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# Synchronous Online Training Workshops

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**Abstract**

This paper describes a series of interactive, synchronous online training workshops in which linguistics graduate students studying in Australia, UK, USA and Saudi Arabia participated. The aim of the workshops was to develop graduate students' research skills in linguistics, to introduce them to latest trends and developments in linguistic research, and to communicate with expert linguists worldwide. The workshops were initiated, organized and hosted by the Saud Linguists' Society (SAL) created by a Saudi Ph.D. student. Since SAL has a limited budget, free web conferencing software were tried out such as PalTalk, *Skype, How-to Geek* and *WEbex*. Registration in the workshops was made free for graduate students. SAL's workshop coordinator invited the speakers, selected the workshop theme, prepared the workshop poster, announced the workshops online, scheduled the workshops, and registered participants. A detailed description of the steps in preparing for and conducting online workshops will be given. Participants' views on the benefits and shortcomings of synchronous online workshops are reported and recommendations for conducting effective, interactive, synchronous online workshops and for extending free web-conferencing and webinar tools to other educational settings in Saudi Arabia are given.

## 1. Introduction

Rapid advancements in information and communication technologies have enabled educational institutions, organizations and government agencies to use new forms of training to enhance performance, learning and instruction. Webinars, web conferencing, and online interactive workshops are common training tools currently used to disseminate knowledge, facilitate collaboration and communication, and enhance performance among students and instructors, employers and employees and specialist in dispersed locations.

Results of several studies have shown that webinars, web conferences, online training workshops and streaming media have several benefits. For example, in-service teachers from primary, secondary and vocational schools and science and art centers in Turkey, who participated in online in-service education and training (INSET) activities reported that those activities helped them overcome time and place dependency, resolve accommodation and transportation issues and use resources more effectively (Kokoc, Ozlu, Cimer & Karal, 2011). Similarly, Forrester (2009) indicated that Web conferencing tools help educators from around the world collaborate in real time. Teachers, school counselors, and administrators need only to put their headsets on, check the time zone, and log on to meet and learn from educators across the globe. Thus, web conferencing, online training and webinars are a cost-efficient way to train students, teachers and employees (Wolf, 2006). There is no need to pay facility expenses and to hire qualified professors. Busy professionals not willing to travel to a physical classroom make the decision to provide the cost-effective infrastructure of online learning (Bandy (2010).

In addition, web conferencing enables instant sharing and access of multimedia-supported lectures, question-and-answer sessions, voice and video group work and archived resource materials-- all in a geodistributed mode (Foreman & Jenkins, 2005). Streaming video and audio play an important role in delivering course materials to online learners and bring courses alive by allowing them to use their visual and auditory senses to learn complex concepts and difficult procedures (Hartsell & Yuen, 2006)..

In a study by (Montgomery, 2009), embedding a librarian in a course enhanced student learning by connecting students with reliable resources, providing instruction via online webinars, giving them an interactive learning experience, and using webinars as a way to be where users and resources are.

Moreover, web conferencing is an effective modality for facilitating constructivist learning environments that enable adult learners to engage in a continuous, collaborative process of building and reshaping knowledge and understanding (Curran, Kirby, Parsons & Lockyer (2003). In New Zealand, the University of Waikato used web-based computer conferencing to support student knowledge construction and collaborative group work (Johnson, Bishop, Holt, Stirling, & Zane, 2001). In rural areas, it promoted shared knowledge construction among student participants. The integration of web conferencing in program and course components proved to be a useful "survival tool" for rural special educators, overcoming barriers of geographic and professional isolation (Chapman & Knapczyk, 2003).

Furthermore, web-based conferencing enhanced interpersonal communication among students and instructors in graduate courses, helped resolve problems related to course content and procedures, and provided instructors with feedback on the course (Quilter & Chester, 2001). It also facilitated pre-service teachers' communication outside their classroom when discussing teaching cases from their field experiences, and electronic conferencing and case-based instruction fostered quality discourse and promote students' critical thinking skills (Angeli, Valanides, Bonk, 2003).

