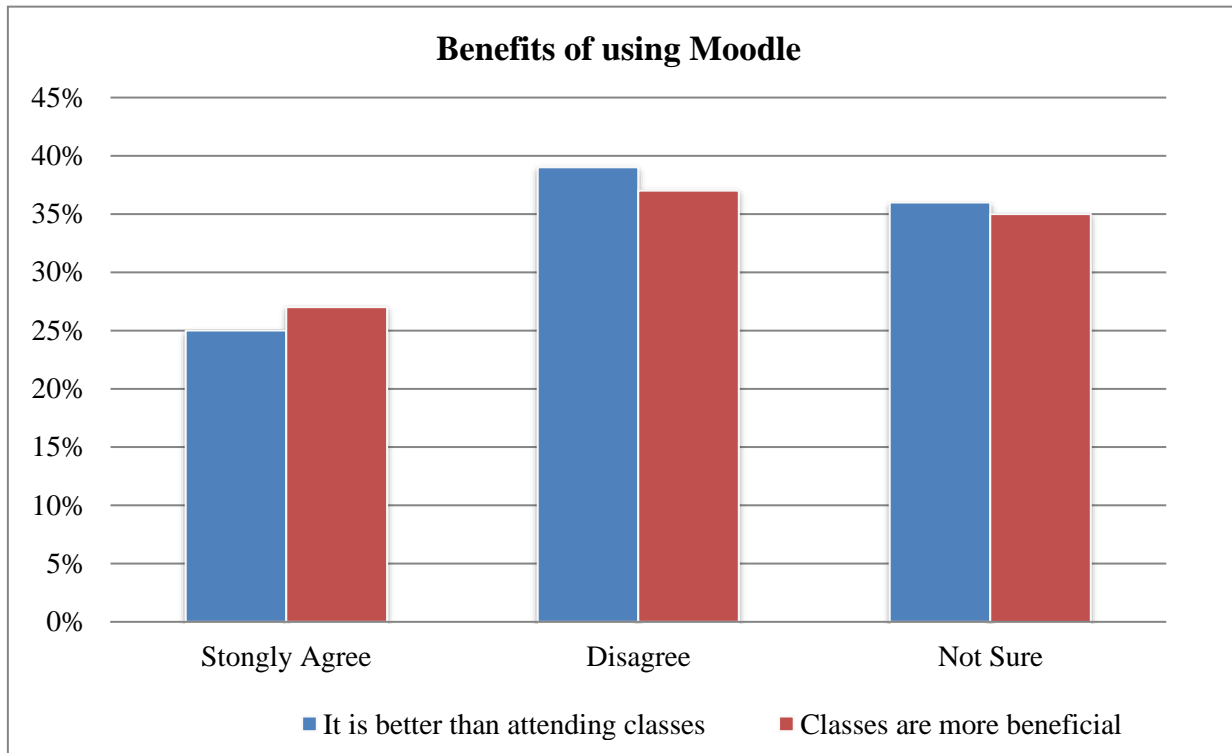
**Table 4:** *Benefits and perceived usefulness of the online activities*

What are the benefits of Moodle courses?	Responses provided						Total	
	Strongly agree		Disagree		Not Sure			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Online activities are better than attending classes</b>	37	25%	58	39%	54	36%	149	100
<b>Classes are more beneficial</b>	56	27%	77	37%	73	35%	206	100
<b>The online activities are more fun than classes</b>	41	23%	64	36%	74	41%	179	100
<b>Have helped improve English more than textbooks</b>	35	18%	87	44%	74	38%	196	100
<b>The activities help improve computing skills</b>	35	16%	66	30%	121	55%	222	100
<b>MReader and Moodle Vocabulary ('What's the right word?') has helped measure my improvement in English.</b>	43	20%	75	35%	97	45%	215	100

Around 25% of the students (37 of the 149) said that they preferred learning online to attending classes. However, 39% disagreed that using Moodle was better than attending classes, and approximately 36% of the participants were unsure.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, responses to the question of whether real-world classes were more beneficial for learning than Moodle had a very similar ratio: 27% (56 of 206) agreed, 37% disagreed, and 35% were unsure. The bar chart (Figure 5) and the pie chart (Figure 6) represent the above results. These results show that a large proportion of students (39%) preferred in-class instruction to the online alternative, which contradicts many other studies, which primarily show

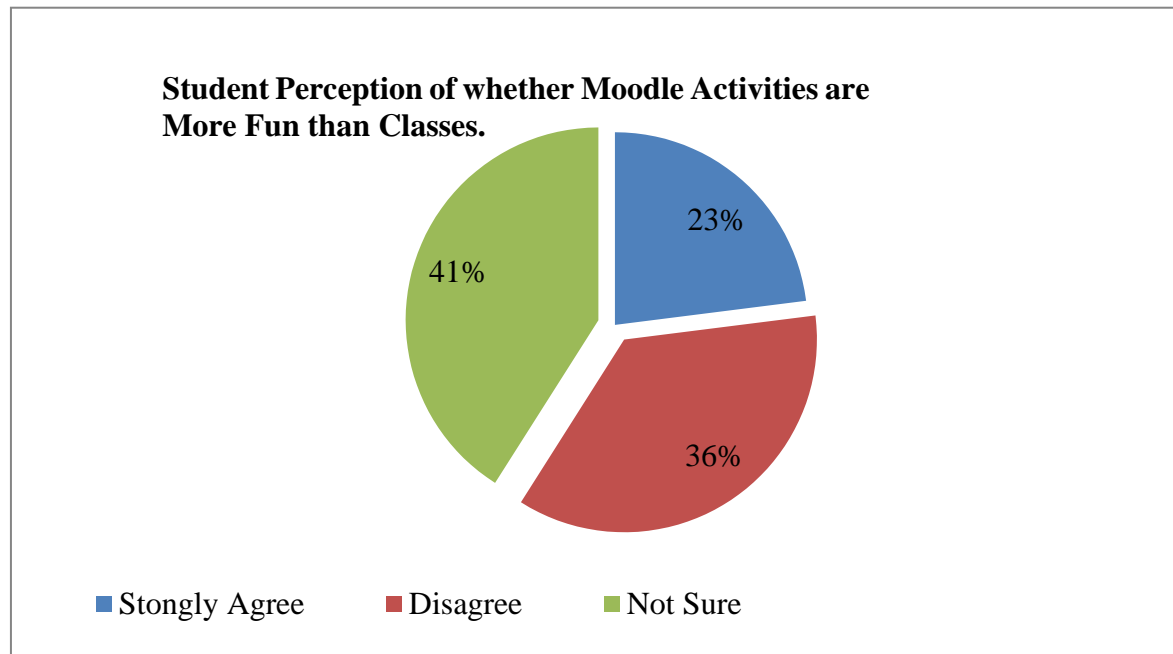
positive attitudes to online learning (e.g., Luppicini, 2007). However, the question here specifically asked the students to choose between the two modes – in other words, if they chose online learning over classroom learning, this did not mean that they disliked the latter, only that it was not their first choice.



**Figure 5:** *Benefits of using Moodle, as perceived by the language centre (LC) students*

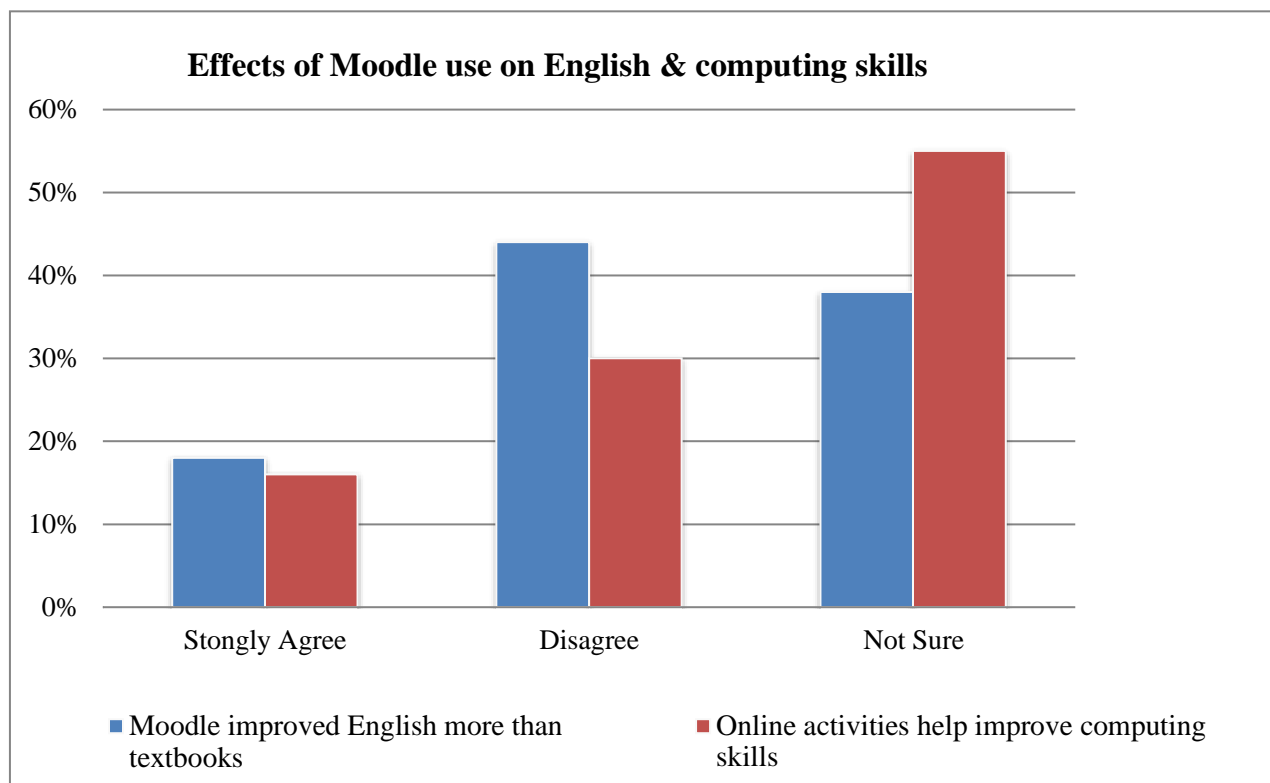
A third of the students (36%) disagreed that Moodle was more fun than classroom activities, while 23% of the students felt that it was (and 41% were unsure ). Figure 6 provides a representation of the above information. From the students’ responses, it is very difficult to gauge their perceptions of the usefulness of the online activities compared to classroom work, but it seems that a substantial proportion consider classes to be more fun than online activities. As the online activities are primarily based on a behaviourist approach, this preference for classroom work may lend support for the importance of social constructivism – or, the idea that human development depends on social contexts and that knowledge is acquired through interaction (Yang

& Wilson, 2006). This finding suggests that students prioritise human interaction, and online instruction may be missing this vital element. Interaction is included in the Moodle Student fora, but the lack of grading for these exercises (when teachers use them) means that students may not take them seriously, as learners tend to be very ‘grades-driven’ (Al Musawi, 2010b).



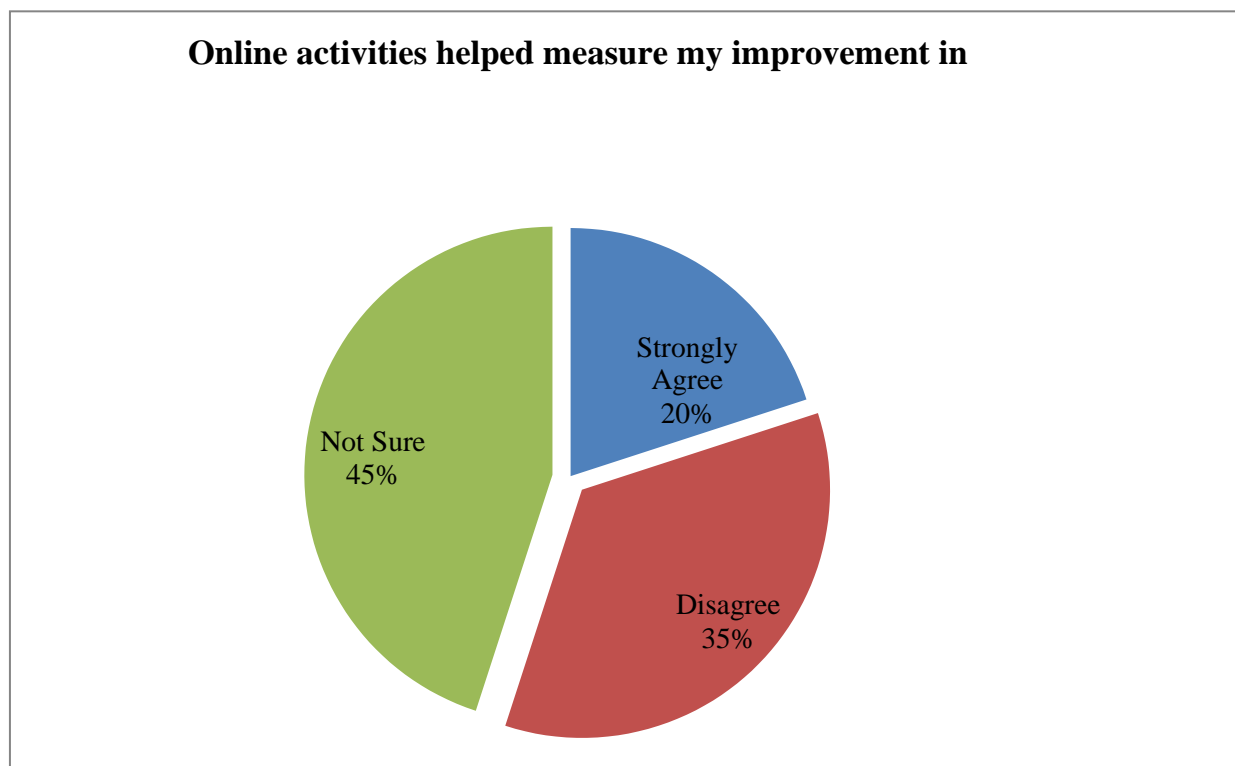
**Figure 6:** Student perceptions of whether Moodle activities are more fun than classroom activities

The questionnaire also investigated whether Moodle had more effectively helped the students to increase their English and computation skills, as compared to using textbooks. Only 18% of the students (35 of 196) agreed with this suggestion, whereas 44% disagreed. Around 38% of the participants were unsure. This clearly indicates that students tend to perceive textbooks as better for learning than online activities, which could stem from their preference for reading paper books over digital print. Stoop et al. (2013) note that this can be an issue with students, but they argue that it can be overcome. Just 16% of the participants (35 of 222) agreed that Moodle had helped them to improve their computing skills, while around 30% disagreed with this suggestion. Over half of the participants (55%) were unsure.



**Figure 7:** Student perceptions of the effects of Moodle use on English and computing skills at the language centre (LC)

The final question concerned the benefits of online exercises for measuring improvement in English language learning. Just one-fifth of the respondents (43 of 215) agreed that the online activities had helped them to measure improvements in their English skills. Notably, more than half of the participants (55%) were unsure as to whether the online activities had helped them measure improvements in their English language skills, and more than a third (35%) disagreed with the suggestion. Figure 8 (below) presents a detailed breakdown of the responses to this question. The relatively large proportion of respondents who were ‘unsure’ suggests that these students are not necessarily in the habit of self-assessment, a practice which Ellis (2015) describes as vital for effective language learning.



**Figure 8:** *Student perceptions of whether online activities help to measure improvement in English (n = 215)*

#### **4.3.2 Language centre (LC) students' perceptions of conventional materials**

This section addresses the findings on perceptions of conventional learning materials used in level-three English language learning. The students were asked to choose between textbooks on four topics: listening, reading, writing, and study skills. As previously mentioned, the listening and reading books are commercial textbooks, while the study skills and writing textbooks were designed in-house by LC teachers. Table 5 shows a breakdown of the results for this section.

