# The Use of Tablets in Teaching English in Saudi Arabia:
# Implications and Challenges

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*Abstract:*

*The use of technology in English teaching and learning has received much attention from educators and language researchers. In fact, the use of technology is a massive research field that includes the using computers and other technological devices such as tablets and mobile phones. The present study aimed to explore the perceptions of English teachers in Saudi Arabia about the use of tablets as teaching tools in English as a foreign language classes (EFL). Using a qualitative research inquiry, the study identified the advantages of and challenges to using tablets as English teaching tools. Results indicated that using tablets has pedagogical and instructional benefits that ease the teaching and learning process. However, time and lack of adequate training are challenges that face English teachers when dealing with tablets during EFL classes. Findings suggest that teachers are encouraged to devote more instructional and designing time to find the best ways to use tablets to teach English.*

*Key Words: The use of tablets in EFL classes, CALL, MALL, English teaching and learning*

## Introduction

The use of technology in the educational settings has received much attention as researchers and educators have looked at the benefits and drawbacks of integrating technology in today's classrooms. It is difficult to imagine teaching and learning in today's classroom without technology. Stanley (2013) mentions that the use of technology has become an essential part of the teaching and learning process, adding that technology facilitates learning and allows for more innovative and creative teaching practices. In terms of language learning, technology has had a particular impactupon how language is taught and learned throughout the years. As Thomas, Reinders, andWarschauer (2013) have pointed out, research surrounding the use of technology in the English teaching has been the provenance of many fields such as Computer Assisted

Language Learning (CALL) and Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). This includes the use of laptops, tablets, and cell phones for teaching and learning of English.

According to Yang (2013), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is a growing subdivision of CALL and refers to the use of handheld mobile and tablet devices such as iPhones or iPads for teaching and learning of English. Yang (2013) added that the use of MALL among English teachers has increased rapidly as mobile devices have become available for students of all ages and as teachers and students use these devices as part of their daily routine. For many researchers (Lu, 2008; Thomas et al., 2013: Yang, 2013), the use of MALL has many social and academic benefits including but not limited to facilitating the learning process and providing more innovative and effective ways of language teaching. Other researchers argue that even though the use of mobile devices has many advantages, such devices lack instructional intentions (Park, 2011) and might serve as a distraction for students' attention toward learning (Reinders & Hubbard, 2013).

Regarding the use of technology in Saudi Arabia, the educational system has gone through different stages depending on the vision of the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for all types of education in the nation including public and private schools, higher education, gifted programs, and private institutions. Over the last decade, the vision of the Ministry of Education has focused on providing teachers and school leaders with time, effort, and resources needed to integrate technology into all classrooms, and perhaps more importantly, the Ministry has worked to prepare teachers to use it effectively. Billions of dollars were spent on equipping classrooms with latest technological devices that aid teachers to incorporate technological devices into their teaching practices.

In fact, the use of technology in all educational settings is one of the goals set by the Ministry of Education in their road to accomplish the aims of Vision 2030. This Vision was adopted by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman to grant the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia a leading position in all economic, politic, and educational fields. All Saudi ministries and institutions have to work to align themselves with the requirements of this initiative.

Even though much research has been done regarding the use of technology in the educational setting, no information could be found about the use of MALL, specifically tablets, in English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. In other words, there is lack of research surrounding the use of different tablet devices during English classes in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the present study explores Saudi English teachers' perspectives and rationale regarding the use of tablets to teach English. Specifically, the study aimed to explore the potential benefits and the challenges that are usually associated with using mobiles in English classrooms. Understanding these perceptions will reveal when and how tablets should be used with English language learners in Saudi Arabia. Targeting English language learners in this research offered an insight

of what Saudi English teachers need in terms of integrating technology, specifically MALL into their teaching practices. Significantly, to understand these perceptions, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the benefits of using tablets when teaching English?
2. What challenges do teachers and school leaders encounter when using tablets to teach English?

**Literature Review**

Research surrounding the use of technology in language teaching and learning is promising. For the past decades, the use of technology in educational settings, specifically language teaching and learning, has received much attention as educators have identified the benefits and challenges of using it in language classrooms. According to Yang (2013), technology has revolutionized the way English is taught and learned. Examples of the technological devices that have been integrated into language teaching are mobile and tablet devices (Yang, 2013). For many educators (Basoglu&AKDEMIR, 2010; Lu, 2008; Miangah&Nezarat, 2012; Yang, 2013) mobile assisted language learning has many benefits that ease the English teaching and learning process.