## 2. Literature Review

Web-conferences, webinars, and online training have been the focus of numerous studies in the literature which have investigated some contexts in which they are being used and the effects of their use on learning and training. For example, Loudon & Sharp (2006) used an automated system that allowed students to replay both audio and video from a large non-majors' organic chemistry class as streaming RealMedia. The system required no technical intervention and was virtually transparent to the instructor. It gave the students access to online class review at any time. Assessment showed that usage grew from about one-third of the class when the technology was first introduced to about two-thirds of the class two years later. Almost all of the students (93%) who reported using the technology rated it extremely useful or somewhat useful.

A survey of 54 teachers from urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout southern and central Indiana, who evaluated 6 design considerations for using web conferencing in an on-line introductory methods course in the area of emotional/behavioral disorders revealed that web conferencing was considered an effective delivery format for offering coursework and other professional development experiences to mid-career teachers (Knapczyk, Frey & Wall-Marencik, 2005).

At a regional Australian university with a significant distance population, students in postgraduate education courses were linked across the globe using a web conferencing software. The students participated in an interactive and collaborative conference activity, communicated via audio, text, and video and shared whiteboard. The web conferencing software enabled teachers and students at the university to engage actively across diverse locations, supporting a student-centered approach and greater flexibility in terms of where, when and how students learn (Reushle & Loch, 2008).

In the business field, Wynter-Wellington (2010) evaluated the effectiveness of an interactive online training course for a placement and business service. The researchers also examined the extent to which the course helped client-applicants understand job application and interview processes. The majority of job applicants reported that the online training course was excellent or very good in preparing them for a successful job interview. In another study, 101 nonprofit employees' from a human services organization attended online training sessions using a simulated training announcement and the Technology Acceptance Model. The participants' perceived usefulness, ease of use, attitude and intentions to use online training predicted their likelihood of online training attendance (Kingery, 2009).

Not only has online training been used with adults, but it has also been used with teenagers. A total of 904 adolescents in grades 8 and 9 were enrolled an Internet-delivered stress-prevention program as a possible alternative for school-based implementation of mental health promotion. The results showed a considerable knowledge gain for participants of the online-program. The number of positive cognitions in stress-evoking situations also increased, although this effect was only observed in the school-based online-training setting. Although online-prevention cannot completely substitute school-based face-to-face-training, it can be seen as an effective and economic complement to conventional methods of health promotion (Fridrici & Lohaus (2009).

Webinars are also being used by the Louisiana Virtual School, a virtual school run and funded by the Louisiana Department of Education, with 6,000 students, 115 instructors, and 450 site facilitators spread across 300 schools

in 72 districts. Webinars play a vital role in the school's ability to meet the challenges of educating students and facilitating staff development. Webinar technologies make it easier for school administrators to expand professional development so that course instructors have the skills to deliver the new curriculum, engage students in exciting yet practical curricula, and effectively communicate with faculty and staff members (Grant, 2009).

The above studies show that web conferencing was successfully used in some university, school and business settings to promote students, teachers, and employee performance.

## 3. Need for Study

Although, the number of educational institutions organizations and government agencies conducting web-conferences, webinars, and online training for students, pre- and in-service teachers, librarians, and other professionals is increasing, web conferences and online interactive workshops are rarely conducted in Saudi Arabia to meet the educational needs of students, particularly graduate students. Many Saudi graduate students, especially those majoring in linguistics, applied linguistics and TEFL, have difficulties in preparing their theses such as selecting a topic, locating and accessing relevant library resources related to the topic of interest to them and not familiar with trends in linguistic research. Many do not receive sufficient training from their supervisors, and do not have the chance to meet and consult with experts and specialists in the field either.