**Table 5: Students' attitudes towards conventional materials**

Questions related to conventional materials	Responses provided (Students could select more than one)								Total selections
	Listening		Reading		Writing		Study skills		A total of 277 students responded
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No. of responses
<b>Which textbook/s do you prefer?</b>	93	33	130	47	46	17	81	29	350
<b>Which textbook/s do you not like?</b>	49	18	68	24	106	38	57	21	280
<b>Which textbook/s do you think is/are useful?</b>	99	36	112	40	55	20	101	36	367
<b>Which textbook/s help(s) you to improve in English?</b>	135	47	106	38	60	10	80	15	381

The reading textbook was the most commonly preferred (47%), followed by the listening skills textbook (33%). The study skills textbook, which provides students with strategies for learning so as to gain the most from their language studies, was the third most preferred (29%); and the least liked of the four was the writing skills textbook, selected by just 17% of the students. This textbook provided the students with essential grammar and punctuation required for effective written communication and introduced the notion of 'writing as a process'.

Asked about the textbooks they disliked, 38% of the 277 respondents cited the writing skills textbook. This confirms the above finding that the writing textbook was not popular. The second most disliked textbook was the reading skills textbook (24%). The textbook on study skills was slightly less disliked, with 21% selecting this, and around 18% said they disliked the listening skills textbook.

As shown in Table 5, a significant percentage of the respondents (40%) suggested that the reading skills textbook was the most useful. This result suggests that students preferred this textbook because they found it the most useful. The listening and study skills textbooks were selected as the next most useful, with 36% choosing each. Only 20% described the writing textbook as useful.

The next question explored which textbooks students thought had helped them to improve their English language proficiency. Nearly half of the 277 participants (47%) felt that the listening and speaking textbooks had helped, while 38% cited the reading textbook. Only 15% were of the opinion that the study skills book was effective in this area, and the students had the lowest opinion of the efficacy of the writing textbook (10%).

These results highlight the positive perceptions of the commercial textbooks, which is in line with the findings of Al-Issa and Al-Balushi (2102), who note that in-house textbooks in Omani universities are considered visually unappealing. However, studies in the Western context have found positive responses to the contextualised content of in-house textbooks (Wedemeyer, 2010).

### **Open-ended questionnaire responses**

The open-ended questions in the student questionnaire produced some interesting findings (see Appendix B). The students cited various reasons as to why they liked the reading textbooks. They reported enjoying the stories in the textbooks and said they provided ‘clear’, ‘useful’, and ‘necessary’ skills. The reading textbook also provided them with what they considered to be new vocabulary, structure, and topics related to their daily lives. In addition, some students felt that this textbook left them more prepared for classes and increased their ‘experience in life’. Some also said that the textbook enabled them to identify their weak points and become faster readers.

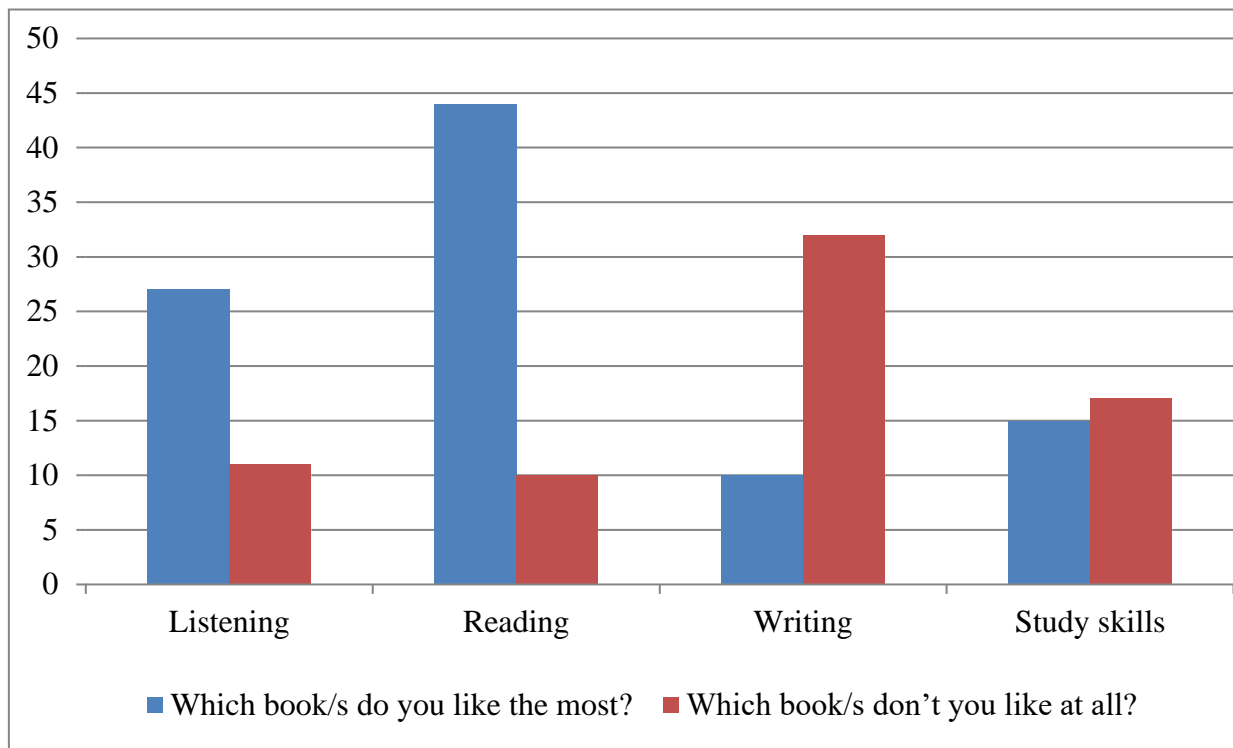
The textbook ‘attracts my attention’, being ‘full of images’, said one respondent. Asked about the study skills textbook, some students felt that the activities helped them to prepare for exams, providing them with essential topics, useful activities, varied ideas, and new vocabulary. Those who liked the writing books felt that the textbook developed their spelling, improved their grammar, taught them new English rules, and improved their writing skills.

Many reasons were also given for disliking the textbooks. Some students said the listening textbook was difficult to understand, contained difficult vocabulary, and wasted their time. Some expressed their dislike for the reading textbook on the grounds that it was too long and boring, containing difficult content and incomprehensible vocabulary. Moreover, they expressed that this textbook resulted in too much homework and insufficient time to complete the exercises. In addition, some felt that the reading books disregarded their cultural and religious values and included embarrassing topics. This echoes the conclusions of Wedemeyer (2010), who states that cultural inappropriateness is one reason why in-house language textbooks are often preferred. Similarly, in an Omani elementary school context, Al-Jardani (2012a) found in-house textbooks to be more relevant, engaging, and adaptable to blended courses.

The writing textbook, which students disliked more than any of the other textbooks, was criticised for failing to encourage imagination or creativity due to its lack of pictures. The students felt it did not improve their English and the content was vague. As mentioned earlier, the in-house textbooks in Omani universities are often viewed as less attractive (Al-Issa & Al-Balushi, 2012). Several students stated that the writing textbook was boring and covered uninteresting topics. In addition, some students pragmatically stated that these textbooks lacked examination preparation material, and some said that their perception of the quality of a textbook was dependent on how the teacher used it.



Those students who disliked the study skills textbook said that it was not useful, the content was too ‘easy’, it lacked clear organisation, and its activities were ‘vague’. As with the writing textbook, some students complained about a lack of pictures – a complaint common to all the in-house designed textbooks. Kashoob (2018) argues that the lack of images is a problem that needs addressing across all Omani ELT materials at the tertiary level, and she suggests the use of checklists to remedy deficiencies such as these. Figure 9 shows which textbooks the sample of 277 students liked and disliked. The bar chart highlights that the students preferred the commercial textbooks (reading and listening) over the in-house options (writing and study skills). As Waterman (2015) discovered, Omani language learning material writers (particularly on the topic of writing skills) often lack training and ability, and this may be reflected in the poor perceptions students had of the in-house textbooks.



**Figure 9:** Language centre (LC) students’ preferences for various level-three textbooks (n = 277) (respondents could choose more than one option)

The students' dislike for the SQU writing textbook may be attributable to many reasons. There are much higher expectations of students' writing ability when they reach university, compared to high school. In a high school English class, students may be expected to write up to one paragraph, without much attention to grammar or spelling. Level-three LC students, on the other hand, are asked to write multiple-paragraph essays, following a three-draft process, with correct grammar, and attend to new concepts such as coherence and cohesion. Trabelsi (2015) notes that writing is often the weakest English skill among Omani students, as it is among Arab students in general. This difficulty with writing could perhaps be reflected in the students' dislike of the writing textbook. However, reading is considered a weak skill for Omani and Arab students at all levels due to the lack of a reading culture (Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016), but this was not reflected in the students' responses to the reading textbook, which was the most popular.

The questionnaire also probed students' opinions of what was lacking in the available conventional materials. The students asserted that they preferred textbooks with variety, interesting content, easy and useful exercises, clear instructions, pictures, and content that is age appropriate and which addresses their needs. In addition, the students preferred books that increased their motivation and confidence, prepared them for real-life interactions, provided them with sufficient practice, and improved their interactions with their teachers. Several students proposed modifications, such as the inclusion of fun and interesting activities, exam practice, pictures in the reading textbook, some Arabic translations, and the exclusion of useless and repetitive topics. Other suggestions included shorter passages in the reading books, updated content, and increased ease and clarity. Some students boldly suggested scrapping the writing book entirely and even changing some teachers who relied on outdated methods of teaching. Overall, the students felt that more difficult topics and in-depth content should be included in the study skills book, the reading books should be made easier and more interesting, the listening and

speaking book should be separated in two, and the content should be added and simplified.

#### **4.4 Benefits and challenges of conventional and online materials in language teaching**

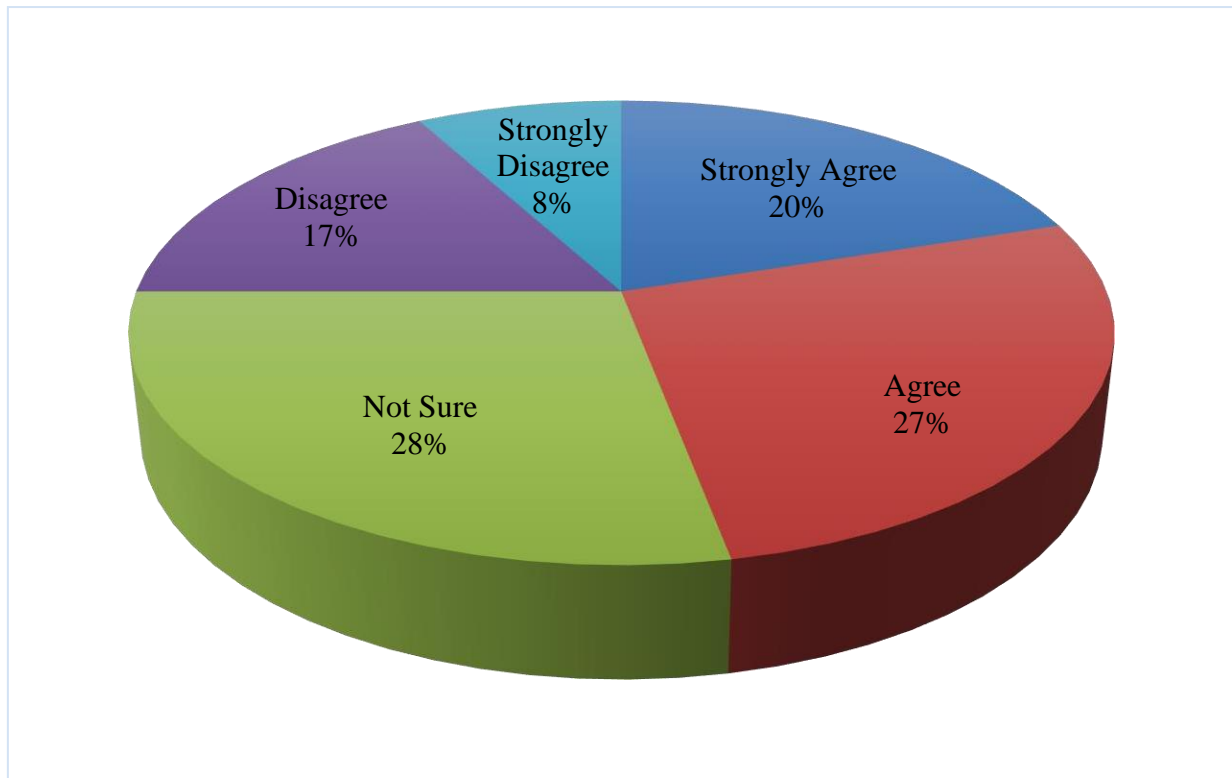
In addition to investigating students' attitudes towards the use of online and traditional learning materials for language teaching, this study explored students' views of the benefits and disadvantages of using these materials for language teaching at the LC. The results are presented in the following subsections.

#### **4.5 Perceived benefits of conventional and online materials for language teaching**

Almost a third of the sample (30.3%) disagreed that working on Moodle was better than attending classes, and another 17% strongly disagreed, while 19.5% agreed, 13.4% strongly agreed, and 20.9% were unsure. Thus, considerably more students (47.3%) were in favour of in-class activities, with just 32.5% favouring online instruction.

When participants were asked to compare the benefits of conventional learning with those of online learning through Moodle, 47% agreed that attending classes was more beneficial than using Moodle alone (with 20% of these strongly agreeing), 25% disagreed (8% strongly so), and 28% were unsure. These findings (see Figure 10) corroborate those of the previous question and indicate that almost twice as many students prefer in-class activities over online instruction. If these results indicate that students value the collaborative aspects of in-class instruction, perhaps more instructor or tutor support could be built into the online activities. Online participation by teachers was described as lacking by some of the students; and, according to the theory of interaction and communication, some form of conversation (synchronous or, more practically, asynchronous) is required to motivate students in online environments (Holmberg, 2005). The theory of independence and autonomy and learner independence as the basis of online learning places value on responsive teacher involvement, which is thought to lead to more positive perceptions of e-learning experiences (Liaw et al., 2007). The wide variety of responses from

students reflect the findings of Fraser (2015), who argues that cultural differences, ability, and speed of processing all affect students' perceptions of online environments. Further research is needed to untangle the relationships between these different factors.



**Figure 10:** *Percentage of language centre (LC) learners who believe that attending class is preferable to completing Moodle activities (n = 277)*

Most participants agreed (61.2%) or strongly agreed (14.8%) that using Moodle is more fun than attending a regular lesson, while just 22.4% disagreed and 10.1% strongly disagreed with this statement. Approximately 23.1% were unsure. Thus, 75.8% of students agreed that Moodle is more fun than classroom work alone, compared to 32.5% who had more fun in class. This result suggests that students do not necessarily consider 'fun' to mean 'better', as Moodle was perceived to be more 'fun', but the classroom lessons were thought to be 'better'. Again, this hints that the social aspect of classes makes them preferable for students, compared with the limited scope of online quizzes, designed with behaviourist principles in mind (Weegar & Pacis, 2012).

A significant proportion (61.2%) agreed that Moodle activities assisted in improving their English skills, and 12.6% strongly agreed. Just 19.5% disagreed and 9.7% strongly disagreed, while 31.4% were unsure. Overall, therefore, most students (72.8%) agreed that Moodle was helpful, and just 30.2% disagreed. Jared (2014) concludes that language students can evaluate the usefulness of their online activities; and as the perception of effectiveness is known to be important for learning in Omani universities (Shaikh, Al-Azawi, & Mond, 2011), this strong belief in online learning is a promising sign.

Another benefit of Moodle, as indicated by the results, was an improvement in the participants' computer skills. About 43.6% agreed that Moodle was helpful for improving computer skills, and a further 12.6% strongly agreed. Just 11.9% disagreed and 9.7% strongly disagreed, and the remainder (23.8%) were unsure. Therefore, most students (56.2%) agreed that Moodle activities played a role in improving their computer skills, and only 35.7% disputed this. Improvements in computer skills can be considered an additional benefit of online components to language courses, and the Oman government has set this as a goal – alongside English language proficiency – for improving workplace readiness (Al Balushi & Griffiths, 2013).