Miangah and Nezarat (2012) pointed out that portability and connectivity are the two main characteristics that make mobile phones effective language teaching and learning tools. Miangah and Nezarat continue to say that these devices can be used effectively to teach English vocabulary, develop students reading and listening comprehension, and introduce new grammatical rules, and enhance students' pronunciation.

Moreover, Chen (2013) investigated how language learners tend to use tablets to learn English in informal settings outside language classes. The researcher sought to understand how tablets could be used by language learners to facilitate more effective self-oriented and independent language learning. Results indicated that language learners used tablets to foster more creative, innovative, and collaborative English learning environment. The researcher pointed out that the participants showed a positive attitude toward the overall usability and satisfaction of tablet in language learning. Tablets allow the language learners to go beyond language classes and provide them with opportunities to learn English in more collaborative and interactive settings. The researcher concluded by stating that "tablet computers, as well as other mobile technologies, are ideal tools to foster learner autonomy and ubiquitous learning in informal settings, provided that their technological affordances have been carefully studied and clearly manifested to student users" (p.29).

In addition, Savas (2014) investigated foreign language teachers' perceptions regarding the use of Tablet PCs to teach English. The study included 40 EFL teachers at a state university

in Turkey. The study was quantitative in nature, and the data was collected through two questionnaires: a pre-tablet usesurvey and post-tablet use survey. Results of the study revealed that the majority of teachers showeda positive attitude toward the use of tablet PCs as instructional tools during EFL classes. The EFL teachers also reported that tablets are effective tools in teaching all English skills such as grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Savas recommended that EFL teachers incorporate more English tasks, materials, activities, using tablets. However, it is important to provide teachers with the adequate training that allows them to effectively and consistently use tablets in EFL classes.

Lu (2008) examined the effectiveness of using mobile phones to learn new English vocabulary. Specifically, the study aimed to explore how short message services (SMS) can be used to learn new English vocabulary. The study included thirty high school English language learners who were divided into two groups. For the period of two weeks, the participating groups were given two set of new English words either in printed materials or through SMS. Also, the participants who received the vocabulary lessons through SMS were interviewed to understand their perspectives on these learning experiences. The researcher found that the use of SMS lessons helped the students recognize more vocabulary words. In other words, the mobile group had greater vocabulary gains compared to the group with which paper-based lessons were used. Moreover, it was found that most of the participants showed a positive attitude toward the use of SMS to learn new words. The students believed that using SMS lessons increased their motivation to read and learn the new words. The researcher concluded by saying that using mobile phones mini-lessons to learn new vocabulary has many advantages such as maximizing students' self-efficacy, facilitating language teaching and learning, and providing a more engaging teaching experience.

Similarly, Basoglu and AKDEMIR (2010) conducted a study in which they compared undergraduate English language learners' vocabulary learning when using mobile phones and flashcards. A mixed method research inquiry was employed to examine the effectiveness of using mobile phones to teach and learn English. The study included sixty students, all of whom were undergraduate language learners in a public university in Turkey. The students were divided into two groups: an experimental group which was assigned a vocabulary learning program in which mobile phones were used to teach new words, and control groups which received more traditional vocabulary acquisition techniques. Results indicated that the use of mobile phones in vocabulary learning ensured more effective and beneficial learning experiences than using the traditional vocabulary learning tools. The researchers pointed out that the participants felt that using mobile phones made the learning experiences more entertaining and enjoyable. The researchers concluded by saying that mobile phones allow students to learn and practice English beyond their language classes. The availability of mobile phones with students allows for English learning to occur anytime and anywhere.

Ultimately, research surrounding MALL reveals that mobile and tablet devices are effective tools that foster more effective, creative, collaborative language learning. Language teachers are encouraged to incorporate tablets in their language teaching practices.