To develop graduate students' research skills in linguistics, to introduce them to latest trends and developments in linguistic research, and to develop their ability to communicate and interact with specialists in linguistics worldwide, a series of online training workshops was initiated, organized and hosted by the Saudi Linguists' Society (SAL), a society that was created by a Saudi Ph.D. student studying in the UK and whose members are student linguists studying in diverse locations worldwide. SAL has a website and a Facebook page.

As an experienced instructor and researcher, the author was invited to deliver few online workshops to Saudi graduate students majoring in linguistics and applied linguistics worldwide. The workshop proved to be beneficial to the students despite some technical obstacles. To publicize the use of online training workshops, the present study aims to describe the following: (i) steps to be followed in preparing for and conducting online workshops; (ii) the technical requirements for conducting online workshops; (iii) technical difficulties that might face presenters and participating students and how they can be overcome; (iv) the participants' views of the benefits and shortcomings of online workshops; (v) criteria for conducting effective online workshops.

## 4. Significance of Study

The study will help gain a better understanding of electronic learning environments. It will give some initial recommendations to the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education and Saudi university administrations on the adoption of synchronous web conferencing to support learning and teaching. It gives recommendations for conducting synchronous training workshops using free web conferencing software and for extending free web-conferencing and webinar tools to other educational settings in a variety of disciplines, especially where there is shortage in specialized and qualified instructors. It shows how instructors and student can connect in an easy way and sheds light on the internal and external barriers facing synchronous online training workshops. It also gives a set of guidelines for the best practices in online training workshops. Results of the study provide meaningful guidance for both researchers and practitioners responsible for the design and implementation of synchronous online training courses.

## 5. Definition of Terms

Web conferencing, webinars, interactive online workshops and streaming media are very common terms used by e-learning and distance learning specialists these days. Each of which is defined below.

**Web conferencing**[1] is a service that allows conferencing events to be shared with distant locations. Web conferencing is utilized in meetings, training events, lectures, or short presentations from any computer. It allows

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_conferencing

real-time point-to-point communication as well as multicast communications from one sender to many receivers. The service is made possible by Internet TCP/IP connections. It enables users to share text messages, voice and video chat simultaneously across geographically distant locations. Web conferencing capability was first introduced by Starlight Networks in the late 1990's. Some of the popular web conferencing software nowadays are *WebEx, Elluminate* and *AnyMeeting*.

A **webinar**[2] (short for *web-based seminar)* is a presentation, lecture, workshop or seminar transmitted over the Internet. A key feature of a webinar is the ability to give, receive and discuss information. By contrast, in *Webcast*, data is transmitted one way and does not allow interaction between the presenter and the audience.

In **interactive online workshops**[3], web conferences are complemented by electronic meeting systems (EMS) which provide brainstorming and categorization, a range of voting methods or structured discussions, typically with optional anonymity. However, EMS do not provide screen sharing or voice conferencing.  Some EMS can control web conferencing sessions.

**Streaming media**[4] is multimedia that is constantly received by and presented to an end-user while being delivered by a provider. Internet TV is a common form of streamed media. In addition to video and audio, the term "streaming media" can apply to live closed captioning, stock ticker and real-time text, which are all considered "streaming text".

**Live streaming**[5] means delivering live over the Internet. It involves a camera for the media, an encoder to digitize the content, a media publisher, and a content delivery network to distribute and deliver the content.

## 6.  Methodology
### 6.1 Participants
Participants of the online training workshops consisted of 20 Saudi graduate students studying linguistics, applied linguistics or TEFL in Australia, UK, USA and Saudi Arabia. All of the participants were members of SAL. They all registered in the workshops on a voluntary basis as it was not part of any formal graduate course.

The generalizability of the results of this study is limited due to the lack of randomness in selecting the participants as they are all members of SAL and due to the a small sample size that attended the online workshops.