**Table 6:** *A comparison of the benefits of conventional and online learning materials*

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not sure		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
<b>Working on Moodle is better than attending classes</b>	37	13.4	54	19.5	58	20.9	84	30.3	47	17	277
<b>The classes I attend with the teacher are more beneficial than working on my own on Moodle</b>	56	20.2	73	26.4	77	27.8	46	16.6	23	8.3	277
<b>In general, Moodle activities are more fun than attending regular classes</b>	41	14.8	74	26.7	64	23.1	69	22.4	28	10.1	277
<b>In general, Moodle activities help to improve my English more than the textbooks we use in class</b>	35	12.6	74	26.7	87	31.4	54	19.5	27	9.7	277
<b>I feel that Moodle activities have helped to improve my computing skills</b>	35	12.6	121	43.6	66	23.8	33	11.9	22	7.9	277
<b>I feel that the grades I get from MReader and ‘What’s the right word?’ measure my improvement in English</b>	43	15.5	97	35.0	75	27.1	43	15.5	17	6.1	

#### 4.6 Perceived disadvantages of using conventional and online materials in language teaching at LC

Figure 7 shows the results for the questions on the perceived disadvantages of online learning, as compared to conventional learning.

**Table 7:** *Disadvantages of using online learning materials, in comparison with conventional learning materials, at the language centre (LC)*

What challenges do you encounter when completing exercises on Moodle?	Strongly agree		Agree		Not sure		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
<b>Instructions for the Moodle exercises are not clear</b>	21	7.6	38	13.7	83	30	95	34.3	40	14.4
<b>The laboratories at the language centre (LC) have poor services</b>	31	11.2	51	18.4	66	23.8	87	31.4	40	14.4
<b>Moodle content is difficult</b>	17	6.1	45	16.2	86	31	91	32.9	33	11.9
<b>Insufficient time is given to complete the Moodle activities</b>	37	13.4	55	19.9	51	18.4	83	30	48	17.3
<b>I have poor computing skills</b>	25	9	35	12.6	44	15.9	69	24.9	92	33.2
<b>I feel that grades I get from MReader and Moodle Vocabulary measure my improvement in English</b>	34	12.3	58	20.9	78	28.2	84	30	24	8.7

From this table, we can see that 34.3% of the respondents disagreed that the instructions for Moodle exercises were clear and 14.4% strongly disagreed. A smaller percentage agreed (13.7%) and 7.6% strongly felt that they were clear, and 30% were unsure. Thus, almost half of the students (48.7%) found the instructions unclear, compared with 21.3% who were happy with the clarity. As mentioned previously, a lack of online teacher support seems to be a concern; and addressing this issue could resolve problems such as the unclear instructions.

On the quality of services found in the LC laboratories, 31.4% disagreed and 14.4% strongly disagreed that the services were poor. Around 18.4% agreed that the services were poor, and 11.2% agreed strongly. Almost a quarter 23.8% were unsure. This indicates that more students were happy with the quality of the services in the LC laboratories (45.8%), with just 29.6% stating that they were poor. Without knowing exactly what the students perceive to be poor (e.g., the internet provision, hardware, software, opening hours), it is difficult to compare these results with those of previous research, but Al-Ani (2013) found university network issues to be the second biggest challenge when completing online study, suggesting technical issues are an ongoing concern.

In response to the question on the difficulty of Moodle content, most students (44.8%) did not find it difficult (32.9% disagreeing with this statement and 11.9% strongly disagreeing). However, a smaller proportion (22.3%) found the content challenging to some degree (16.2% agreed and 6.1% strongly agreed). A relatively large group (31%) were unsure. These responses are difficult to decipher without further research on the exact nature of this difficulty and whether it is leading to variation in outcomes.

Almost half of the students (47.3%) disagreed that the time allocated to complete Moodle was insufficient, with 30% disagreeing and 17.3% strongly disagreeing. Around 19.9% agreed that there was not enough time allocated to Moodle, and 13.4% strongly agreed – giving a total of



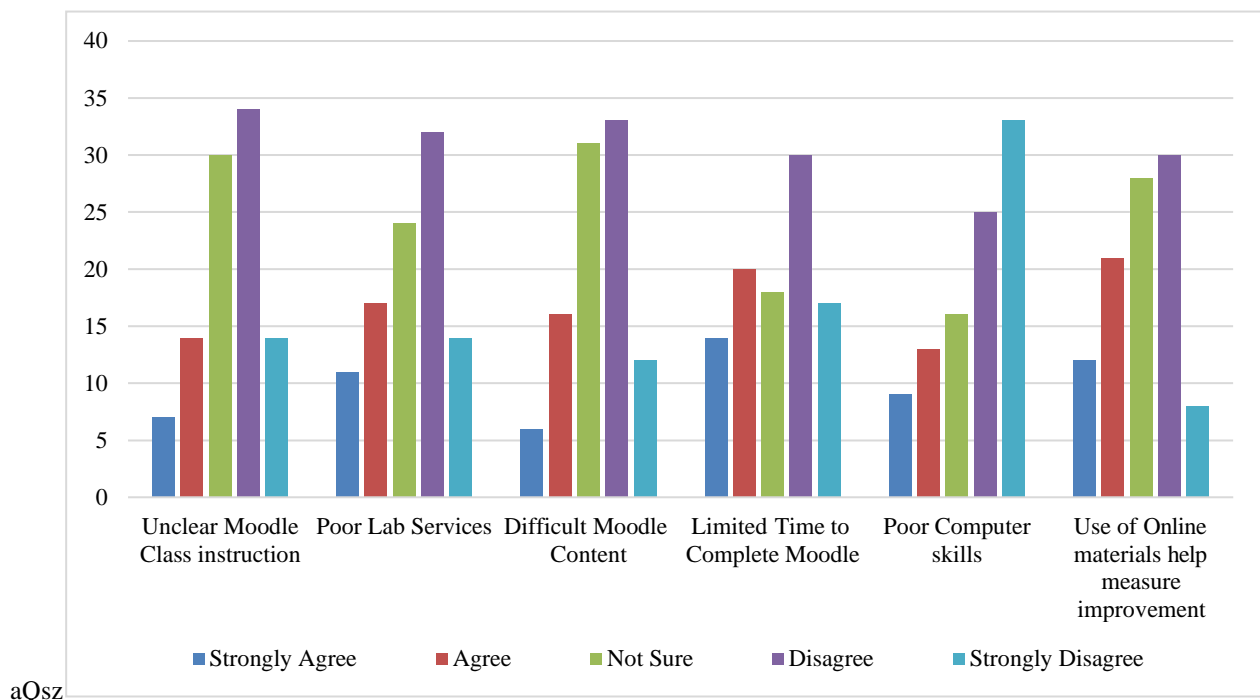
33.3%. Approximately 18.4% of respondents were unsure. This suggests that students need training in time management, which Al Musawi (2010b) also found to be an issue for online learning.

A large proportion (58.1%) disagreed that inadequate computer skills were a disadvantage in online learning, with 24.9% disagreeing and 33.2% disagreeing strongly. Around 15.9% were unsure. A relatively small number of students agreed that a lack of computer skills was a problem (21.6%), with approximately 12.6% agreeing and 9% strongly agreeing. This low level of disagreement supports the claim of Al-Ani (2013) that computer skills are perceived as a very insignificant challenge to online learning at SQU.

Finally, the results indicate that students were split reasonably evenly on the perceived usefulness of online activities for measuring improvement in language learning. Overall, 38.7% disagreed to some extent, while 33.2% agreed that it was useful. Breaking these numbers down further, 30% of the respondents disagreed, 8.7% disagreed strongly, around 20.9% agreed, and 12.3% agreed strongly. Approximately 28.2% were unsure. Several reasons can be postulated as to why students found the online tools useful for measuring their performance and improvement in English. First, the activities are graded, which may make it possible to gauge improvement based on quiz scores. Second, for MReader, the students can compare themselves with others from SQU and other institutions in terms of the number of stories they had read. If they have read more stories than other students, they may feel this reflects their progress in English. The 38.7% who felt that the activities did not measure their achievement may have found the course was too short to gauge progress. According to the IELTS handbook (2002), 200 engaged classroom hours are required to improve by one IELTS band score. Over the course of level three, LC students have around 270 hours; thus, there is perhaps insufficient time for students to detect clear progress, especially without the self-assessment training that Ellis (2015) deems essential. As Ahn (2000)

says of Korean students, ‘Despite students having spent a thousand hours learning English in the classroom, they are still unable to communicate in English’, which illustrates that exposure to English does not necessarily equate to results that teachers, let alone students, can detect. Further evidence for the difficulty in gauging progress comes from Edmunds, Thorpe, and Conole (2012), who suggest that, despite thousands of impact studies on the use of online learning for student achievement, it remains difficult to quantify.

Figure 11 provides a summary of the results on the perceived disadvantages of online materials.



**Figure 11:** A summary of the challenges to using online materials at the language centre (LC) (n = 277).

#### 4.7 Discussion

According to Brophy (2013), the major strengths of an e-learning programme lie in its capacity to offer differentiated instruction, to motivate, and to enable activities that are difficult to recreate in conventional classes. Meta studies such as that by Means et al. (2010) have mainly

been positive on the effectiveness of blended instruction. However, in line with the results of this study, research from around the world has found that students still often prefer classroom content to online material (Celik & Yesilyurt, 2013). Regarding online instruction in a Russian context, Emelyanova and Voronina (2017) state that there is ‘no clear evidence that this type of language instruction is fully embraced by language learners, nor is it viewed by them as a form of linguistic support’ (p. 36). They argue that students praise the convenience and flexibility of online components, but find motivation and effectiveness to be lacking. One of the main reasons why online content is less often preferred by students is that it is not thought of as effective for improving language (Brophy, 2013). This is in line with the findings of Al-Ani (2013), who concludes that Omani university students perceive Moodle to have limited effectiveness in terms of motivation, achievement, and communication. This may be why a large proportion of the students in this study said that online activities were less effective than classroom instruction. Part of the reason for this dislike of online materials could be increased anxiety, which Edmunds et al. (2012) cite as a major influence on motivation in a Western context, while Al-Ani found that anxiety had a moderate to low impact on SQU students’ online learning through Moodle in different colleges.

The results of this study indicate that e-learning motivates some LC students more than others; as some described it as more fun and beneficial for learning English than in-class work, though these students appear to be in the minority. In Western contexts, students often find it more interesting to study using their personal computers, rather than textbooks (e.g., Ku et al., 2013), which is consistent with findings on SQU students. For example, Osman and Ahmed (2003) conclude that the implementation of e-learning considerably enhanced student motivation. Al-Qahtani and Higgins (2013) note that, when ICT is well integrated into learning, it promotes the teacher-student relationship and makes learning more fun and meaningful, while

improving motivation, attitudes, and performance and resulting in long-term engagement and learning for Arab students. This is evident, to some degree, in the current research, where almost 39% of the participants said the online programmes had helped them improve their English language skills more than textbooks.

Most students selected MReader as their favourite online component, which implies that this is well designed and utilised and motivating. This opens up the possibility that, if the other online programmes such as Moodle were professionally designed by an outside organisation, they too could be popular among the students. Another reason for students preferring MReader could be that it was designed using a behaviourist approach, in that it tests low-level skills such as memory and basic reading comprehension with simple quizzes. Students are accustomed to this method from high school, where behaviourism-based instructional design is common due to tradition and a slow rate of conversion to constructivism-based instruction (Gasmi & Thomas, 2017). In addition, MReader has autonomy built into its design, as it enables the students to choose their own books. As explained in the literature review, the theory of independence and autonomy holds that more learner-centred instruction leads to more positivity towards instruction and greater independence (Liaw et al., 2007). Therefore, if this feature were built into other online activities in Moodle, this could enhance their popularity. The answer to increased autonomy at SQU may lie in the Hy-flex learning delivery used at SFU, where students can design a combination of online and classroom learning to suit their situation. This would not only give greater independence to learners, but also, supporting Oman's drive to provide more high school graduates with access to tertiary education, it could alleviate pressure on resources through more efficient, economical, and targeted instruction in line with the theory of industrialisation (Peters, 1988).

Many of the students sought help with the activities that had been designed to be done

individually, which indicates that the clarity of the instructions was an issue (as was reported by the students); and it also suggests that students are approaching the online exercises in a social manner. Therefore, the students may be ready for online activities of a more student-centred constructivist nature, involving collaboration and group participation (Siemens, 2008), which the Oman Ministry of Education claims to promote (Al-Jardani, 2012b). As social bonding is also an overarching objective of the SQU LC (Tuzlukova et al., 2019), the social aspect of online learning deserves more attention.

When asked their views about the conventional learning materials, most students expressed a high regard for the textbooks they were supplied with, indicating they preferred classroom instruction to online activities. This is in line with the findings of Ku et al. (2013), who suggest that most American distance university students preferred textbooks to e-learning materials, as textbooks are tangible and more comfortable to use. However, as with most of the questionnaire results, there was a relatively large group at the other end of the continuum who did not enjoy using conventional learning resources. Some students preferred online instruction to attending classes (32%) and found Moodle more fun than textbook content (40%). The reasons for these preferences could be numerous, including teacher differences and the view that online learning is more engaging than conventional learning (Celik & Yesilyurt, 2013). This preference for online materials aligns with findings by Al-Ani (2008), who concludes that online materials are preferred by most students learning English as a foreign language in a college in Oman due to what they describe as improved ‘participation in learning’, communication, and knowledge. In a different study, Beetham and Sharpe (2013) found that the use of computers reduced dependence on the teacher and promoted flexibility in learning, which promoted autonomy (Chikwa et al., 2018) and resulted in cost savings (Baker & Passmore, 2016). Beetham and Sharpe (2013) note that the use of textbooks and other hard-copy materials involves substantial expense in the long-term,

compared with online learning materials, which can be shared among a large number of students. Due to Oman's challenging financial situation and the pressure on it to reform its language education provision while cutting costs (Al Riyami, 2016), the development of its online learning capabilities seems more important than ever.

Moreover, the use of online materials was found to be more fun than working with conventional learning materials. This view was expressed by 61.2% of the students, who stated that Moodle was more enjoyable than attending the regular class lessons. The respondents said that computers enhanced the presentation of learning materials in ways that made them more attractive than traditional learning methods. These results are similar to those of Verdugo and Belmonte (2007), who conclude that online learning materials are more engaging and student-oriented than conventional learning materials and can be easily tailored to meet the specific needs of students.

This study has also uncovered some perceived advantages of conventional learning materials. First, the results indicate that many respondents (46.6%) found guidance from teachers to be important. They agreed that working with a teacher was preferable to doing personal Moodle classes. A small portion (24.9%) felt that using Moodle was better than working with a teacher, thus conventional learning was preferred by the majority of participants, despite being less fun. This supports the contention of Jared (2014) that students can properly evaluate online learning materials, generally having the maturity to accept that 'fun' does not necessarily mean 'useful'. It also suggests that, until online activities are designed to maximise collaboration and provide a sense of support and community, students will continue to prefer classroom interaction. A study by Al Saadi et al. (2017) that examined SQU students' perceptions of e-books found that, while students are familiar with e-books, they prefer the paper form and may need more time and encouragement to fully embrace digital reading material. Al Saadi et al. (2017) suggest that the

dislike for online materials in general may be partially explained by the finding that most Omani university students in their study (69%) had an aversion to reading digital content, thus preferring paper books over e-books.

The literature review and the data analysis in this work indicate that online learning faces a number of challenges. A certain level of computer skill is evidently a prerequisite for learners to use the online tools. The results here indicate that a considerable portion of the participants (21.6%) lacked the basic knowledge required to access and use online materials. The implication of this is that a large number of students may not have the opportunity to benefit from online learning materials. This is supported by studies such as that of Garrett (2009), which was conducted in the West and concludes that challenges around the use of computers make it difficult to adopt computerised learning. A more recent study by Al Saadi et al. (2017) found that 77% of Omani college students said training in the use of online material was important or very important. More needs analysis and support is needed to help students.