**Methodology**

In term of the research methodology, a qualitative research method was employed for this research study. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research methodsare used to understand the participants' underlying opinions, motivations, and behaviors. They provide a deep and rich understanding of the researched problem. The researchers used qualitative research for this study to explore and understand Saudi English teachers' perceptions regarding the use of tablets as instructional tools in EFL classes. Ultimately, a qualitative research method allows for a morein-depth understanding of what Saudi teachers believe were the benefits and challenges usually associated with tablets in English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, interviews were employed as the primary source of data for this research study. In particularly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty pre-service and in-service Saudi English teachers who use tablets for educational purposes. The interview allowed the researchers to provide more time and space for teachers to express their opinions and thoughts about the current use of MALL in English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. Also, teachers were asked about the potential implications of tablets in English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. Each interview lasted for about 60 minutes and was audio-recoded. The participants' responses were transcribed and coded to fully understand the teachers' perspectives of using MALL to teach English in Saudi Arabia. Also, notes were taken during the data collection process.

The participants for the study included20 Saudi English teachers from 12 different schools across Saudi Arabia. The participants were mixed in gender with 12 female and 8 male English teachers. Also, the participants variedin terms of their teaching experiences, some of whom had been teaching for more than 10 years while othershad just started their teaching career.

Moreover, Creswell (2014) indicated that ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research method is important to strengthen the study conclusions and enhance the accuracy of the study results. In terms of the present study, to ensure the trustworthiness of the research methods, several strategies were employed. First, the researchers engaged in dialogic engagement during the analysis process. Ravitch and Carl, (2016) pointed out that dialogic engagement is an important collaborative and dialogue-based process which can inform and ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the qualitative research. Second, "member checking"was used with participants to ensure that the data collection and interpretation process were accurate. The

interviewed teachers were given the opportunities to check and evaluate the interpretation of the collected data.

**Data Analysis**

During the data analysis phase, the researchers used Dedoose program to organize and analyze the collected data. Dedoose is an online-based coding software that can be used by qualitative researchers to code, categorize, and analyze the collected data. Moreover, initial and final coding were identified and guided by ongoing conversations among the researchers.Figure 1 representsthe data analysis process and the findings of this research study.
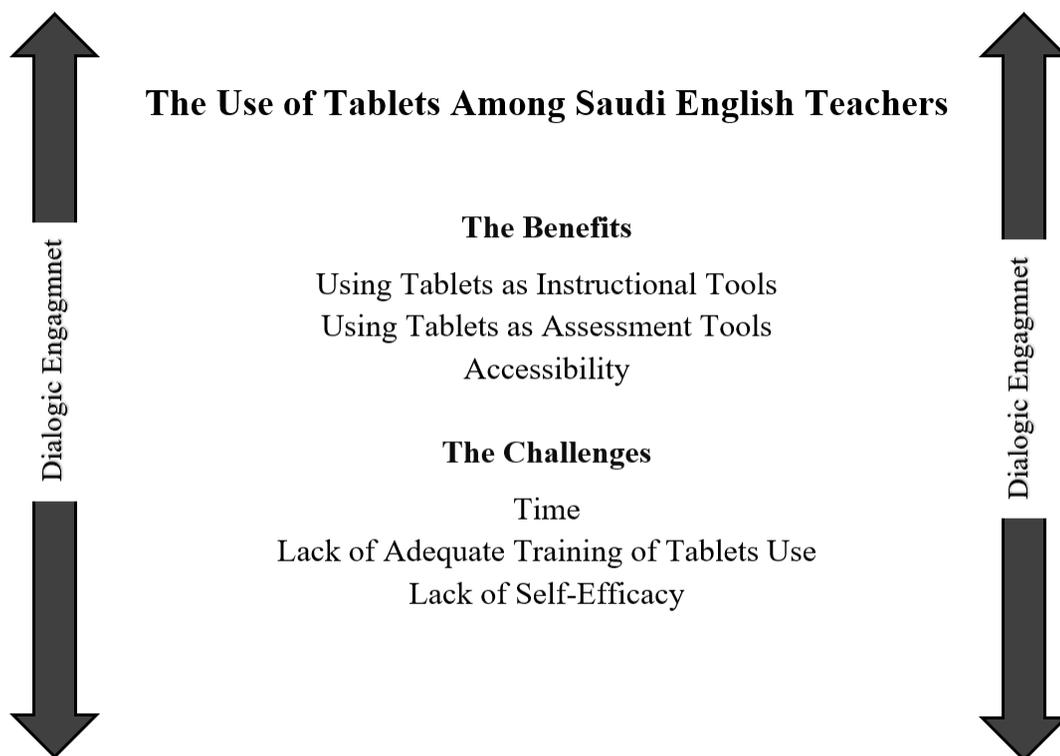
**The Use of Tablets Among Saudi English Teachers**

**The Benefits**

Using Tablets as Instructional Tools
Using Tablets as Assessment Tools
Accessibility

**The Challenges**

Time
Lack of Adequate Training of Tablets Use
Lack of Self-Efficacy

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Figure 1. Representation of the data analysis and the findings of the study.

