

# Building Learning Communities in Saudi EFL Online Classes

Amal M. Almalki<sup>1</sup>, & Mona Sabir<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Amal M. Almalki, English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

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## Abstract

The transition from on-campus to online classes during Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised the role of online learning. Therefore, teachers need to adjust their teaching strategies to help students interact in this new learning environment. One of the methods that help to engage students in online classes is building learning communities. The aim of the present study is to explore the various strategies that teachers can implement to build learning communities in Saudi EFL online classes and investigate students' perceptions of the use of these strategies. The researchers collected data in two stages. The first stage involved conducting interviews with 11 EFL teachers. The second stage involved a questionnaire that was based on the teachers' interview responses and was utilized to obtain the perception on teachers' strategies from 275 EFL students. The results indicate that EFL teachers implement various strategies that promote teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, and student-content interaction. Moreover, the results show that EFL students have a positive attitude towards the implementation of these strategies in the context of Saudi EFL online classes. It is suggested that learning communities could be developed through the implementation of teaching strategies that promote classroom interaction.

**Keywords:** learning communities, community of inquiry, efl classroom, online classes

## 1. Introduction

Covid-19 outbreak has caused a major shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning, and language teachers have had to respond by adopting interactive teaching strategies in online lessons. One effective method in engaging students and increasing classroom participation is building communities of learning (Lytle, 2009). In a learning community, students become engaged in collectively learning and sharing ideas and views with their peers and teachers to enhance their academic, social, and emotional objectives (Berry, 2017). A number of studies have found that building learning communities positively affects knowledge construction and learning outcomes (Lai, 2015; Rovai, 2001). Additionally, a growing body of second language acquisition research has revealed the positive effect of online learning communities on students' performance (Herrera Díaz & González Miy, 2017; Wu et al., 2017).

Given that the literature recognizes the impact of building learning communities on learning outcomes, it is clearly beneficial for teachers to integrate this practice into their online EFL teaching. However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there has only been one study in the Saudi context that has investigated learning communities (Assalahi, 2020). The study explored learners' perceptions of casual relationships among the elements of the community of inquiry (COI) framework in online EFL courses. It highlighted the significant role that teachers play in implementing a variety of strategies that build learning communities in EFL classes. Nevertheless, there is a need for a wider investigation of the strategies that teachers use in Saudi EFL online classrooms that can help develop learning communities. In addition, to explore the phenomenon deeply, it is useful to explore Saudi students' perceptions regarding the impact of these strategies in their EFL online classrooms. Informed by the COI framework, the present study identifies strategies that Saudi EFL teachers implement in online classes to build students' sense of community and how Saudi students perceive the use of these strategies. Further research in this direction will help EFL teachers to revisit, design and implement high-level strategies that improve their teaching and allow them to achieve their intended learning outcomes. To achieve this goal, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What strategies do EFL teachers use to help build students' sense of community in Saudi EFL online classrooms?

RQ2. How do EFL students perceive the use of these strategies in promoting the building of learning communities?

The paper begins by laying out the theoretical dimensions of the research and looks at the various strategies that help in building learning communities. The remaining parts of the paper proceed as follows: methodology, results, discussion, limitations and future research, and conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

As this study explores strategies that teachers implement to build learning communities and students' perceptions of these strategies, the community of inquiry (COI) framework lays the foundation for understanding these phenomena in depth. This framework describes the online learning environment in which learners and instructors collaborate to achieve the intended teaching and learning outcomes (Garrison et al., 2010).

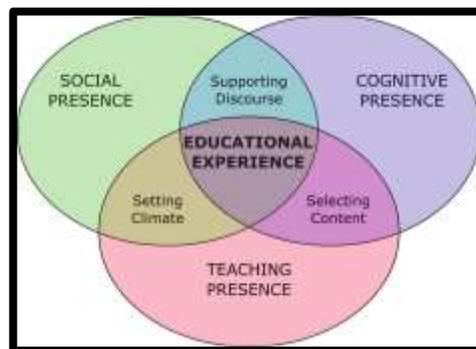


Figure 1. Community of Inquiry Framework

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The COI framework is defined as ‘a cohesive and interactive community of learners whose purpose is to critically analyse, construct, and confirm worthwhile knowledge’ (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007, p. 9). It posits that learning occurs within a community through the interaction of three elements: cognitive presence (CP); social presence (SP); and teaching presence (TP). See Figure (1).