### 6.2 The Workshops
Several interactive, synchronous online training workshops were scheduled by SAL members. Topics were chosen based on the students' research needs and interests and in consultation with the presenters, i.e. participating professors. Examples of the topics chosen are: *How to search for references online, how to conduct an experiment, the needs for discourse analysis in an Arabic and Muslim context, terrolinguistics, doing critical discourse analysis, postdoctoral research and publication* and others. The workshops lasted between 1:30-3 hours including at least 30 minutes per workshop for questions and answers. The workshop schedule was set depending on the instructors. Several free web conferencing software that work on any platform *(PC, Mac, Linux, or Solaris),* that require no hardware installation or software maintenance and that allow desktop sharing were tried out such as *PalTalk, Skype, How-to Geek, WEbex* (See Figure 1).

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[2] http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/W/Webinar.html
[3] http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/W/Webinar.html
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Streaming_media
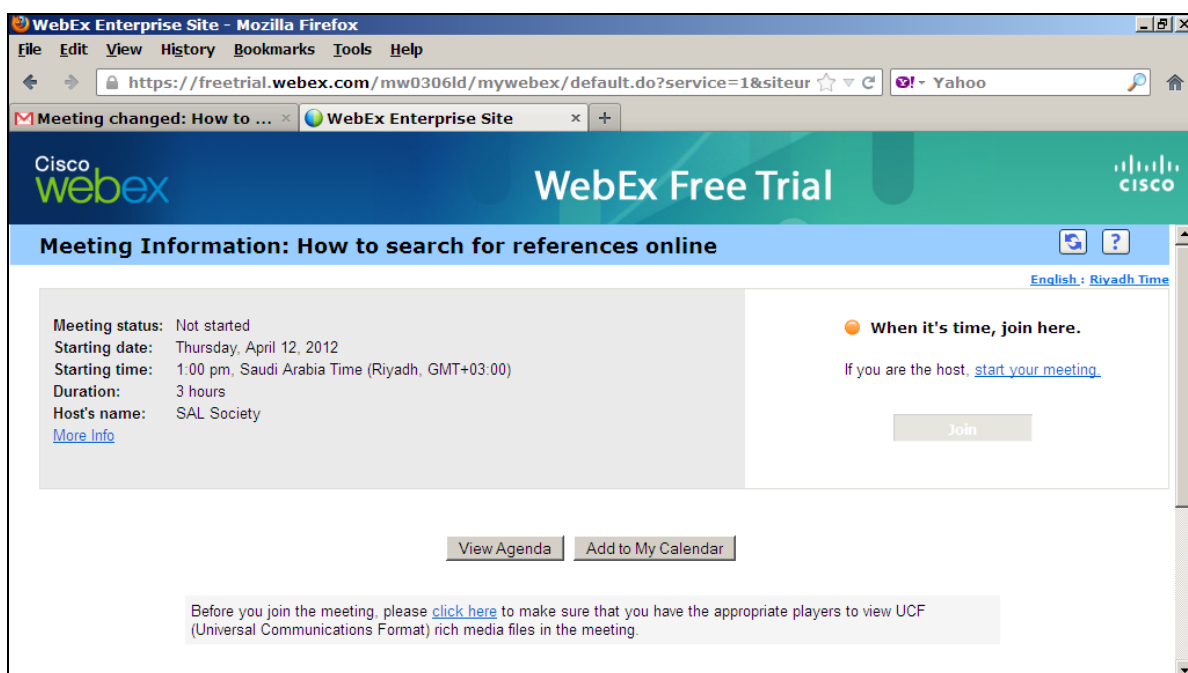[5]  http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Streaming_media

Figure 1: The Main Page of WebEx Free Web Conferencing Software

The founder of SAL and coordinator of the workshops expressed the objective of the workshops as follows:

> *Online seminars allow us (graduate students) to attend classes given by professors in different universities in different fields. We need such encounters with these professors to motivate us and benefit from their experience…through these seminars we may highlight the importance of research and encourage people to work together and start research projects that will benefit the society.*