This study also found that the use of online learning materials can be affected by external distractions. These distractions come from other apps, games, websites, and online adverts, which all compete for the students' attention. This reflects the findings of Saadi et al. (2017), which suggest that Omani tertiary students experience distractions and health problems as major disadvantages in accessing online content. Furthermore, the results of the student survey indicate that it is difficult for a student to monitor the progress of their language learning, though this may be due to the short duration of the course and a lack of training in self-assessment – something that Ellis (2015) claims is essential for language learners.

Some respondents found the use of conventional learning materials unappealing. In this study, 76% of the respondents considered conventional learning materials to be 'boring'. Only 32.4% found them as enjoyable as online sources. This could be due to the type of materials on

offer in each mode. For example, online materials may be perceived as more visually appealing to Omani university students due to media use (Wheeler et al., 2008), and these same students may be proceeding at their own pace and working more autonomously (Gawande, 2015).

#### **4.8 Chapter summary**

This chapter presented an analysis and discussion of the results concerning students' attitudes towards the integration of e-learning into education. It emerged from the analysis that most of the students had positive perceptions of the use of both online and traditional learning materials to support language teaching.

The following chapter presents the qualitative results on the instructors' perceptions of the use of online and traditional learning materials. The chapter also highlights what instructors perceive to be the benefits and disadvantages of these types of teaching material.



## **CHAPTER V - THE QUALITATIVE STUDY: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The qualitative component of the study sought to expand upon the quantitative findings reported in the previous chapter and uncover why the respondents took their negative or positive stances. The qualitative results are presented here in two sections: one concerns the qualitative analysis of the results obtained from the semi-structured interviews, and the second is a discussion of the findings.

### **5.2 Qualitative data collection and preparations for the analysis**

As described in the methodology chapter, the qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the respondents were selected using a stratified sampling technique. This technique was employed to help recruit participants from various language teaching backgrounds, as discussed in section 6.3. Using this sampling strategy, 13 respondents were recruited.

At the end of each interview session, the information obtained was summarised, and the relevant quotes and interpretations were read back to the interviewees to ensure they had been accurately expressed and recorded. The content analysis approach was then used to analyse the data. This essentially involves the interpretation of data in the form of text to uncover meaning and trends (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Following the interviews, the data were coded and key themes were identified from individual words and sentences (Cronin & Sugimoto, 2014). The number of teachers whose responses were categorised under each theme is reported. Although the use of numerical data in qualitative studies has been challenged by some researchers, Ritchie et al. (2013, p.34) argue that it is a valuable strategy that can provide supplementary support for

the evidence retrieved. In this case, the researcher used numerical data primarily to indicate the level of agreement among teachers, rather than making conclusive statements based on numeric calculations.

### **5.3 An overview of respondents' profiles**

All 13 respondents were instructors teaching level three English in the foundation programme at the LC in SQU. Ten of the respondents were female, and the others were male. Most were aged between 25 and 45 years. Two teachers were Omanis, and the others were from different the USA, the UK, Turkey, and Russia. The teachers had various qualifications, backgrounds, and experiences. Some held bachelor's degrees and others had master's degrees, and two had obtained PhD. The teachers were diverse in terms of their age, education, and experience, and this was reflected in their attitudes towards the use of online and traditional learning materials for supporting language teaching. The next section provides a presentation of the results obtained from these interviews.

### **5.4 Research procedure for qualitative study**

To ensure reliable results, and in accordance with the objectives of this research, teachers with full teaching schedules were chosen, rather than those only teaching one or two skills. This was because the interviews concerned all four English language skills (listening, speaking, writing, and reading) and study skills. Each teacher was given a copy of the intended questions prior to the actual interviews. This allowed them time to think about their responses and gave an opportunity to easily withdraw from the study if the questions made them uncomfortable. The teachers were assured of their anonymity and told that the recordings of their interviews would be destroyed after

the research had been completed. This encouraged the participants to be open and free when giving their responses.

## **5.5 Instructors' attitudes towards the integration of online and traditional learning**

As stated earlier, the qualitative component of this study investigated what teachers perceived to be the benefits and disadvantages of online and traditional learning materials, as well as their attitudes towards the use of these materials for language teaching. To meet these research objectives, the participants were asked a range of questions (refer to Appendix B). The results obtained are presented in the following subsections, each representing an independent question or theme.

### **5.5.1 Do you support the idea of integrating e-learning into education?**

The purpose of this question was to investigate the participants' attitudes towards the use of online tools for language teaching. The interviews revealed that almost all of the respondents (12 of the 13, or 92%) advocated the integration of e-learning. A number of reasons were given by the respondents to explain their support; and themes related to cautious positivity and a desire to keep students engaged emerged from this question.

The teachers who were positive about integration highlighted improvements in communication and engagement between instructors and students; increases to student motivation, which made learning more enjoyable; enhancements in the flexibility of learning, with regard to location and time; and the promotion of autonomous learning by decreasing teacher dependence and allowing students to identify and correct their own mistakes. For example, one participant said the following:

*Yes, I do [support the integration of online learning]. e-Learning opens doors to a different way of learning. Students can learn from anywhere and at any time on*

*their phones by accessing websites or Moodle quizzes, as long as they have an internet connection. Also, the students are interested in everything related to technology and we should take advantage of that. It also promotes autonomous learning as they don't need a teacher to learn (P02).*

This argument was also echoed by other participants. For example, according to P05 and P12, the failure to integrate e-learning – particularly in these times, when students are spending a significant amount of their time on devices – would make it difficult for instructors to engage with learners. As P12 indicated,

*I mean if we don't integrate e-learning in this day and age, for the kind of learners we are dealing with, it is very difficult to engage them. So, we have to engage our learners by bringing e-learning into the classroom (P12).*

On a similar note, P05 had this to say about integrating e-learning:

*I believe it should be integrated. Nowadays, students use technological devices such as phones, iPads, and tablets, among others. Therefore, why don't we integrate these things and make good use of them for their learning as well? So, I believe, yeah, that is a good thing (P05).*

As far back as 2009, studies were citing near 100% mobile telephone ownership by Omani university students and indicating that most felt 'uncomfortable' without their telephones (Belwal & Belwal, 2009). Therefore, as the teachers in this study mentioned, it is essential to exploit the ubiquity of this technology for the benefits of learning.

Though virtually all the respondents indicated that they advocated e-learning, two participants expressed concerns about the extent of the integration and argued for caution in the use of online components. For example, P04 noted a need for more research, as e-learning may actually have a negligible impact on education. In addition, P09 said that some educators rely on

e-learning to such an extent that they have forgotten the value of face-to-face interactions and activities.

One respondent reported a preference for conventional methods of learning and attributed this to being relatively conservative. This opinion ties in with the conclusions of Borg (2003) that teachers' beliefs are often relatively fixed by the time they begin teacher training, and they can be difficult to change. Age and computer literacy could be factors in this 'conservatism', as younger and more computer literate teachers have been shown to incorporate technology more readily (Yang & Huang, 2008). One respondent said the following:

*...because I am a bit conservative, I prefer teacher-student interaction through face-to-face communication. On the other hand, e-learning is good as it can be accessed anywhere. So even if a student is sick or has gone to some vacation, he or she can continue studying (P13).*

### **5.5.2 What do you think about the three types of online activities available for level three students?**

The teachers were asked about their attitudes towards the three online components available for level-three students – namely, Moodle Vocabulary, Moodle for Students, and MReader. The participants provided a wide range of responses. Four of the instructors expressed satisfaction with all three options, while another four instructors had varying opinions, and, surprisingly, despite teaching this level, two interviewees said they were unfamiliar with the online components.

The respondents who expressed satisfaction highlighted a number of reasons for their positive perceptions. They felt the tools gave students an opportunity to develop their skills, enrich their vocabulary, study independently outside the classroom, and stay motivated. According to P02, the three online components gave students exposure to new words through the

reading and listening exercises. P11 and P13 maintained that the three online components present an excellent opportunity for students to develop their skills and to find learning more enjoyable. Some respondents also noted that the tools helped the students remain motivated to read, as they could easily assess how they were progressing. This contradicts the claims of many students who said they could not easily judge their progress. P11 stated the following:

*I absolutely love the MReader and I think it is great. This is something that we were really striving for its implementation because not all students are comfortable reading books. Therefore, MReader, supports them in a pleasant and fun way of encouraging them to read as they see how they're progressing (P11).*

P13 shared similar views on why ensuring an appropriate level was important for enjoyment and motivation:

*Well, I love them because they give the students an opportunity to develop their skills. Though they are graded, MReader activities are kind of easier than their level, so students can do it for pleasure. Besides, Moodle for vocabulary is not hard (P13).*

P03 viewed MReader positively because it gave students an opportunity to read by themselves and take an automatically graded test online, hence saving teachers' time. This is an important consideration, as some studies have shown that teachers in Omani colleges can be reluctant to introduce technology due to a lack of time (Al-Senaidi, Lin, & Poirot, 2009). P06 said that MReader was well organised and noted – as a positive – that it was used internationally.

Four out of the 13 respondents expressed mixed reactions to the three online tools. P06 stated that some students complained because the Moodle for Students quizzes were too easy, were worth too few marks, and did not align with the course content:

*My students have complained that these quizzes are too easy and the answers are*

*right there in the quiz itself, and for each unit there is only one mark – whether they are doing two or three quizzes in each... I don't think they need to learn some of these things because they already know. I would like if the quizzes are a bit more challenging, maybe by making sure what is online corresponds with what is being studied in the books to make them relevant (P06).*

A number of other weaknesses were also mentioned, with some negative perceptions of the three online components. For example, P03 noted that, although MReader was a great idea, it was not user-friendly because of the procedures involved. P03 noted that students needed an account to use the tool and they had to wait two days to retake a test. P03 noted,

*...it's rather formal and bit bureaucratic since you have to sign-in and only have two days in between your test, but the idea is very good in my opinion for homework and for something that students do outside their classrooms (P03).*

With respect to the extra activities in Moodle, P03 and P06 indicated that this was challenging, because instructors had to be very specific about what they wanted students to complete from the large collection of materials, identifying that which fitted the needs of their particular classroom environments. P06 stated that, although she encouraged her students to complete the extra (optional) Moodle activities, she was unsure whether the students found them useful. On the other hand, P03 and P08 indicated that the extra Moodle activities were useful for teaching their Arabic-speaking students how to pronounce and spell difficult sounds. P03 said,

*When it comes to the extra activities, a teacher has to be very specific about what they need to select to fit the need of their particular classroom environment. For instance, in pronunciation, as you know, in 340, we also have links to the clarity package and that has a section about pronunciation which is called 'clear*

*pronunciation’... The pairs of words targeted are not relevant to the local environment. They don’t target ‘pro’ and ‘boo’, they don’t look at ‘go’ and ‘jo’, so as a teacher you have to be selective. And there is no ‘ay’ you can actually put them together – you have to take them separately. But I think one of those packages is very useful for students in the pronunciation of individual sounds that are often mispronounced and thus misspelled in the Arab learning environment (P03).*

The respondents also had mixed opinions about Moodle Vocabulary, with some expressing satisfaction and others citing perceived weaknesses. For example, although Moodle Vocabulary promotes new words, it is difficult to read and listen to new words without the help of a teacher. P05 and P13 felt that the vocabulary students were learning from Moodle was not sufficiently useful or difficult. Similarly, P06 and P09 mentioned that some of the vocabulary items were not useful and the vocabulary exercises were too repetitive. They further indicated that the design of the level-three Moodle course did not reach its full potential, and there was a need for improvements to make it more effective. For example, P09 said, *‘Some students complain that the vocabulary exercise is a little repetitive, and maybe the vocabulary isn’t useful’*, and P13 noted that, *‘Activities are kind of easier than their level, so they can do it for pleasure. The Moodle vocabulary is not hard’*. Two interviewees claimed to be unfamiliar with the activities and were thus unable to express an opinion on them, claiming to have no knowledge at all of the online components.

### **5.6 Do you think the grades for online activities accurately reflect the students’ level of English?**

The respondents were asked whether the students’ grades for the online activities tended to accurately reflect their level of English. Varying opinions were reported. Two respondents said that the grades were accurate in this respect, while five participants disagreed. Four teachers



felt that the grades reflected the students' levels to some extent, while two participants were unsure.

The two respondents who felt that the online grades were accurate presented a number of reasons for this. P11, for example, insisted that online quizzes reflected real learning better than formal assessments, especially when the e-learning activities were taken seriously, due to the lower anxiety among the students when taking the tests. The respondent further argued that research has found students score higher in online or computerised tests because they feel they have more control in the situation.

The five interviewees who indicated that the online quiz scores did not tend to reflect the students' genuine level of English said that there was widespread cheating on the tests. Teachers cited acts of malpractice such as copying from fellow students, using notes or written answers from others, plagiarism, and even having others take the tests on a student's behalf. The five sceptical teachers (P02, P03, P04, P05, and P13) all noted that, although some of the online tools, such as MReader, had systems in place to prevent cheating, students were able to trick these systems and cheat. These five respondents were sure that cheating was taking place, but they confessed that they were not aware of the exact techniques being used. As P05 said,

*The MReader, in some cases, yes, but the students bring in other stories and ask the questions. They cheat in the quizzes even though I do not know how as MReader doesn't tolerate students cheating as they are clever enough to discover if a student has cheated or not (P05).*

Some respondents indicated that the design of the Moodle Vocabulary quizzes meant that they accurately reflected the students' English proficiency. For example, according to P05, the vocabulary quizzes were very easy and students were given three attempts to complete them,

which essentially guarantees a high score. The students were also given multiple choices from which to choose, which allowed them to potentially score high grades through guesswork. Additionally, students could save the quizzes and return to them later, a feature viewed as giving an excellent opportunity to cheat. Some teachers mentioned that the scores would probably be more accurate if the students could only take the quiz once. P05 stated the following:

*However, for the vocabulary quiz, although it is too easy, one has three attempts and can save then come back later to answer the questions. Also, the answers are right there, and they can get chances to cheat. Therefore, it is not a reflection of their real grades (P05).*

Nevertheless, most of the teacher respondents felt that the online quizzes were excellent tools for student learning because the students were able to identify and correct their own mistakes, which they deemed hugely important in the learning process. For example,

*Learning is a process, and the students can retake the quizzes if they have a low grade. Many of them cheat and copy answers, and I don't think it reflects their real level of learning. But I think it is an excellent tool for their learning (P02).*

The four instructors who did accept, to a certain extent, the accuracy of the quiz scores argued that the contribution of these grades to the final marks was sufficiently low that it did not matter if there was some cheating. P08 argued that because the quizzes were often not taken in the classroom, in a controlled testing environment, there would always be some doubt about the accuracy of the scores. The respondent disputed the import of cheating, however, and argued that the weighting of the quizzes was calculated to ensure they represented only only a small proportion of the final marks. P08 made the following remark:

*To some extent it does, even though it's not done in the classroom where there is a testing situation/environment. It represents a percentage of the entire mark; it is not*

*an overall mark, and so if a student cheats, it doesn't take a whole lot of the grade*  
(P08).

P02 felt that the claims of widespread cheating were 'baseless', stating there was insufficient evidence that students were cheating at all and, if they were, to what extent they were doing so. Despite this, however, this teacher revealed that they had put in place measures to prevent cheating on quizzes and ensure that students' scores reflect their true effort and ability. These include changing the options in the multiple-choice questions, jumbling the order of the questions, and making other improvements to the quizzes.

P01 stated that the overall grades probably did reflect the students' level of learning, but they admitted that it could be difficult to establish the extent of the accuracy because some group work was involved:

*Maybe in some cases they do, but the students sometimes work together as a group.*

*Perhaps the grading affects the grade of a student, but the mark is awarded to a group, and they tend to help each other* (P01).

P07 acknowledged that it could be erroneous to conclude that the quiz scores reflected the students' level of English, as overthinking and outside sources could create distractions:

*Students can take the test three times and can also refer elsewhere in the process. So, I'm not really sure that it's indicative of their English level and sometimes they do really poorly, but just because they are over thinking the activity and some of them have like six pages they have to do and their mind is somewhere else. So am unsure it has any bearing on their actual level of English* (P07).

These responses indicate that the teachers were concerned about what they deemed to be cheating in low-stakes quizzes. This issue is addressed further in the discussion section.