The first element, CP, is rooted in Dewey’s practical inquiry model, which focuses on the process and steps of critical thinking (Garrison, 2009). Garrison et al. (2010) define CP as the instructors’ ability to create a reflective and engaging learning community and the learners’ ability to be engaged in this community through questioning, critiquing, and reflecting with their peers. Additionally, Garrison et al. (2001) state that CP is constructed in four main phases: the triggering event, exploration event, integration event, and resolution event. According to Garrison (2007), CP must exist in conjunction with the other presences (SP and TP) to create a learning community.

The second element of this framework that plays an important role in establishing a COI and ensuring a higher level of learning in an online context is social presence (Garrison, 2007). The existence of SP in online courses has a positive impact on learners’ satisfaction (Akyol & Garrison, 2008), and it reduces learners’ feelings of loneliness caused by online learning (Rovai, 2007). Garrison (2007) defines SP as ‘the ability to project one’s self and establish personal and purposeful relationships’ (p. 63) and notes that there are three elements that explain this presence: affective communication, open communication, and group cohesion. Once learners start freely communicating, they are motivated to share their personal feelings and experiences, which, in return, encourages them to work and collaborate more effectively (Vaughan & Garrison, 2019).

Teaching presence is the last crucial element that combines with CP and SP to establish an online learning community. TP is ‘the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realising personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes’ (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 5). Saadatmand et al. (2017) emphasise the major role that the teachers’ presence plays in executing well-designed activities that enhance interaction in online classes. Teachers are responsible for implementing various strategies to encourage students’ interactions with their peers, teachers, and the course content, which can lead to promoting learning communities in online classes.

### 2.2 Strategies Teachers Use to Build Learning Communities

Researchers have highlighted the significance of implementing several strategies such as online discussions, immediacy and feedback, collaborative learning, and clarity and accessibility. They have emphasised the role that these strategies can play in cultivating engagement and creating a learning community in online classes.

The first strategy that is found to be beneficial in building learning communities is online discussions. Many researchers have argued that online discussions foster connections between students, promote deep thinking, develop meaningful insights (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019), and create a COI in online classes (Berry, 2019; Garrison et al., 2001). However, researchers further emphasise the need for linking topics to students’ lives and providing them with meaningful examples (Watson et al., 2017). In addition, students must be able to share their ideas freely to foster discussion between themselves and their teachers (Berry, 2017; Gardner, 2008). Scholars assert the need for conducting research that investigates students’ perceptions of the strategies teachers implement in different courses and with different students. The findings of Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) also suggest that students should encounter a variety of SP strategies, including having discussions with their teacher and other students. On the other hand, Cho and Tobias (2016) report that the use of online discussions does not always contribute to students’ learning experience or satisfaction. It should be noted that the researchers believe that the nature of the course might have contributed to reaching this result as the learning content was self-studied. Therefore, it is important to consider the course design in relation to the activities implemented.

Moreover, the existing research has highlighted the benefits of using the features that online platforms offer in order to promote discussions. One of these features is discussion boards, which are considered a tool to promote knowledge sharing and construct social interaction (Tolu & Evans, 2013; Yang, 2016). However, Martin and Bolliger (2018) conclude that students’ least valuable strategy is the use of discussion boards. In their study, students reported that participating in discussion boards was a time-consuming process as all participants were

graduate students working in full-time jobs. Conversely, the use of other Blackboard features such as chat box, polling tools, hand-raising, and audio chat allows students to share their ideas and enhance interactions in online classrooms (Martin et al., 2012; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019).

Secondly, a number of studies have found that immediacy and feedback promote TP and create online learning communities (Berry, 2019; Martin et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2017). In a recent study, Moorhouse and Wong (2022) report that instant messaging features allow teachers to provide prompt feedback and give the students the sense of the teachers' availability at any time. Similarly, Dixson (2010) has found that integrating multiple modalities of communication is necessary to help students feel connected in online classes. However, McDaniels et al. (2016) found mixed opinions on the use of various communication tools; some learners find it enjoyable to communicate with peers and instructors simultaneously whereas others face some challenges in managing multiple communications.