## 6.3 Training Objectives, Content and Tasks

As an example, the objectives, content and tasks of the training workshops that the author gave about *"how to search for references online"* are given below. The aims of the workshops were to enable graduate students to:

- select search terms, narrow or broaden them.
- connect search terms with Boolean operators such as *"and, or, not"* or enclosing search terms in quotation marks when searching *Google* or *Google Scholar*.
- understand and use basic electronic searching commands and common abbreviations such as *"simple"* and *"advanced search"*, AU, AB, SU, KW.
- use search terms to locate documents in specialized databases such as *Dissertation Abstracts, Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), ERIC, Google Scholar, Google Books, Questia.*
- components of the database homepage.
- searching by author, title, keyword or descriptor.
- selecting the document type.
- marking the relevant records.
- selecting the display options.
- viewing and evaluating the search results.
- how to narrow, broaden, or change the search terms to get more accurate and relevant results, i.e. documents.
- saving, printing or e-mailing the search results.
- how to documenting the references cited using APA style.

## 6.4 Procedures

SAL graduate student members selected, contacted and invited the guest speakers, selected the workshop themes, prepared the workshop poster, announced the workshops online, scheduled the workshops and registered participating students. Registration in the workshops was made free for graduate students.

Since SAL has a limited budget, free web conferencing software were tried out such as *PalTalk, Skype, How-to Geek, WEbex.*

- *http://www.howtogeek.com/61998/how-to-share-your-presentation-using-powerpoint-2010-through-the-web/*
- *https://www.google.com.sa/search?hl=en&safe=active&site=webhp&q=screen+sharing+software+free&oq=screen+sharing+software&aq=1&aqi=g10&aql=&gs_sm=1&gs_upl=1571l19642l0l28021l26l26l0l6l6l1l229l2624l11.0.9l20l0&gs_l=hp.1.1.0l10.1571l19642l0l28021l26l26l0l6l6l1l229l2624l11j0j9l20l0*

The presenter and a student tried out the software before going live. At the Beginning of the session, the author gave the students a brainstorming task that required them to select a research topic of interest to them and make a list of search terms related to it consisting of single-word terms or compounds. The students' topics and search terms were used to demonstrate the electronic searching steps in each database or search engine and to keep the students interested and engaged. She would call on each student, once in a while, to answer or explain something, to make sure the students were following and were able to understand the information presented.

## 6.5 Data Collection
At the end of the training sessions, the participants were surveyed. They were asked about the benefits and shortcomings of the online workshops they have attended and whether they found them useful. The students' chat messages containing their questions, comments during the workshops and technical problems were examined and analyzed. The author also kept a log of how the workshops went on and the technical problems faced.

## 6.6 Data Analysis
The participants' views on the online workshops and the technical difficulties faced by the presenters and participating students and how they were overcome were sorted out and analyzed qualitatively.

## 7. Results
### 7.1 Benefits of the online training workshops
Responses to the survey indicated that all of the participants considered the synchronous online workshops extremely useful and would like to join any online workshops to be conducted in the future. They helped them overcome barriers of time and geographic and professional isolation. They gave them a chance to meet and learn in real time from experts in different parts of the world and a chance to get to know and collaborate with graduate students studying the same major in other countries and other universities.  The participants could join the online workshops from home and did not have to travel physically to a particular location. Thus they saved travel time and expenses.

Despite the technical problems, the web conferencing software helped the students participate in interactive and collaborative educational activities and to communicate via audio, text, and video, share the presenter's screen, re-play the recorded workshop made available in the SAL archived resource materials. They enabled the instant sharing and access of multimedia-supported lectures and question-and-answer sessions.

The SAL founder and workshop coordinator indicated that due to their limited budged and lack of financial support, the online workshops conducted with free web conferencing software are a cost-efficient way to train graduate students in issues related to their major area of study. SAL did not pay for the software nor for any meeting facilities.