### **5.6.1 Do you think that the students' activities in Moodle should be graded?**

In the next question, the participants were asked whether they thought the students' efforts on the Moodle activities should be graded. Five of the instructors said they supported this practice, while three opposed it, and the remaining five participants expressed varying opinions.

The participants who supported the idea of grading the students' activities made several points in support of this. Some stated that grading is crucial for preventing scores from becoming too heavily weighted towards summative exams and classwork. They stated that grading of Moodle activities motivates the students to complete their homework and underlines that work done outside class time is an important part of learning. P01, P04, P09, and P10 all felt that a failure to grade some activities – while grading others – would send a message that the ungraded activities were not important. P01 stated that,

*Some of them are graded like the vocabulary quizzes, but the extra activities aren't and if they are graded, the students will understand that those extra - curriculum activities are really important and they will be more motivated to do them (P01).*

P04 was sure that students would be unwilling to spend time on suggested activities unless they were graded:

*...unfortunately, the students won't do it unless it is graded and very few of them would do it. I have asked my students who do the weekly Moodle activities that aren't graded and they were maybe two or three of the classes of 21 are doing them (P04).*

The respondents who expressed mixed opinions about the grading of the students' Moodle activities argued that grading served as an extrinsic motivator to the students and encouraged

them to practise more. PO2 also noted that the students were not likely to take the tests at all if they were not being graded, saying that grades often did not reflect actual performance because cheating was so common. She said,

*If they are not graded, they may not answer anything. I think their main purpose is testing; they are learning as they are supposed to. I think the purpose of grading is to motivate them, but I don't think they reflect their real level of learning. They can retake their quizzes to correct their mistakes which are part of learning. Many of them also copy the answers and I don't think it reflects their level in learning, but it is a good tool for their learning (P02).*

The respondents who did not advocate the grading of students' online activities maintained that it was not important because (1) the grades did not reflect the students' actual performance due to widespread cheating, and (2) the students believed that activities such as the 'extra activities' in Moodle were not an integral part of the curriculum. However, most respondents who generally opposed grading did support the grading of some activities, such as those in MReader and Moodle Vocabulary, but they argued it was unnecessary to grade activities given as extra practice. Generally, the respondents who expressed negative views of online activities (P03, P06, and P05) opposed the grading of these activities.

The following question explored the teachers' perceptions of the obstacles their students face when working on online activities.

### **5.6.2 From your point of view, what are the main obstacles facing LC students engaged in online activities?**

This question sought to ascertain the challenges and difficulties, if any, faced by students

when engaged with online activities. Several drawbacks emerged. P13 talked about a lack of motivation and familiarity with online courses:

*There are many students who do not have any motivation to use online material. This could probably be because many of them come from interior regions of Oman and they don't have access to computers or internet there' (P13).*

These sentiments were echoed by P07, who said, *'These students have not been exposed to computer education in their early school life and thus lack very basic skills in computers'*. These comments regarding digital and computer literacy challenges highlight the need for analysis and support. As Hrastinski (2009) concludes, to meet learning objectives in online environments, it is necessary to analyse the needs of students and provide appropriate support. The following subsections investigate themes related to the use of textbooks.

### **5.7 Of the textbooks you are currently using with your students, which ones do you like and why?**

The teachers had a range of views on the textbooks currently in use at the LC. One interviewee said that all the textbooks were good, but the Pathway listening book was the best:

*I like all the books, but Pathway is my favourite, it is new and is enjoying the experience and enjoys teaching it because the content is fascinating and there are both talks and conversations (P04).*

Notably, considering that students disliked it the most, two respondents asserted that the Writing Explorer was the best textbook in use at the LC:

*It is not only my opinion but the opinion of many teachers here at the LC that the writing book, called the 'Writing Explorer', is probably the best one. First of all, [it] is because it has been designed and made by the teachers who work with these*

*students, with these groups of learners (P08).*

Six participants asserted that all the books at the LC were effective for the students, and one stated the following:

*I think all of the books are engaging for the students – be it listening, speaking, reading or the in-house writing book that we are using. I like the topics as they are very current and engaging for the students. They get to think about the issues they have not thought about for the reading topics (P09).*

Four respondents asserted that the *National Geographic* reading textbook was the best option at the LC. P05 offered some reasons for this:

*My students and I like the new Reading Explorer book from National Geographic. Its reading texts are interesting, the topics are relevant, and generally, there are some reading tips to engross students' skills. There are also many questions for critical thinking, for discussion, teach them how to scan, look for details, and it keeps drilling in this (P05).*

P11 asserted that the in-house textbooks were the best options in use at the LC:

*I prefer the in-house books, study skills, and the writing because the students attach to them better and they anticipate the needs of the students. I also like the listening and speaking book more. However, the recordings appear scripted, and the students laugh at them when played in class. Hence, using them without the reading textbook particularly where it's not contextualised is difficult (P11).*

Therefore, it would appear that teachers have conflicting views about the conventional materials in use at the LC. Some teachers prefer commercial books, while others opt for in-house materials; and there are various reasons for this.

### **5.7 Which textbook for level-three students needs to be replaced?**

In light of the views expressed in the previous section, the teachers were asked about which of the textbooks they felt needed replacing. The responses varied greatly. P08 cited the Pathway textbook, while P11 was of the opinion that the reading book should be replaced:

*I would replace the reading book primarily because of the cultural issues because it is not culturally sensitive, but also for the 340 students; they seem to be going through the readings very quickly, and doesn't appear to be challenging them enough (P11).*

Four respondents asserted that the in-house textbooks needed to be modified, at the very least. P09 said, '*Our weakness is our in-house materials*'. On the other hand, eight participants felt that none of the materials needed to be replaced, though they had suggestions for improvements, including more integration. P08 said,

*I wouldn't say 'replaced', but I would still think that if we have a successful writing course that we just talked about, then the other three skills should be incorporated. I don't think there should be a course book that would take a reading, listening and speaking separately. I am for the idea of integration (P08).*

### **5.8 Which materials work best for our foundation students – commercial or in-house?**

To probe further regarding the use of conventional materials, the teachers were asked which materials they felt were working better. Six respondents said that each material has benefits for the foundation students. P05 felt that it came down to teaching:

*I don't think it depends on the materials: it depends on the teacher, how teachers are handling the materials. If the teacher adjusts everything to the needs and interests of his/her students, then he or she can deal with any material and make it*



*interesting and, of course, good teachers offer supplements and modify the activities in the textbooks. It's not the material; it's the teacher (P05).*

Four interviewees indicated that both the in-house and conventional materials were working well, and P04 asserted the following:

*I think both are working well. The writing book is excellent, and we all teachers can agree on that. For commercial books, I think the National Geographic book is doing okay (P04).*

P05 felt that the in-house materials were the best suited for the foundation students:

*The in-house ones definitely, and the reasons I would say is that they do anticipate the needs of the students better. And it is designed for Arabic students; therefore, it is going to be designed for the grammatical problems that they will have, the cultural questions that they will have – and also the writing book mainly is designed more so for the type of writing they will be doing at the university level (P05).*

Conversely, three participants thought that the commercial materials worked best for the foundation students. P08 said,

*Some commercial books work very well. I think this reading course book that is National Geographic has a lot of travel stories and experiences, lots of vocabular[y], and it is also very culturally sensitive. It doesn't have any issues with the local culture, which you also should consider as a teacher (P08).*

As seen in the discussion above, the teachers had a range of views on the advantages and disadvantages of the commercial and in-house materials.

### **5.9 Do you think level three has a right balance of commercial and in-house books?**

In regards to the balance of commercial and in-house books used at level three, nine

participants felt that this was appropriate. P01 responded as follows:

*We have two in-house and two commercial books. [I] am mostly happy with the books and there's not much extra that I have to spend time preparing, so I think it's successful in that way because it gives me a lot of options for my students and a lot of the language skills to work on (P01).*

However, four respondents were unsure as to whether level three has the right balance. P03 explained as follows:

*We have two commercial books and two in-house books which are good. I wonder if maybe we put it committed together what we might be able to come up with if we did an in-house reading book. However, at the same time, I see the benefit of having an out-of- university textbook to us, and it is a good balance that it is two and two (P03).*

### **5.10 In your opinion, what are the features of a good textbook?**

Having shared their opinions on the textbooks in use at level three of the LC, the teachers were asked what constituted a good textbook. Taken together, the responses of the 13 teachers suggest a good textbook should be attractive and should align with the course objectives. P11 made the following recommendation:

*A good book, whether in-house or commercial, must be colourful, have glossy pages, and [be] neatly bound. And the most important thing is that it should meet the objectives of the course' (P11).*

P07 felt that there should be real consideration of the topics chosen for the textbooks. This respondent explained the following:

*Books that are used in EFL teaching-learning situation should be authentic in the*

*sense that it should have topics that are related to the culture and tradition of students, which can engage students easily. It is when topics are interesting and the ones that they confront in their daily life that makes the students think critically and engage with topics easily' (P07).*

### **5.11 Do you believe that the online and conventional materials available for level-three students properly enhance their learning?**

The teachers expressed similar view on the question of which materials best enhance learning. All 13 teachers agreed that both the conventional and online materials used at level three are effective in this respect. P11 added the following caveat:

*Sure, if the students get some guidance from the beginning as [to] the rationale, why they need to do that, how they need that. You need to guide and train them first to explain why they should do that, the purpose, and they can benefit from that (P11).*

### **5.12 Benefits and challenges of using conventional and online materials in language teaching**

The next line of questioning explored the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using conventional and online materials in language teaching at the LC. A variety of opinions emerged, and the respondents were invited to explain their views in open-ended responses. Most of the benefits identified in this section were similar or closely related to those mentioned in the previous sections; therefore, the following subsection presents the primary benefits and challenges identified, though – to avoid repetition – not all are explored in detail.

### **5.12.1 Perceived benefits of using conventional and online materials in language teaching**

Two themes emerged from responses to this question, with both noted in the replies from all seven teachers who advocated technology integration. First, it was said that e-learning made learning more flexible (in terms of time and location), and second, it promoted autonomous learning, allowing students to assess their own progress, identify their own mistakes, and correct problems without necessarily seeking help from their teachers. This is supported by the literature, where there is almost unanimous agreement that flexibility (Anderson, 2008) and autonomy (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2003) should be core features of online learning. It also emerged from the interviews that some teachers believed e-learning improves communication and engagement between the instructors and the students, which, again, is supported by the literature (Armstrong, 2011). Additionally, the teachers claimed – in line with the conclusions of Shaikh, Al-Azawi, and Mond (2011) – that e-learning motivated the students, made learning enjoyable for them, helped them to acquire skills, and made it possible for students and instructors to access resources more easily.

According to P02, online learning – and the three online tools in particular – promoted autonomous learning because the students had the convenience of learning while using their devices, without monitoring from their instructors, as well as improving their communication skills and motivation. P02 noted the following:

*e-Learning opens doors to a different way of learning. They can learn from anywhere and at any time on their phones by accessing websites or Moodle quizzes, as long as they have an internet connection. Also, the students are interested in everything related to technology and we should take advantage of that. It also promotes autonomous learning, as they don't need a teacher to learn (P02).*

In support of the online graded reader quizzes, P12 had this to say:

*...it encourages autonomous reading learning on their part, and I think it's something that should be encouraged by the teacher. And there should be a culture to engage our students and to encourage a reading culture. And if we start off with the smaller graded readers at the beginning, it will kind of encourage them into higher level reading activities and novels, etc. (P12).*

Similarly, P11 stated that e-learning played an important role in ensuring that students were motivated to read, due to the ease with which they could monitor their progress:

*I absolutely love that. It supports them in a pleasant and fun way of encouraging them to read and making up their level. They can see how they're progressing; and I like MReader (P11).*

P01 also maintained that students were more motivated to learn when technology was integrated into their education, as opposed to when they were relying on conventional methods of learning:

*I do because many students are very young now, so I think they like using technology; and if we use e-learning, they will feel more motivated and keen to study (P01).*

P06 acknowledged that, although he had not used Moodle for very long, his students enjoyed using it and they seemed to have been motivated by the integration of e-learning:

*I've been enjoying using them. However, since it is my first year, I have not explored them fully to see what they are fully capable of. The students seem to be very motivated to do them on their own, which is great, and that keeps them practising their language outside of class (P06).*

An appreciation of self-assessment (defined as the ability to identify one's own mistakes

and correct them without seeking help) also emerged as a theme in the data. According to P11 and P13, for instance, the three online tools presented an excellent opportunity for students to develop crucial learning skills, because they were reading by themselves, taking quizzes online, and receiving scores for their efforts. P13 had this to say about the advantages of e-learning activities:

*Well, I love them because they give the students an opportunity to develop their skills, and at the same time, they are for pleasure, more or less. Though they are graded, MReader activities are kind of easier than their level, so they can do it for pleasure. Also, Moodle for Vocabulary is not hard (P13).*

### **5.12.2 Drawbacks of using conventional and online materials in language teaching**

In addition to the benefits of blended learning, the teachers identified several negatives. The most common were quiz malpractice that made monitoring difficult, a lack of familiarity with the online platforms, computer literacy issues, challenges with navigating some online platforms, and the easy or repetitive nature of the online tests.

#### ***Quiz content***

With respect to quiz content, P05, P06, P09, and P13 noted that the vocabulary the students learned with Moodle was not useful and the quizzes were not varied. P09 said, *'For the vocabulary exercise, some students complain that it is a little repetitive, and maybe the vocabulary isn't useful'*, while P13 noted that, *'Activities are kind of easier than their level, so they can do it for pleasure. The Moodle for Vocabulary is not hard'*.

#### ***Promoting examination malpractice***

The teachers felt that e-learning – especially online quizzes – presented an opportunity for students to engage in examination malpractice, such as impersonation, copying from fellow

students, discussion of questions, seeking assistance from one another, and using notes. There was more opportunity for cheating on quizzes, according to P04, because there was no direct supervision from the instructors. This explains why most of the respondents believed that the grades scored by the students in online tests were not a reflection of their true effort or ability.

P03, P04, P05, and P13 noted that although some of the online tools, such as MReader, had features to prevent cheating, the students were able to overcome these obstacles. Some teachers also found it problematic that students were able to save the quizzes and come back later to answer the questions. They held that this also presented an opportunity for cheating. These factors, according to five respondents, meant that the grades scored in the online quizzes did not reflect the students' real levels of learning, as illustrated by the comments from one participant:

*MReader, in some cases, yes; but the students bring in other stories and ask the questions. They cheat in the quizzes – even though I do not know how, as MReader doesn't tolerate students cheating, as they are clever enough to discover if a student has cheated or not (P05).*

### ***Ease-of-use***

Some online platforms were considered by some teachers to be complicated, and they reported that some students struggled to use them. For example, P03 noted that, although MReader was a great idea, it was not user-friendly because of the steps and rules involved:

*...it's rather formal and a bit bureaucratic, since you have to sign in and you have two days in between your test[s]; but the idea is very good, in my opinion, for homework and for something that students do outside their classrooms (P03).*

Other user-related challenges identified included a lack of familiarity with the online platforms, as well as computer and digital literacy issues. P08 took the time to explain the obstacles to the implementation of e-learning at the LC. According to him, students lacked

adequate computer skills, which limited their ability to explore the Moodle activities.

Digital literacy, for these students, seems to refer to the most basic of a group of skills that Eshet (2004) argues are necessary to function effectively in a digital environment. P08 pointed out that, while cases were decreasing, some students lacked basic screen-navigation skills:

*In the beginning, some students would come to me and ask where the questions and multiple-choice [options] are. So, I had to show them how to navigate. Therefore, navigating through the website is sometimes a challenge to some of them. But it's less now than a few years ago, so I think they are getting used to it, and they are not used to reading things on a screen, so that's practice (P08).*

Similarly, P08 pointed out that some students lacked basic computer skills, such as typing:

*Another basic skill I think that some students are weak on is typing, even though they take IT courses. I think a course has the basics things like typing, and they have programmes to teach typing. And I remember doing them when I was in high school, and they also have it now after the completion of level four (P08).*

The teachers also reported that some students had difficulty opening files, including documents, images, audio, and video. This challenge, according to P03, was more common when the students were off campus. This aligns with the students' own responses and it may explain why so many students chose to complete their online exercises on campus. P04 stated that technical issues – such as not being able to open files when off campus – were stressful for the students, as this limited their access to study materials and interfered with their deadlines. He also said that some students did not have the devices, such as laptops, that would be required to complete the online activities at home.