**Findings**

Analysis of data generated by the interviews with the participating teachers revealed several themes related to the Saudi teachers' perceptions regarding using tablets to teach English.

These themes also reflect the participants' opinions and thoughts about the advantages and challenges that are associated with using tablets during English classes in Saudi Arabia. The following section unpacks each theme in detail.

## The Advantages of Using Tablets in Teaching English

Previous research (Basoglu&AKDEMIR, 2010; Chen, 2013; Savas, 2014) indicated that the use of tablets in the educational settings has many advantages. Similarly, the findings of this study resonate with these studies as the participants shared positive perspectives toward the use of tablets in English classes. Analysis of the data revealed three pedagogical and instructional advantages of using tablets to teach English. These advantages are: tablets may be used as instructional tools, tablets may be used as assessment tools, and tablets may improve accessibility.

## Tablets as Instructional Tools

One of the benefits of using tablets in English classes that consistently shared by almost all Saudi teachers was that these devices could be used for instructional purposes. This includes the teaching methods and practices that are used to develop students' language proficiency. Most of the participants mentioned that tablets are useful devices that can help students develop their written and oral skills. According to the teachers, tablets provide high-quality instruction which can be used for different purposes such as guiding instruction, modeling, and allowing for collaborative and individual learning. For instance, the participants mentioned that tablets are used to introduce new grammatical rules in enjoyable and interesting ways. Another use of tablets is to develop students' reading abilities. Students are assigned to read through tablets and answer follow-up questions. To illustrate, one of the teachers mentioned:

*Computers and tablets are useful devices that help my classroom instruction. I usually use them during grammar lessons. Students are motivated to learn using tablets. Also, students can develop their reading abilities using various activities through tablets. These are some examples of what tablets can provide as teaching tools.*

For the teachers, tablets enhance the learning process and provide endless teaching and learning opportunities for both teachers and language learners. In other words, the participants believed that tablets offer new capabilities and opportunities that enhance and improve language instructions. These capabilities and opportunities help teachers replace the traditional instruction methods that were used in language classes with more effective and interactive teaching approaches.

**Tablets as Assessment Tools**

Another benefit of using tablets to teach English is assessing students' performance and language abilities. According to the teachers, tablets are effective tools that can be used to evaluate students' language skills. With tablets, teachers were able to evaluate students' oral and written skills. According to the participant, one of the most obvious strengths of using tablets is that immediate feedback is provided for students after they finish the tasks. For example, one teacher mentioned that all reading exams are done using tablets. Students are required to read a passage and answer follow up questions about that passage. As one of the teachers pointed out that:

*Students in my class are required to read short passages or stories using tablets. We have all sort of short stories and article that they can read. As for reading activity, they have to choose an article or story, then they have to answer some questions that evaluate their reading comprehension. They can receive feedback about their errors.*

More importantly, the participants shared the beliefs that using tablets motivate students to read and learn English. These tablets provide interesting and appealing ways of learning and assessing their language skills. That can be used to reduce students' tests anxiety. As one of the teachers mentioned:

*Students believe that Tablets are motivating and interesting way of learning. They do not have the fear they usually have with traditional ways of testing. We tried to use tablets with all English tests in all my classes. I believe that students do better comparing with traditional ways.*

Ultimately, the participants indicated that the tablets are effective tools that can be used to assess students' language proficiency. When using tablets, students are motivated to learn and evaluate their language skills. According to Davis, Kong, McBride, and Morrison (2017), using tablets for testing is one of most common academic use of these devices. Davis et al. added that the use of tablets and online testing "has moved beyond the traditional multiple choice item as the primary vehicle for evaluating student competencies" (p.2).