Survey findings also revealed that the workshops provided a constructivist learning environment and a student-centered approach that focused on participants' needs and interests in linguistics research. The participants engage in a continuous, collaborative process of building and shaping knowledge about linguistic research, theory and

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practice. Their comments revealed a considerable knowledge gain as a result of attending the online training workshops. The workshop presenter had the skills to deliver practical information about locating references online, engaging attendees in exciting and practical information and effectively communicating with them. Mohammed wrote:

> it was a great experience and wonderful info we got from Prof. Reima.

Ahlam, the coordinator of the workshops and who is a Ph.D. student in Australia, added:

> Prof. Reima's seminar was important especially to those who did not have an idea about libraries. Online libraries are new to our students and searching any database sometimes could be confusing. All of the feedback was positive and they recommended the seminar to other students. Some of the students who attended the seminar were BA (senior) students who had a project and they needed to use Umm Alqura online library. They were happy and they contacted me telling me that Prof. Reima made it easy for them to look for references for their project. They told me that they were taking notes and they wrote the name of the databases Prof. Reima suggested.

Graduate students were excited about the online workshops and were eager to join them. However, SAL organizers were not willing to register more than 20 participants in each workshop to keep it manageable, give each participant a chance to ask questions and receive answers and to enable the presenter to attend to students individually. Ahlam, commented:

> we had waiting list because we could not accept more than 20 students and this is due to the capacity of the online seminar room. That's why we planned to hold some of the seminars under the request of the students.

Findings of the present study are consistent with findings of other studies in the literature, mentioned above such as Kear, Chetwynd, Williams & Donelan (2012); Kokoc, Ozlu, Cimer & Karal (2011); Forrester (2009); Bandy (2010); Kingery (2009); Fridrici & Lohaus (2009); Grant, 2009); Skylar (2009); Reushle & Loch (2008); Hartsell & Yuen (2006); Wolf (2006); Loudon & Sharp (2006); Knapczyk, Frey & Wall-Marencik (2005); Foreman & Jenkins (2005); Curran, Kirby, Parsons & Lockyer (2003); Chapman & Knapczyk (2003); and Johnson, Bishop, Holt, Stirling, & Zane (2001).

### 7.2 Shortcomings of the online training workshops

Responses to the survey from the participants indicated some technical obstacles while preparing for the workshops. Several web conferencing software were tried out: PalTalk, Skype, Hot to Geek and WebEx. In the authors' workshops, there was a screen and desktop sharing problem with PalTak and Skype. In addition, some students were disconnected, the presenters suffered from slow connection and slow browsing and there was a buzzing sound throughout the session conducted via How-to-Geek. Ahlam noted:

> The quality of the voice due to the poor connection on the end of the students or the speaker was among the challenges and shortcomings that we could not overcome.

Hopefully, the third workshop went on fine with WebEx. As a coordinator of the workshops,

In the first couple of sessions, there was no technical support available to help with the emerging problems. However, starting from the third session, the coordinator managed to have technical support available online from a graduate student majoring in IT.

Some participants had no prior experience using the web conferencing software. To make it easy for the participants to use the software, they were e-mailed a link and logging in instructions . They did not have to download anything; they only had to click on a link to go directly to the main page. At the beginning of and throughout the session, the presenter and coordinator had to prompt the students and direct.

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The author had to work with several screens: A Google screen, a university library screen that shows a list of databases and a database screen, in addition to the chat screen. She also had to deal with multiple online tasks such as switching between websites, waiting for the students to respond to an assigned task, calling on the students individually to respond to a question, following up the text chat, creating some interaction especially because some participants were hesitant to use the video, reconnecting and re-logging and into the library electronic resources.

Despite the positive effects of such practice on skill improvement, being a workshop presenter, the author thinks that synchronous online workshops lack the opportunity for further skill practice on the part of the participants as no follow-up asynchronous activities were organized through an online discussion forum or a blog…etc.