Finally, it was noted that the teachers had challenges of their own. P03 highlighted problems



regarding the relevance of the course materials and the sheer quantity of options:

*It was quite challenging because instructors had to be very specific on what they wanted from the vast sea of materials that fitted the need of their particular classroom environments. This problem emanated from the fact that most of these Moodle activities were designed abroad, an aspect that rendered them entirely irrelevant in the Omani context. As a result, tutors were required to search for what they want[ed] from the large volume of material in the Moodles – for example, with respect to the element of extra activities (P03).*

### **5.13 Discussion of the results**

The preceding sections have presented the qualitative results on instructors' perceptions of the pros and cons of using online and traditional learning materials to support language teaching. It emerged that almost all of the instructors interviewed had highly positive attitudes towards the use of both types of material. They saw the integration of e-learning into education as useful and important, which is in line with the findings of previous studies carried out at SQU (e.g., Al Kindi et al., 2006; Al Musawi & Abelraheem, 2004; Gawande, 2015). As noted by Singh (2015), older teachers tend to oppose the adoption of new methods for various reasons, such as the fear of a loss of control, uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and concerns about their competence. Similar findings have been provided by other studies (Acharya et al., 2015; Jackson, 2016; Teo & Zhou, 2017), with researchers noting that age tends to be correlated with attitudes towards the integration of technology into the education system. In Oman, a lack of support, experience, time, and belief were all found to negatively affect technology integration in university classes (Al-Senaidi et al., 2009). These findings may explain why a quarter of the interviewed teachers in this study, falling into the highest age bracket (40 years and above), were partially or completely opposed to the

integration of e-learning into language teaching.

The interviewees highlighted several advantages of using conventional and online materials in language teaching. The merits identified were similar to those cited in other studies on this topic. The students and teachers both noted that using technology in class provides learners with skills relevant to their personal and professional growth, as well as keeping students engaged, which supports Oman's goal of producing life-long learners with workplace skills (Al-Jardani, 2012a). Again, these findings correspond with those of previous research on SQU students (Saleem et al., 2016). Other benefits of technology in LC language classes include improvements in communication and engagement between instructors and students, the promotion of autonomous learning, and support for students' skills acquisition. Most of the students and teachers in this study highlighted increased motivation and enjoyment as two highly important aspects of online learning. This was not an unexpected finding, as other Omani studies in this area have cited motivation and enjoyable learning as the primary benefits of e-learning (Shaikh et al., 2011). Flexibility and autonomous learning were also considered by both students and teachers to be major benefits of blended learning, which aligns with the findings of many other studies (e.g., Venkataraman & Sivakumar, 2015). Other secondary benefits mentioned by the respondents were associated with autonomy, including opportunities for students' self-assessment and ease of accessing information resources. The process of self-assessment, in which students identify and correct their own mistakes without seeking help from their teachers, is an important part of language learning (Ellis, 2015). However, as the behaviourism-based online exercises in this study are rather narrow in scope, the identification and correction of mistakes may be limited to the type of drill and memorisation activities on offer, and not applicable to the more real-world tasks found in cognitive or constructivist activities. This may limit the relevance of the theory of autonomy and independence to this study.

The primary disadvantages with regard to integrating e-learning in education, as discovered in this study, include unfamiliarity with online courses, digital and computer literacy issues, the inability to regulate examination malpractice, a lack of necessary devices (such as personal computers), and user-unfriendly e-learning or Moodle platforms. Inevitably, technology has downsides if not managed well. Students with poor computing skills and who struggle to follow instructions may be negatively affected; thus, there is a need for teachers to closely monitor, support, and train students online, as suggested by Hrastinski (2009).

Further challenges to online learning identified in the present research included digital literacy issues, negative perceptions of online quizzes, and unwieldy e-learning platforms. These challenges have also been reported in previous research in Oman, to varying extents (Al-Ani, 2008), although the emphasis on quiz ‘cheating’ found in the present study is notable. Although the respondents were not able to prove conclusively that students had engaged in unsanctioned activities, they were quite certain that cheating was common, with some instructors advocating for no grades to be given to students for online quizzes. The findings were mixed as to whether students cheated more often when studying online or in face-to-face classes (Malesky Jr et al., 2016). Some argued that the difference between the rates of cheating in the two environments was negligible (Watson & Sottile, 2008). However, overall, there seems to be a consensus that academic dishonesty in online components of university courses is at least easier and hence more prevalent (Miller & Young-Jones, 2012).

The discussion around cheating reflects the split between behaviourist and constructivist approaches to teaching language. The issue at hand, as mentioned in the literature review, is a reliance on punishment-reward behavioural modification in these quizzes, when perhaps a more constructivist, knowledge-building, collaborative approach would be better suited. As noted by Gasmi and Thomas (2017), Oman has been struggling to change from traditional, teacher-centric,

behaviourist-heavy teaching to a more constructivist and collaborative approach. Therefore, it may be that cheating is not the issue, and, in fact, the concern is the nature of the activities. Omani researchers in universities have found that one effective method is to ‘flip’ the language classroom, such that the completion of homework assignments forms the basis of face-to-face classwork (Gasmi & Thomas, 2017). In addition, the gamification of behaviourist drills could help to shift the focus of Omani students from grades to enjoyment (Ahmad, 2018).

As discussed in the literature review, increases in positivity are associated with the increases in independence and autonomy that Omani students experience during online learning (Chikwa et al, 2018). Therefore, students benefit when they take more responsibility for their educational activities. The preferred MReader platform provides an illustration of this, and this could help to change students’ beliefs about online quizzes. Student self-assessment is an important component of independent learning (Ellis, 2015), and, as shown by Jared (2014), students are more than capable of evaluating their learning materials, incorporating self-assessment into their practice, and self-selecting their online practice activities.

To facilitate development such as this, changes may need to be made at the high school level to familiarise students with more constructivist and student-centred learning. This will require teacher training, which, as mentioned in the literature review, is an area that needs addressing in the Omani school system (Al-Issa, 2006b) and at the university level (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). As Pajeres (1992) explains, beliefs can be changed more easily before adulthood, thus pre-tertiary trainee-teacher education needs to be targeted. Oman’s cultural and educational transformation has been rapid (Mahrooqi, 2012), and the cultural transmission of beliefs has played an important role in this (Pajeres, 1992), thus it may be difficult to alter students’ preoccupation with grades and memorisation. It is important to change teachers’ beliefs by altering their language-learning experiences, training, and class practice, as suggested by Borg (2006), but this will take time.

Successful prior experience with technology seems to override these other factors, and so, again, if we are to see changes, those at the high school level and below need to ensure that future teachers are having positive experiences of technology and language learning.

Regarding textbooks, it was interesting to compare the views of teachers with those of students. The teachers seemed to judge the textbooks more on their content, the soundness of the pedagogy, and the learning objectives, reaching much more positive conclusions about the in-house provision. Students, on the other hand, seemed to base their preferences on visual and affective features, such as images. Respondents in both groups mentioned the importance of cultural suitability. The occasionally divergent views of these two groups underlines the value of studies such as this one, as they can ensure that both groups are consulted during the process of materials development. Making textbooks attractive can seem like an added burden for in-house material developers, but the return on the investment could be extremely valuable. As mentioned in the literature review, students using online materials need assistance and training, and these can be given in the form of handbooks and checklists (Jared, 2014), help with navigation (Yang, 2013; Hinkel, 2006), and ongoing teacher monitoring and guidance (Hrastinski, 2009). However, this support may be just as important with paper textbooks, with more guidance required to 'sell' students on their usefulness. In the future, with the development of augmented and virtual reality, the line between paper and technology will become increasingly blurred, and educators in Oman should capitalise on these new methods to improve learners' perceptions of their course materials (Al-Azawi, 2018).

#### **5.14 Chapter summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings derived from the interviews with instructors. This study found that most students and instructors had positive views of the use of online and traditional learning materials in language teaching. The respondents perceived the

integration of e-learning into language education as motivational, convenient, and necessary.

With respect to the perceived benefits and disadvantages of using conventional and online materials in language teaching, several trends emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative data. The primary advantage of e-learning, as identified by both research methods, is its enhancement of the flexibility and convenience of learning. Other merits include improvements in communication and engagement between the instructors and students, promotion of autonomous learning, accessibility of resources, motivation of students, and the enjoyable nature of the work. e-Learning also helps students to become autonomous by encouraging self-assessment, identifying their own mistakes, and correcting them without necessarily seeking help from their teachers.

The primary challenges of e-learning, as highlighted in this study, arise from factors such as a lack of familiarity with online courses, digital and computer literacy issues, unregulated examination malpractice, a lack of necessary devices (such as personal computers), and unintuitive e-learning platforms or Moodle platforms.

As with any research, this study had limitations; and these are discussed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter briefly summarises the context of this study and looks at its objectives, research questions, and findings, then offers recommendations for further research. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the perceptions of students and instructors regarding the use of online and classroom-based learning materials to support ELT in Oman. The study was conducted in an English foundation programme at the LC in SQU. An examination of the relevant literature revealed that perceptions of learning materials substantially affected the practices of language learning and teaching. On this basis, the study investigated these perceptions and beliefs in pursuit of insights that could aid future development in this area. The aims and objectives of the study are as follows:

- To investigate and analyse the attitudes of learners and instructors towards traditional and online learning materials for supporting the process of language instruction
- To investigate the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using traditional and online publications in language teaching at the LC
- To probe the reasons for students and teachers' preferences for specific teaching materials

### **6.2 Conclusions**

Most teachers and students in the study had positive views of both online and traditional learning materials. All the respondents perceived e-learning as a valuable educational model. Almost 80% of the respondents said that various online courses had significantly helped them improve their English. Many students also had a high regard for conventional learning resources, which is not unusual for Omani university students (Al-Ani, 2013). The students also felt that guidance from

teachers in a classroom setting was preferable to independent online learning, suggesting that assistance in online environments helps them to perform better. It was also revealed by some that conventional learning material was easier to use than online materials, due to the level of computer skills required for the latter. These preferences are striking, as the outcomes of online and classroom learning are usually similar (Kok, 2008). It has been widely reported that students and teachers have different perceptions of learning materials – both in the Arab world (Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2013) and elsewhere (Emelyanova & Voronina, 2017). The results of this study indicate that this is equally true in SQU, Oman. The teachers interviewed for this study expressed positive views of the in-house textbooks, whereas the students rated commercial textbooks more highly. For example, the in-house writing textbook was held in such high regard following its development at SQU that it was adopted throughout Oman. However, many of the students surveyed criticised the publication, suggesting that students should have more of a voice in the development of materials.

The integration of e-learning into the LC at SQU was praised by virtually all the respondents, who advocated blending conventional and e-learning methods, rather than privileging one over the other. The advantages of e-learning were highlighted in both the qualitative and quantitative data. First, it was said to enhance the flexibility and convenience of learning in terms of access, location, and time, and most perceived it as useful and motivating. Second, for some students, it was perceived as improving communication between instructors and students. Finally, it enables students to assess their own proficiency and progress and become more autonomous, which was viewed by teachers as valuable. However, e-learning also comes with several challenges due to lack of familiarity with the online courses, issues with basic digital literacy, quiz completion irregularities, and a lack of personal equipment. A specific drawback of Moodle was the non-intuitive nature of the platform.



By viewing English language learning techniques at the LC as a combination of behaviourism and constructivism, we can begin to identify the reasons for some of the advantages and disadvantages of the current blended learning. We see the hold-over of behaviourist micro teaching, transferred from poorly performing high schools to university settings, as detailed by Al-Mahrooqi (2012). Teachers complain of ‘cheating’ in online quizzes, but the rewards in place encourage the very behaviour that teachers wish to stop (i.e., a preoccupation with grades and shallow learning). Course designers should be thinking in terms of behaviourist and constructivist approaches and seeking to take advantage of what students value: namely, social contact, appealing materials, and teacher support.

This study has considered language teaching from the point of view of industrialisation, as well as the theory of autonomous learning, both of which are vital if Oman is to maximise the use of its rapidly dwindling resources. Blended instruction, in economic terms, can lead to economies of scale and help to increase supply in the face of surging demand. In addition to the value of autonomous students in themselves, the autonomy promoted by online instruction can save institutions money by reducing their teaching burdens. This, according to Luppicini (2007), is vital if Oman is to continue to grow.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, some tentative recommendations are made regarding the use of online and conventional learning materials at the LC. First, due to the overall positive perception of online teaching tools – by both students and staff – and their impact on learning, the LC should explore the possibility of expanding their adoption. Second, there is a need to enhance the general accessibility and usability of Moodle courses by simplifying their navigation. Oman is confronted with immense challenges related to educational quality, and the promotion

of online learning is one of many possible solutions. Policymakers in Oman should also consider individualised course modes such as Hy-flex (Miller et al., 2013) to further increase autonomy, flexibility, and, hence, efficiency of instruction.

A further recommendation is a focus on the use of technology in schools across Oman. Students need to be equipped with essential computer skills – and not simply mobile telephones – prior to joining SQU. This will involve bridging the gap between the Ministry of Education-controlled school system and SQU to ensure a seamless blend of materials at the school and college levels. Efforts need to be made to assist all Omani students in understanding the importance of technology as a learning aid, in behaviourist drill and practice situations and more socio-constructivist collaborative settings. In other words, policymakers must seek to integrate online learning into the educational system in a way that ensures students take responsibility for their learning and develop a passion for study, rather than grades. This could be aided by changes in teacher training at all levels, as suggested by the World Bank back in 2001 and Al-Mahrooqi and Denman as recently as 2018. Finally, the comments made by the students and teachers on the current textbooks, both in-house and commercial, should be taken into consideration when designing, supplementing, and choosing future study materials. For instance, most students disliked the study skills book, for a variety of reasons. It could be argued that this is the most important of the materials, as it teaches the students *how* to learn; thus, curriculum designers should be using feedback from students to design the next generation of materials.

#### **6.4 Direction for further research**

It could be argued that some of the theoretical assumptions (independence and autonomy, industrialisation, and interaction and communication) do not align precisely with the framework of this study. Future research could build on this work by investigating areas such as gamification (using repetitive exercises to modify behaviour) and behaviourist aspects, as well as social media

and social-constructivist aspects of blended instruction. It would be inappropriate to generalise the results of the current study, as the findings concern a single institution, and, as Cole (2008) explains, preferences for teaching materials and instruction are very context-specific. Therefore, there is a need for further investigation into other HEIs in Oman. Moreover, it would be useful to explore the ideal ratios and types of blended learning and how such courses can promote language learning. Further research could also focus on the particular features of Moodle, such as fora, quizzes, and media. As each teacher customises and assigns work according to their own practice, a more finely tuned investigation of the use of these features could be illuminating.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Sample of Students’ Questionnaires and Teachers’ Interviews

#### [I] Students Sample (i) Part One – Online Materials: Perceptions and Usage

(A) Tick (✓) where applicable to indicate your answer [you can tick more than one square]

(أ) أختَر الاجابة بوضع علامة (✓) يمكنك اختيار أكثر من اجابة

1.	Which Type of Moodle course do you like? ١. اي نوع من ال moodle course تفضل؟	<input type="checkbox"/> MReader <input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Vocabulary (What’s the right Word)	<input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Students (340 Students Course) <input type="checkbox"/> None of them (ليس اي مما ذكر)
2.	Which moodle course have you more used during this level? ٢. اي نوع من ال moodle استخدمته بصورة اكبر خلال هذا الفصل؟	<input type="checkbox"/> MReader <input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Vocabulary (What’s the right Word)	<input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Students (340 Students Course) <input type="checkbox"/> None of them (ليس اي مما ذكر)
3.	Which moodle course helped to improve your English? ٣. اي نوع من ال moodle ساعدك في تطوير لغتك الانجليزية؟	<input type="checkbox"/> MReader <input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Vocabulary (What’s the right Word)	<input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Students (340 Students Course) <input type="checkbox"/> None of them (ليس اي مما ذكر)
4.	Which moodle course do you usually need help with while doing? ٤. اي نوع من ال moodle تحتاج فيه الى مساعده اثناء أداءه؟	<input type="checkbox"/> MReader <input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Vocabulary (What’s the right Word)	<input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Students (340 Students Course) <input type="checkbox"/> None of them (ليس اي مما ذكر)
5.	I usually do MReader ..... ٥. في العادة أقوم بحل أسئلة ال MReader .....	<input type="checkbox"/> On my own بنفسي	<input type="checkbox"/> With the help of others بمساعدة الآخرين
6.	I usually do (What’s the right Word) ..... ٦. في العادة أقوم بحل (What’s the right Word) أسئلة .....	<input type="checkbox"/> On my own بنفسي	<input type="checkbox"/> With the help of others بمساعدة الآخرين
7.	I prefer to work on moodle ..... ٧. افضل ان اقوم بحل أسئلة ال moodle .....	<input type="checkbox"/> On Campus داخل الحرم الجامعي	<input type="checkbox"/> Off Campus خارج الحرم الجامعي
8.	I think _____ is a waste of time ٨. انا اعتقد ----- مضيعه للوقت	<input type="checkbox"/> MReader <input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Vocabulary (What’s the right Word)	<input type="checkbox"/> Moodle Students (340 Students Course) <input type="checkbox"/> None of them (ليس اي مما ذكر)

(B) What Challenges do you encounter while doing exercises on Moodle?