**Accessibility**

Another advantage of using tablets that was reported by the participating teachers was accessibility. Surprisingly, most teachers explain that accessibility is one of the benefits of using mobile phones to teach and learn English. Accessibility refers to the ability to use tablets anytime anywhere. This feature gives language learners the ability to learn and practice English not only during English classes but also at home. Teachers expressed that students can have access to

tablets not only in classes but also outside of the classroom setting. This is advantageous in that it allows students to develop their language skills in more than one settings. As one teacher stated,

*In my class, I use tablets in English classes frequently just to make sure that students practice all the time. They have access to these devices most of the time. I want them to benefitfrom this and provide them with activities that develop their language.*

Another teacher explained,

*I started using tablets because I know all students have these devices with them all the time. Now I can provide them with English activities that they can be used to practice anytime and anywhere. Some of the activities were done in classes white others they can do it at home. In other words, they can practice these activities anytime they prefer*

This finding resonates with Miangah and Nezarat (2012) research that indicates that portability and connectivity are the main characteristics that enable teachers and students to teach and then English beyond that classroom settings. All in all, accessibility is one the benefits that was consistently expressed by the participants who use mobile phones to teach English.

**The Challenges of Using Tablets to Teach English**

Besides the advantages, analysis of the data revealed some challenges that work as inhibitors to the use of tablets in English teaching and learning. These challenges were: time constraints, lack of training opportunities, and lack of self-efficacy.

**Time**

Participants identified finding time to prepare lessons and time to actually use tablets to teach as challenges to using these devices during English classes. Most of the teachers believed that using tablets require a massive amount of time to design, modify, and apply language lessons to fit these devices. According to the teacher, not having enough time forces them to be selective when designing lessons that utilize tablets as teaching tools. As one of the teacherspoints out:

*I think the biggest challenge we face when using these devices is time. We do not have enough time to design lesson plans that use tablets as teaching tools. In fact, using tablets requires time and effort to find the materials, modify them, and finally apply them to the classroom instruction*

Moreover, the participants mentioned that one of the obvious barriers to effectively using tablets to teach English is not having adequate time to actually use them during the English class. As one teacher explain:

*I would say that the preparation time is a challenge when it comes to using tablets in my classes. I need time to prepare students as well as the class. By the end of the day, what is important to me is meeting my class objectives. I need more time for instruction rather than preparing the class to use tablets.*

In general, participants in this study were frustrated with not having enough time to design lessons and incorporate tablets into their teaching practices. In other words, time presented a significant barrier to effective tablet use in English classes.

**Lack of Training Opportunities**

Another challenge of using tablets in English classes is the lack of adequate training of technology use in English classes. The participants expressed frustration over the lack of training they receive about using the technological device, specifically tablets to teach English. According to the teachers, professional development opportunities for using technology would have helped them conduct more classes using technology. For instance, one of the teachers stated:

*I have been to many training sessions. These sessions are beneficial and helped me in many ways. However, there are few sessions that focus on the use of technology in classrooms. These types of training session would help me overcome any problem that might face me when trying to use technology in my classes.*

Teachers also mentioned that it is important for them to be trained in order to use technological devices successfully and consistently. The participants believed that through professional development opportunities, they can learn about different types of technology that are can be used to develop students' language abilities.

**Lack of Self-Efficacy**

Lack of self-efficacy was one of the challenges consistently reported by the teachers. This refers to their confidence in their abilities to use tablets in English classes. The teachers mentioned that one of the reasons behind their reluctance to use tablets is lack of verbal and physical support that they expect to receive from school leaders and educators. Support can be in the form of materials, resources, and technological devices that they need to use tablets in English classes. As an example, one teacher mentioned:

*We are expecting support for our school leaders to use technology in our classes. We all know that this will benefit us and our students. We need to be encouraged when using technology in our classes. Implementing lessons with technology required efforts and we need to be supported.*

In general, teachers express their frustration over not receiving support when using tablets as teaching tools. This lack of support decreases their confidence in their abilities to integrate tablets into their teaching practices.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The study explored the perceptions of English teachers in Saudi Arabia regarding the use of tablets as educational tools in English classes. A qualitative research method was used, and twenty English teachers were interviewed to identify some of the benefits and challenges that are associated with the use of these devices to teach English. Accordingly, the study revealed that the participating teachers had positive perceptions and attitudes toward using tablets as educational tools during EFL classes. In other words, the participants were motivated to integrate tablets into their teaching practices. Most of the teachers indicated that tablets can be used as effective instructional tools which provide more flexible and entertaining English classes. Also, according to the participating teachers, tablets can be effectively used to assess students' language levels. This includes using tablets to evaluate students reading, listening, and vocabulary learning. These findings are consistent with previous research, which showed that the use of technology in EFL classes has many advantages such as increasing students' motivation, enhancing the teaching experiences, and facilitating language learning (Ilter, 2009; Wu, Yen and Marek, 2011).