Few students left the session due to the poor sound quality or because they had other commitments. Some students could not attend the first session because of the lack of time available both at school and at home.

Another difficulty was setting a presentation time that suits the presenter who is living in Saudi Arabia and the participants living in Australia, UK and USA. Ahlam pointed out:

> Also, because of the different time zones of the students and the speakers, sometimes it was not convenient for some students to attend the seminar.

Finally, the workshops were organized by volunteer students belonging a volunteer students' organization that is funded by the students themselves, they could not subscribe to a premium version of a web conferencing software nor rent a chat-room that costs about SR6000 for lack of financial support and inadequate funding. Here again, Ahlam says:

> And because we are not supported financially we could not buy expensive software designed for webinars.

Planning, managing and following up the online workshops constituted an extra burden on the student-organizer's time, who was a Ph.D. student working on her thesis. Ahlam commented:

> I was too busy and I had to take care of a few things around, no one of the members had time to take care of the seminars.

Shortcomings of the online training workshop reported in the present study are consistent with the types of barriers to online training and web conferencing reported by other prior studies in other contexts such as: Kear, Chetwynd, Williams & Donelan (2012); Supanakorn-Davila & Bolliger (2012); Ghosh & Githens (2011); Coffey (2010); Sitzmann, Ely, Bell & Bauer (2010); Long, Dubois & Faley (2009); Daytner, Robinson, Schneider & Johanson (2009); and Doo (2006).

## 8. Conclusion & Recommendations

The use of web conferencing, webinars and online training workshops in teaching and learning is a common practice in education today. The series of synchronous online workshops in which Saudi students studying in the Australia, USA, UK and Saudi Arabia were connected and participated proved to be effective, beneficial and enhanced the students' linguistics shared knowledge and research skills despite the technical difficulties encountered and the time wasted trying to fix the problems.

For synchronous, online training workshops to be effective to the students and trainees, the web conferencing software chosen must meet several conditions such as: Desktop sharing, video and audio conferencing and text chatting and messaging, and should working on any platform. The presenter and a student can try out the web conferencing software before conducting the workshop. There should always be alternative web conferencing software in standby, in case an unexpected problem happens. Availability of IT support specialists for providing adequate support to the trainers and trainees before, during and after the workshop is necessary.

Online workshops should meet students' needs, work/study schedule, and location. The subject matter, the activity design, and the choice of interface should be chosen carefully as they affect interaction and collaboration during the online workshop (Cereijo, 2006; Bower & Hedberg, 2010). Synchronous online training should be incorporated with asynchronous online discussion to foster learning and to ensure extra practice (Lin & Chiu, 2008; Seufferheld & Scagnoli, 2011). Trainer-controlled interactivity should be provided to enhance trainee

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perceptions of the trainer's credibility by allowing student-to-content, interface and instructor interaction (Stephens & Mottet (2008); Contreras & Dolan (2006).

Faculty conducting the workshop should be trained to teach online using a particular delivery system, i.e. web conferencing software with which they will be teaching (Wolf, 2006).

Provide sufficient funds to subscribe to an efficient delivery system or web-conference software such as Eluminate. The students prefer that they get financial support from the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education and give some reasons. To make the best use of online training workshops or web conferences, Ahlam suggested:

> *We need to be supported financially,*

Bashayer also suggested:

> *...the ministry can...buy such webinar software so academics with the help of graduate students can arrange such seminars.*

Fadwa pointed out:

> *I don't mean to conduct these seminars through universities. I believe routine paperwork will kill this project. Such project should not owned by universities. It should be run by academics who might be supported by universities. Cooperation across universities should be discussed to exploit as much as we can from the experts and academics in our universities...*

Finally, the study recommends that synchronous online workshops using web conferencing and webinar tools be extended to other educational settings, where students in different universities within Saudi Arabia are connected together. Researchers as well as graduate students may investigate the use of online training workshops using a variety of training topics, a stronger focus on part-time employees and larger sample sizes in the future.

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