(ب) ما هي التحديات التي تواجهها اثناء اداءك لتمارين ال moodle؟

	The Challenges التحديات	Strongly Agree أوافق بشدة	Agree أوافق	Not Sure غير متأكد	Disagree غير موافق	Strongly Disagree غير موافق بشدة
1.	The instructions of moodle exercises are not clear ١. التعليمات والإرشادات ليست واضحة					
2.	The labs at L.C. have poor services ٢. الخدمات المتاحة في مختبرات الكمبيوتر بمركز اللغات هي دون المستوى					
3.	Moodle content is difficult ٣. صعوبة محتوى ال moodle					
4.	The given time to complete Moodle is not enough ٤. ضيق الوقت المحدد للإجابة					
5.	I have poor computing skills ٥. مهاراتي في الكمبيوتر تعرقل من أدائي					
6.	I have poor English proficiency ٦. ضعف لغتي الانجليزية يعرقل من أدائي					

(C) What are the benefits of doing moodle exercises?

(ج) ما هي الفوائد من القيام بتمارين ال moodle؟

	The Benefits الفوائد	Strongly Agree أوافق بشدة	Agree أوافق	Not Sure غير متأكد	Disagree غير موافق	Strongly Disagree غير موافق بشدة
1	Working on Moodle is better than attending classes ١. القيام بحل تمارين ال Moodle افضل من حضور الصف					
2	Classes I attend with the teacher are more beneficial than working on my own on Moodle ٢. محاضراتي التي احضرها في الصف مع المدرس اكثر فائدة من القيام بتمارين ال Moodle					
3	In general, Moodle activities are more fun than attending regular classes ٣. بشكل عام اجد في التعلم من خلال أنشطة ال Moodle متعة اكثر من حضور الصف					
4	In general, Moodle activities helped to improve my English more than textbooks we use in class ٤. بشكل عام الأنشطة الموجودة على ال Moodle تساعد في تطوير لغتي الانجليزية اكثر من الكتب التي أدرسها في الصف					
5	I feel that Moodle activities helped to improve my computing skills ٥. اشعر بان الأنشطة الموجودة على ال Moodle ساعدت بشكل كبير في تطوير مهارات الكمبيوتر لدي					
6	I feel that grades I get from MReader and (What's the right Word) measure my improvement in English. ٦. اشعر بان الدرجات التي احصل عليها من استخدامي لـ (What's the right Word) و ال MReader معيار حقيقي لقياس مدى تطوري في اللغة الانجليزية					

## (ii) Part Two – Conventional Materials

(A) Tick (✓) where applicable to indicate your answer [you can tick more than one square]

(أ) أختَر الاجابة بوضع علامة (✓) يمكنك اختيار أكثر من اجابة

1.	Which book/s do you prefer? 1. أي من هذه الكتب تفضل؟	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening and Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Reading	<input type="checkbox"/> Writing <input type="checkbox"/> Study Skills
2.	Which book/s you don't like? 2. أي من هذه الكتب لا يعجبك هذا الفصل؟	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening and Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Reading	<input type="checkbox"/> Writing <input type="checkbox"/> Study Skills
3.	Which book/s do you think is useful? 3. أي من هذه الكتب تجده مفيدا؟	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening and Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Reading	<input type="checkbox"/> Writing <input type="checkbox"/> Study Skills
4.	Which book/s help/s to improve your English? 4. أي من هذه الكتب ساعدك في تطوير لغتك الانجليزية؟	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening and Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Reading	<input type="checkbox"/> Writing <input type="checkbox"/> Study Skills

(B) Answer the following questions:

(ب) أجب عن الاسئلة التالية:

1. Which book/s do you like the most? Why?

1. من بين الكتب المقررة هذا الفصل ما الكتب التي تفضلها اكثر؟ لماذا؟

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2. Which book/s you don't like at all? Why?

2. ما الكتب المقررة هذا الفصل والتي لا تفضلها على الإطلاق؟ لماذا؟

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3. What do you suggest to improve the one/s you don't like?

3. ماذا تقترح لتحسين الكتب المقررة هذا الفصل والتي لا تفضلها؟

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(C)	What features influence your preference towards books?	(ج) ما الخصائص التي تجعلك تفضل كتابا على الآخر ؟		
1	It should have good content ١. ينبغي ان يكون محتوى الكتاب جيدا	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
2	It should have easy and useful exercises ٢. ينبغي أن يحتوي الكتاب على تمارين مفيدة	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
3	It should have clear instructions ٣. ينبغي ان تكون التعليمات والإرشادات واضحة	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
4	It should be interesting ٤. ينبغي ان يكون محتوى الكتاب ممتع وشيق	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
5	It should have pictures ٥. ينبغي ان يحتوي على صور	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
6	It should be helpful in preparing me for exams ٦. ينبغي ان يساعد الكتاب في اعدادي اعدادا جيدا للاختبارات	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
7	It should have enough practice ٧. ينبغي ان يحتوي الكتاب على تمارين تساعدني على ممارسة وتطبيق ما تم تعلمه	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
8	It should prepare me for real life interaction ٨. ينبغي ان يساعد الكتاب في إعدادي لمواجهة متطلبات الحياة اليومية	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
9	It should help me to improve my learning skills and strategies ٩. ينبغي ان يساعد الكتاب في تطوير مهارات واستراتيجيات التعلم لدي	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
10	It should increase my level of motivation and confidence ١٠. ينبغي ان يزيد الكتاب من مستوى ثقتي ودافعتي للتعلم	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
11	It should be able to meet my needs ١١. ينبغي ان يراعي الكتاب احتياجاتي	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
12	It should help to improve my interactions with teachers and students in class ١٢. ينبغي ان يساعد الكتاب في تطوير مدى تفاعلي مع المعلم والطلبة في الصف.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
13	It should suite my age ١٣. ينبغي ان يكون الكتاب مناسباً لعمرى	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
14	It should suite my level of education ١٤. ينبغي ان يكون الكتاب مناسباً لمستواي التعليمي.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
15	It should be related to my context ١٥. ينبغي ان يكون الكتاب مرتبطاً ببيئتي	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure

## [II] Teachers Sample: Perceptions of Online Materials

<b>Teachers Interview Questions:</b>	
1	Do you support the idea of integrating e- learning in education?
2	What do you think of the three types of moodles available for 340 students?
3	Do you think students activities on moodles should be graded?
4	Do you think the grades reflect the students' real level of English?
5	From your point of view, what are the main obstacles facing LC students while using Moodle?
6	Out of the books you are currently using with your students, which ones do you like and why?
7	Which book needs to be replaced in 340 students?
8	Which materials are working best with our FP students; commercial or in-house? Why?
9	Do you think 340 course has a good balance of commercial and in-house materials?
10	In your opinion, what are the features of a good book?
11	Do you think the online and conventional materials available for 340 students could enhance their learning?

**Appendix B – Quantitative Results of Teachers’ Responses to the Interview Questions:**

*Table 1: The idea of integrating e-learning in education*

<b>Do you support the idea of integrating e-learning in education?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Yes, it is a great idea	3	7	<b>10</b>
It depends	0	1	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

*Table 2: Types of Moodles available for 340 students*

<b>What do you think about the three types of Moodles available for 340 students?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
They are good	1	3	<b>4</b>
Each has a different purpose	0	1	<b>1</b>
Not sure/varying opinion	1	3	<b>4</b>
Not familiar with all the different types of activities	1	1	<b>2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

*Table 3: Grading of student’s activities on Moodles*

<b>Do you think student’s activities on Moodles should be graded?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Yes, I support fully	0	4	<b>4</b>
Slightly support	1	1	<b>2</b>

Grading is not important	2	0	2
Varying opinion	0	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

*Table 4: Do grades reflect the student's level of learning*

<b>Do you think the grades reflect the student's real level of English?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Yes. I think it reflects their real level	0	2	2
No, they don't reflect their real level	1	2	3
Maybe in some cases/ to some extent	2	4	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

*Table 5: Main obstacles facing LC students when using a Moodle*

<b>From your point of view, what are the main obstacles facing LC students when using a Moodle</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Audio files do not open when off campus	0	1	1
Lack of motivation	0	1	1
Lack of familiarity with online courses	0	1	1
Some of them don't have computers at home	0	1	1
Technology-some files/videos fail to open	1	1	2
Computer literacy and digital literacy	2	1	3
Doing things that they don't get marks for	0	2	2



<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>
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*Table 6: Best book from those being used in the LC*

<b>Out of the books you are currently using with your students, which ones do you like and why?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Pathway	0	1	<b>1</b>
The writing book (Writing explorer)	1	1	<b>2</b>
I love them all	0	3	<b>3</b>
Reading book from National Geographic	1	3	<b>4</b>
In-house books	1	0	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

*Table 7: Book that needs to be replaced for 340 students*

<b>Which book needs to be replaced for 340 students?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Pathway book	0	1	<b>1</b>
Reading book	1	0	<b>1</b>
In-house material	0	1	<b>1</b>
None	2	6	<b>8</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

*Table 8: Materials that are working best with our foundation students*

<b>Which materials are working best with our foundation students, commercial or in house?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
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Each has its role/benefits	0	3	<b>3</b>
Both the in-house and commercial	1	3	<b>4</b>
In-house books	1	0	<b>1</b>
Commercial materials	1	2	<b>3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

*Table 9: Balance of in-house and commercial books*

<b>Do you think the 340 course has a good balance of commercial and in-house books?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Yes (50/50)	2	7	<b>9</b>
Not sure	1	1	<b>2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

*Table 10: Can conventional materials available for 340 students enhance learning*

<b>Do you think, online and conventional materials available for 340 students could enhance their learning?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Yes, they enhance learning	3	8	<b>11</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

**Appendix C – Results of Students’ Responses to the Survey Questions:**

Questionnaire queries	Responses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MReader (182)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moodle students (31)</li> <li>• Moodle vocabulary (74)</li> <li>• None of them (17)</li> </ul>
Which Moodle course have you more used at this level?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MReader (140)</li> <li>• Moodle students (38)</li> <li>• Moodle vocabulary (113)</li> <li>• None of them (8)</li> </ul>
Which Moodle course helped to improve your English?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MReader (151)</li> <li>• Moodle students (30)</li> <li>• Moodle vocabulary (110)</li> <li>• None of them (21)</li> </ul>
Which Moodle course do you usually need help with while doing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MReader (42)</li> <li>• Moodle students (57)</li> <li>• Moodle vocabulary (123)</li> <li>• None of them (65)</li> </ul>
I think _____ is a waste of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MReader (23)</li> <li>• Moodle students (30)</li> <li>• Moodle vocabulary (45)</li> <li>• None of them (168)</li> </ul>
I usually do MReader .....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On my own (245)</li> <li>• With the help of others (29)</li> </ul>

I usually do (What's the right Word) .....	
Which Type of Moodle course do you like?	
I prefer to work on Moodle .....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On Campus (216)</li> <li>• Off Campus (61)</li> </ul>
<b>What challenges do you encounter while doing exercises on Moodle?</b>	
The instructions for Moodle exercises are not clear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (21)</li> <li>• Not sure (38)</li> <li>• Disagree (83)</li> </ul>
The laboratories at LC have poor services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (31)</li> <li>• Not sure (51)</li> <li>• Disagree (66)</li> </ul>
Moodle content is difficult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (17)</li> <li>• Not sure (45)</li> <li>• Disagree (86)</li> </ul>
The given time to complete Moodle is not enough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (37)</li> <li>• Not sure (55)</li> <li>• Disagree (51)</li> </ul>
I have poor computing skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (25)</li> <li>• Not sure (35)</li> <li>• Disagree (44)</li> </ul>

I have poor English proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (34)</li> <li>• Not sure (58)</li> <li>• Disagree (78)</li> </ul>
<b>What are the benefits of doing Moodle exercises?</b>	
Working on Moodle is better than attending classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (37)</li> <li>• Not sure (54)</li> <li>• Disagree (58)</li> </ul>
Classes I attend with the teacher are more beneficial than working on my own on Moodle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (56)</li> <li>• Not sure (73)</li> <li>• Disagree (77)</li> </ul>
In general, Moodle activities are more fun than attending regular classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (41)</li> <li>• Not sure (74)</li> <li>• Disagree (64)</li> </ul>
In general, Moodle activities helped to improve my English more than textbooks we use in class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (35)</li> <li>• Not sure (74)</li> <li>• Disagree (87)</li> </ul>
I feel that Moodle activities helped to improve my computing skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (35)</li> <li>• Not sure (121)</li> <li>• Disagree (66)</li> </ul>
I feel that grades I get from MReader and (What's the right Word) measure my improvement in English.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly Agree (43)</li> <li>• Not sure (97)</li> <li>• Disagree (75)</li> </ul>

<b>Conventional materials</b>	
Which book/s do you prefer?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening (93)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading (130)</li> <li>• Writing (46)</li> <li>• Study skills (81)</li> </ul>
Which book/s you don't like?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening (49)</li> <li>• Reading (68)</li> <li>• Writing (106)</li> <li>• Study skills (57)</li> </ul>
Which book/s do you think is useful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening (99)</li> <li>• Reading (112)</li> <li>• Writing (55)</li> <li>• Study skills (101)</li> </ul>
Which book/s help/s to improve your English?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening (135)</li> <li>• Reading (106)</li> <li>• Writing (60)</li> <li>• Study skills (80)</li> </ul>
Which book/s do you like the most? Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening (76)</li> <li>• Reading (122)</li> <li>• Writing (28)</li> <li>• Study skills (41)</li> </ul>

Which book/s you don't like at all? Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Listening (30)</li><li>• Reading (27)</li><li>• Writing (90)</li></ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Study skills (47)</li></ul>

<p><b>What features influence your preference towards books?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It should have good content</li> <li>• It should have easy and useful exercises</li> <li>• It should have clear instructions</li> <li>• It should be interesting</li> <li>• It should have pictures</li> <li>• It should be helpful in preparing me for examinations</li> <li>• It should have enough practice</li> <li>• It should prepare me for real life interaction</li> <li>• It should help me to improve my learning skills and strategies</li> <li>• It should increase my level of motivation and confidence</li> <li>• It should be able to meet my needs</li> <li>• It should help to improve my interactions with teachers and students in class</li> <li>• It should suite my age</li> <li>• It should suit my level of education</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It should be related to my context</li> </ul>