Moreover, the participants identified some challenges that they usually encounter when using tablets to teach English. These challenges include lack of time and lack of training opportunities and support. Teachers expressed their frustration over that fact that they usually need more time to design, implement, and use tablets as teaching tools. Specifically, more time is needed to design lessons that benefitfromthe tablet's features and can be used to develop students' various language skills. According to the teacher, finding the appropriate materials can be overwhelming process that requires more planning and searching time. Other challenges that arise from the data was the lack of training opportunities and lack of confidence in their abilities to use tablets. Even though training sessions are held every month, the participating teachers mentioned that the focus of these sessions is not technology most of the time.

Ultimately, the findings of the present study resonate with research that showed tablets and similar technological devices as effective teaching tools. Researchers (Basoglu and

AKDEMIR, Davis et al., 2017;Lu, 2008; Savas, 2014) believed that computer, tablets, and mobile phones can be effective instructional tools that offer motivating creative and interactive language activities that develop language competency of learners in all ages. Significantly, the findings of the study are important because they show that technology has changed the way language is taught. Language classes have benefitted from the spread of technological devices and provided more meaningful and creative language lessons.Ilter (2009) pointed out that technology should be an essential part of English language curriculum because it facilitates language learning and helps in providing a lively classroom atmosphere.

**Suggestions and Recommendations**

From a pedagogical point of view, the study provides an insight into what tablet devices can offer in terms of English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. The use of tablets and similar technological devices has become essential in language classes in Saudi Arabia. Using these devices helps English teachers replace the traditional ways of teaching and helps them conduct more innovative and interactive language instructions. With the Ministry of Education's new vision, teachers are encouraged to integrate technology into their teaching practices. In fact, the use of technology in the educational settings is one of the goals set by the Ministry of Education to ensure that more modern teaching materials are provided for students in all educational levels.Significantly, the study findings yield some implications that are related to the use of tablets and other technological devices in English classes in Saudi Arabia.

First, teachers need to devote more instructional time to design learning lessons and activities that benefit from a wide range of teaching moments that tablets and other technological devices can provide. When designing these lesson and activities, English teachers have to keep in mind matching students' language needs and their proficiency levels. According to Ilter (2009), English teachers "should not think that using technology is the only solution for good motivation; the lessons should be based on well-designed technological classrooms and pedagogical considerations" (p. 155).

Second, it is important to provide language teachers with professional development opportunities, so they can effectively and successfully use tablets during English classes. These professional development sessions have to focus on not only how to use technology in English language instructions but also how to design language lessons that match learners' needs. Also, school leaders in Saudi Arabia need to provide more support for English teachers to develop their skills in terms of using tablets as teaching tools. The professional development opportunities alongside with the support will increase teachers' self-confidence in their abilities to use tablets regularly in their classrooms. Egbert, Paulus, and Nakamichi (2002) indicated that lack of support is one of the glaring factors that prevent language teachers from integrating technology into their teaching practices.

Third, English teachers in Saudi Arabia are advised to use different techniques and methods when employing tablets during English classes. In other words, the use of tablets should include all language domains including speaking, listening, writing, and reading. The class tasks and activities have to focus on providing students with authentic experiences, so they can learn in more interesting and enjoyable atmosphere. Wu et al., (2011) mentioned that the use of technology and online interactions in EFL classes increase students' motivation and help them learn in more authentic and enjoyable environment.

Regarding future research, the present study sheds light on what English teachers in Saudi Arabia believe are the benefits and challenges of using tablets in the educational settings. It gives a voiceto teachers who are the center of the teaching and learning process. This information can be used to determine what English teachers in Saudi Arabia need to effectively use technology in English classes. However, the study did not explore language learners' perceptions and opinions regarding the use of tablets as educational tools. Thus, research has to be done to explore students' perceptions about their experiences with tablets during English classes. It is important to include learners' voices to better understand and enhance English teaching and learning practices in Saudi Arabia.

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