<p><b>Part 2: Conventional materials</b></p> <p><b>1. Which books do you like the most?</b></p> <p><b>Why?</b></p>	<p><b>Listening and speaking-</b> Improve skills which I need in credit courses and future</p> <p>Learn new strategies</p> <p>It makes easy to learn English</p> <p>It helps to improve my English</p> <p>It enables you to enhance your skills Helps to get British Accent</p> <p>It has documentary Movies</p> <p>Helps you to receive information in an interesting way</p> <p>Does not have a lot of information</p> <p>Helps to improve my interaction with teachers</p> <p>It's simple and not complicated</p> <p>Learn new vocabulary from it Includes different activities and topics</p> <p>It improves both listening and speaking skills</p> <p><b>Study Skills-</b> Many activities to help in preparing for examinations</p> <p>Have topics that students need</p> <p>Have useful activities</p> <p>It's fun and useful</p> <p>It has different skills</p>
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	<p>Different exercises</p> <p>Lots of ideas</p> <p>It contains new vocabulary</p> <p>You can improve many skills</p> <p><b>Writing-</b> It develops my spelling</p> <p>it has grammar</p> <p>we can learn and apply new rules</p> <p>It shows you how to write</p> <p>It can improve your writing</p> <p><b>Reading-</b> It has stories</p> <p>Teach us necessary skills</p> <p>Enjoyable, useful and clear</p> <p>Teach us new vocabulary</p> <p>It's full of images</p> <p>You can learn about new things</p> <p>It attracts my attention</p> <p>It helps to improve my silent readings</p> <p>Read and write at the same time</p> <p>Improves my concentration skills</p> <p>Because it has useful structure</p> <p>helps me to communicate with others</p> <p>It makes me quick in understanding text and answering any question related to it</p>
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	<p>Topics increase our experience in life</p> <p>Topics are related to our daily life</p>
<p><b>2. Which book/s you don't like at all?</b></p> <p><b>Why?</b></p>	<p><b>Listening and Speaking-</b> Difficult to understand</p> <p>It has challenging vocabulary</p> <p>A waste of time</p> <p><b>Writing-</b> Does not improve my English</p> <p>Doesn't encourage imagination and creativity</p> <p>Does not have enough activities to improve my writing</p> <p>Does not have many pictures</p> <p>It includes many information and challenging vocabulary</p> <p>Don't notice any development in writing</p> <p>Boring, no definite content, and not useful</p> <p>Basics are not there</p> <p>Makes me lose interest</p> <p>Many activities and little writing</p> <p>It depends on the teacher</p> <p>doesn't prepare me for the examinations</p> <p>doesn't have interesting topics</p> <p>we don't use the book very much</p> <p><b>Study Skills-</b> it includes only exercises</p>

	<p>Boring, complicated, not organised, a waste of time and very easy</p> <p>Nothing new, no pictures, not useful, and the activities are not clear</p> <p>Doesn't improve my English</p> <p>Doesn't have useful information</p> <p><b>Reading-</b> Long, boring, long passages and requires lots of homework</p> <p>Challenging content and vocabulary, and embarrassing topics</p> <p>Doesn't respect our values and challenging Passages</p>
<p>3. What do you suggest to improve the one/s you don't like?</p> <p>General suggestions:</p>	<p>Add activities which are fun and interesting</p> <p>Add pictures to the reading book</p> <p>Stop using the writing book</p> <p>Include samples of examinations in books</p> <p>Exclude some topics which are useless and repetitive</p> <p>Little translation in Arabic</p> <p>Choose interesting topics</p> <p>Books should suite our level</p> <p>More and different activities</p> <p>More grammar</p>

	<p>Focus on the process of writing</p> <p>In reading passages, should be short</p> <p>Make books easy and clear, focus on writing</p> <p>Regularly update books</p> <p>Change teachers and appoint good ones</p> <p>Explain difficult words</p> <p>The foundation program should not focus merely on books</p>
<b>Specific for each book</b>	
Study Skills Book	<p>Add more difficult topics</p> <p>Deep content</p>
Reading	<p>Make it easier</p> <p>Make it more attractive</p> <p>Make vocabulary easy</p>
Listening and Speaking	<p>Separate speaking from Listening</p> <p>More activities and videos should be supplemented by exercises from other books</p> <p>More exercises to practice listening</p> <p>Make the book easy</p>

## **Appendix D – SQU LC FPEL Course Descriptions.**

### **English Foundation courses:**

#### **FPEL 0120**

This is a semester-long Foundation Program English Language (FPEL) course, which covers basic grammar, vocabulary and skills work on reading, writing, listening and speaking. Students are also introduced to the fundamental study skills necessary to succeed at university. Students are assessed through a combination of continuous assessment and formal exams at mid and end of semester.

#### **FPEL 0230**

This is a semester-long FPEL course which students enter at an elementary level of English proficiency. The course takes a skills-based approach, with a strong focus on language use in the writing lessons. Study skills are further developed and students give a presentation. Students are assessed through a combination of continuous assessment and formal exams at mid and end of semester.

#### **FPEL 0340**

This is a semester-long FPEL course which students enter at a pre-intermediate level of English proficiency. The course further develops all general English language skills and introduces students to basic note-taking while listening to lectures. Students give two presentations. Students are assessed through a combination of continuous assessment and formal exams at mid and end of semester.

#### **FPEH/FPES 0450**

This is a semester-long Foundation Program English Language (FPEL) course which covers the general basic skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The course also continues to consolidate study skills which are necessary for college work. The second half of the course draws upon language-usage specific to students' specializations. Students are assessed through a combination of continuous assessment and formal examinations at mid and end of semester.

#### **FPEH/FPES 0560**

This is a semester-long Foundation Program English Language (FPEL) course which covers the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the context of students' specializations. The course also continues to consolidate study skills necessary for college work and equip students with skills crucial for writing a 500-word report. Students are assessed through a combination of continuous assessment and formal examinations at mid and end of semester.

#### **FPEH/FPES 0603**

This is taught for a whole semester and is taught 10 hours a week. It is a Foundation Program English Language (FPEL) course which covers the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the context of students' specializations. Students enter at an intermediate level of English proficiency.

The course also consolidates study skills which are necessary for college work and equips students with skills crucial for writing a 500-word report. Students are assessed through a combination of continuous assessment and formal examinations.

## **Appendix E – SQU LC Research Permission Documents.**

### **(1) Research Proposal**

Title: CONVENTIONAL OR ONLINE MATERIALS: TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS IN AN ENGLISH FOUNDATION PROGRAMME

#### **Introduction**

The advancement in Information Communication Technology has fostered the development of English learning, understanding, and communication mediums and materials. Today, there are forms of online lectures, interactive videos, podcasts, and other conventional forms with which students can interact with English in a more flexible and fun environment. However, there are conflicts in opinions regarding the significance of online and conventional English learning sources and materials for students. Tomilson (2008) claims that the selection of any learning form language acquisition should be based on its effect on the pedagogical pattern of the students, and how it improves or affects the academic performance of the students.

#### **Literature Review**

Julius (2003) opines that conventional materials of text-books, learning guides, and other in-house publication sources are readily available and contain contextualized information, which closely complies with the cultural and social environment of the students. However, Burns (2000) argues in-house conventional materials to be less appealing, have limited information, and attached cost of buying, which reduces the overall motivation of students towards the conventional forms.

On the contrary, the online learning material for English acquisition is advocated to host a rich collection of instruments, methodology, and learning patterns that suits the pedagogical pattern of diverse students with different learning styles (Graham et al. 2007; Podromou 2002).

However, Tomilson (2008) challenges the position of Graham et al, claiming that most of the online resources lack in their intellectual mapping and resourcefulness to be able to support the language skills development of students.

### **Research Goal**

The aim of this research is to observe and analyse the perceived effectiveness and imperativeness of the two forms of the language learning resources, conventional and online, from the standpoint of students and teachers. The study outcome can be used by English language teaching institutions in selecting their teaching resources and planning the course curriculum to better suit the intellectual and pedagogical preferences of the students.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be addressed to achieve the research objectives:

1. What are students and instructors' attitudes towards the use of online and traditional learning materials in supporting language teaching?
2. What are the perceptive benefits and disadvantages of using conventional and online materials in language teaching at the LC?
3. What is the contribution of traditional textbooks and on-line materials in students' academic achievements?

### **Data Collection**

A Mixed-Research Approach will be followed in this study, using both qualitative and quantitative data. The secondary data for the study will be collected from peer-reviewed articles, books, and other published sources on material types, usage, perceptions, and imperativeness in English language teaching, learning, and applying. The primary data for the study will be collected from the teachers and students enrolled in LC Level 3 program using both structured (close-ended) questionnaire and semi-structured (open-ended) questionnaire/interview.

A likert-scale will be designed for the structured interview with the primary aim to rate the preference level of different English learning materials and strategies by the students and the



teachers. The interview will then try to put stress on areas with conflicts either within the students or between students and the teachers. This inquiry will lead towards a detailed account of why a particular form of learning or teaching material is preferred more/less than the other forms.

### **Data Analysis**

The quantitative data (obtained from close-ended questionnaire) will be first decoded using SPSS software and then will be further scrutinize by comparing it with the findings and results of previous sources. The qualitative data (obtained from the interview) will be first segregated using themes and keyword coding method. The data will then be analysed in the light of the literature review and conceptual framework of the study.

### **Ethical Issues**

The researcher will try to convince the participants by informing them about the purpose of the study and that their contribution can enable the researcher to pinpoint learning/teaching materials and strategies that are significant, but not employed or insignificant and applied in the language program. Thus, the research will benefit in improving the material and resource-base of the LC language program. In addition to this, the researcher will prior inform about the study questions, interview modes and recording tool, and measures taken to safeguard their identity.

### **Referencing Format**

Harvard referencing style will be followed throughout the research report.

## (2) Research Permission Form



Sultan Qaboos University  
The Language Centre

Professional Development & Research Unit



### Research Permission Form

#### The Research Permission Form: What Is It & What Is It Not?

This Form acts as a formal document granting permission to applicant to conduct their research at the SQU Language Centre based upon the specifications indicated in Sections A & B below. Once approval is granted, the next step for the researcher will be to append this Form together with their Email Request for Participation and any enclosed instrumentation to the liaise person (the individual(s) in the Unit/Programme/LC Administration who will facilitate access to the prospective participants). Please note that **this Form is valid for its declared purpose only. It does not secure any form of consent for participation.**

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#### Section A: [To be Completed by the Researcher Seeking Permission to Conduct Research at the LC]

<b>Researcher(s)</b>	Fatma Mohammed Salim Al Futaisi
<b>Institution</b>	SQU – Language Centre
<b>Research Topic</b>	Conventional or Online Materials: Teachers' and Students' Perceptions in an English Foundation Programme
<b>Requested permission (e.g., to distribute a questionnaire, conduct interviews/observations, etc.)</b>	To distribute a questionnaire and conduct interviews
<b>Date application is made</b>	15 <sup>th</sup> April 2015
<b>Name of person(s) facilitating access to participants, if known</b>	Programme Coordinator of 230 (Jokha Al Ghafri)

#### Section B: [To be Completed by the LC Research Committee Chair and Returned to Concerned Researcher]

<b>No.</b>	
<b>LC Research Committee Decision</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Approved</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Requires revision</b>
<b>Authorizing body</b>	Language Centre Research Committee
<b>Date permission granted</b>	-
<b>How long is this permission valid for?</b>	-
<b>Comments</b>	-

### (3) Research Ethics Form

#### Research Ethics Form

##### Section 1

<b>Researcher name(s):</b>	Fatma Mohammed Al Futaisi
<b>Proposed research area:</b>	Online and Conventional Materials
<b>Discussant:</b>	Kamla Al Amri
<b>Date of discussion:</b>	20 <sup>th</sup> April 2015
<b>Date submitted to LC Research Committee</b>	15 <sup>th</sup> April 2015

#### **A. Discussion of Ethical Issues and Decisions Made**

##### **Brief overview of study**

The mounting importance and dominance of English language has encouraged online and conventional publishers to print and publish resources for English reading and learning. Though, some argue that the increased number of English resources and materials provide an opportunity for better language acquisition for the learners, other hold the position that many sources and material forms are unable to contribute in pedagogical learning pattern of the students. This research will try to analyse and compare the perceived significance of the different English resources from the standpoint of teachers and students.

##### **Participant recruitment**

The participants of the study will be teachers and students. The criteria for selecting students will be; (1) the participant needs to be registered in Level 3 of the English learning program with LC, (2) the participant should also be enrolled in an academic course with the university, (3) the participant needs to be 18 years of age or above at the time of the research. Furthermore, all 33 teachers of level 3 will be selected for the research.

##### **Information given to participants**

The information that will be provided to the participants will be of:

- i. Purpose of the study.
- ii. Modes of research i.e. face-to-face interviews and questionnaires.

- iii. Voluntarily and un-paid participation.
- iv. Copies of the research questionnaire and interview questions
- v. Date, location, and duration of interview
- vi. How their responses will be analysed.
- vii. Measures taken to secure their confidentiality.

### **Participant right of withdrawal**

After the participant has agreed to his/her voluntarily participation, the researcher will brief the right of withdrawal from the interview at any point. Participants will have the right to ask to cease or pause the interview procedure any time they feel uncomfortable, have changed their minds, or want the interview to be postponed.

### **Informed consent**

Only when the participant has agreed to take part in the research, an informed consent will be signed in order to document the willingness and unpressured or incentive-less engagement of the participant.

### **Anonymity/confidentiality**

- No personal information like participant's name, student or staff I.D. number, grades, etc. will be collected in this study.
- Informed consent of participants will be communicated verbally.

### **Data collection**

The secondary data of the study will be collected from peer-review articles, books, and other published work on English language acquisition, including the work of LC-affiliated authors on online and conventional English learning materials. The primary data will be collected from students and teachers in Level 3 of LC's Language Foundation

Programme through questionnaires and interviews.

### **Data analysis**

Quantitative data will be analysed using SPSS software to compare the mean values of different students and teachers. On the other hand, the qualitative data will be analysed using the thematic coding approach as guided by Burns and Coffin (2001)

### **Data storage**

Electronic data storage will be preferred over hard copies of data. Electronic transcripts of all the recorded interviews will be created, which will be stored in the university protected server for future use. All recordings and hard copies of participants' data and information will be discarded after being assessed by the supervisor.

### **Reporting of research**

The research will be reported in five phases.

1<sup>st</sup> Phase: Research Proposal and objectives

2<sup>nd</sup> Phase: Literature Review and detailed account of data collection instruments, number of finalized participants, etc.

3<sup>rd</sup> Phase: Results of the primary collected data

4<sup>th</sup> Phase: Complete data analysis of qualitative and quantitative data.

5<sup>th</sup> Phase: Finalized and structured report.

### **B. Any Difficulties Anticipated**

- Availability of the target participants, particularly the teachers will be an issue.
- Students might be hesitant or shy to share their true feelings, and this can dilute data accuracy.

### **Acknowledgements**

#### (4) Application for research support

**Sultan Qaboos University**  
**The Language Centre**  
 The Professional Development & Research Unit  
**Application Form for Research Support**

**Kindly complete Section A of this form fully and send to LC Research Committee Chair.**

**SECTION A:** For Applicant (Must be completed by the individual researcher needing support)

<b>Full name (s) of researcher(s)</b>	Fatma Mohammed Salim Al Futaisi	
<b>Date of application for support</b> (d/m/y)	15 <sup>th</sup> April 2015	
<b>Nature of required support</b> (Double click 'square' and choose 'Checked')	<input type="checkbox"/> Proposal writing <input type="checkbox"/> Instrument Development <input type="checkbox"/> Methodology <input type="checkbox"/> Data analysis <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (Please specify below)	<b>Your preferred method to receive support:</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Written <input type="checkbox"/> Face to face
	Permission to carry out interviews and questionnaires	
<b>Support needed by</b> (d/m/y)	23 <sup>rd</sup> April 2015	

**Brief description of required support (Not less than 30 words; be as precise as possible)**

Pursing EdD at university of Sheffield, UK and in line with the research proposal towards fulfilling the dissertation requirement would seek the Research Committee approval to conduct interviews and questionnaires among 230 teachers and students in the LC foundation programme on the perceptions of teachers and students of Online versus Conventional materials.

**(5) Instruments:**

- a. Students (English-Arabic) – Refer Appendix A (I)**
- b. Teachers Samples - Refer Appendix A (II)**