Thirdly, the implementation of collaborative learning is another pedagogical strategy that existing research has found to be effective in constructing learning communities in online classes (Kurucay & Inan, 2017; Makri & Vlachopoulos, 2018). Through collaboration, students exchange ideas and thoughts, deepen their knowledge, and create peer interactions that help in fostering CP and SP (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Moreover, active interactions between students in online language classes allow them to embrace the foreign language and develop language skills and fluency (Tratnik et al., 2019). Therefore, teachers use synchronous tools such as breakout rooms and asynchronous tools such as Google Docs, Padlet, WhatsApp, and Telegram to provide students with opportunities to work together on collaborative projects. In investigating breakout rooms in synchronous sessions, Martin et al. (2012) reveal that this feature fosters students' learning experience and helps students feel connected to one another. Similarly, students in McDaniels et al. (2016)'s reported that the use of breakout rooms and the chat box allowed them to share their thoughts freely and supported their connection with the learning community.

A number of studies have also shown that teachers implement a variety of asynchronous online tools to promote collaboration among students. The findings of Abdelmalak's (2015) research revealed that the implementation of online tools helped to promote students' sense of community in online classes. Additionally, the findings of Al-Omary et al. (2015) and Panah and Babar (2020) show the positive effect of using WhatsApp in creating intimate relationships that help them in creating a community outside of the classroom. Moreover, Nadeem's (2021) results reveal that the Padlet app helped in enhancing students' engagement and provided opportunities for peer collaboration. However, this study asserts the need for teachers' support and encouragement to use online tools effectively. Overall, research has supported the effectiveness of using both synchronous and asynchronous tools in facilitating collaborative learning.

Lastly, clarity and course accessibility have been identified as elements that cultivate the learning community. Dunlap and Lowenthal (2018) suggest that online educators should consider the clarity of instructions and teachers' expectations while designing their learning communities as they can aid in connecting students with content and each other. Additionally, Murray et al. (2012) emphasise the importance of the teachers' guidance in helping students engage with learning content. Hersman and Schroeder (2017) assert the need for verifying instructions using visual media, games, and group activities, and providing activities that relate to the real world. Farrelly and Sinwongsuwat (2021) also suggest the use of L1 to help in clarifying instruction in EFL classes. Overall, clarifying instruction and guiding students through the course was found to help students achieve better results (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019).

Because it is important for students to be involved in effective learning communities to achieve better learning outcomes, researchers are encouraged to investigate the topic from various angles to achieve a more precise understanding of its role in language learning contexts. Investigating the strategies that help build learning communities and learners' perceptions toward them are worthwhile endeavours in online teaching and learning. Until now, only a limited number of studies have discussed the strategies that develop students' sense of community in EFL online classrooms. Furthermore, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, none of these studies have investigated this topic in the Saudi EFL context. Therefore, this paper explores the strategies that language teachers use which aid in cultivating learning communities among EFL learners in one of the English language institutes (henceforth ELI) in a Saudi Arabian university and how these learners perceive the teaching strategies.

### **3. Methods**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

This study utilises a mixed-methods, exploratory sequential design to answer the research questions. This design is appropriate for this study as the researcher aims to build on the findings from qualitative data that led to finalising the instrument for collecting quantitative data and identifying themes related to the aims of the research (Creswell, 2011). The data were collected in two phases. The first phase explored the strategies that the teachers used in Saudi EFL online classrooms, and which helped in building learning communities, whereas the second phase aimed to investigate EFL learners' perceptions of these strategies.

#### *3.2 Sampling*

This study used a purposeful sampling technique, in which specific participants were chosen to share their input on the research problem. According to Creswell (2011), 'in purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon' (p. 206). To collect data, an ethical approval was obtained from the institute's administration where the study was conducted. Then, an email was sent to 15 EFL female teachers to seek their approval for conducting interviews, and 11 teachers agreed to participate. The participating instructors were PhD, Masters, and BA holders in the fields of applied linguistics, linguistics, and TESOL. The participants have been teaching English at the English Language Institute (ELI), King Abdul-Aziz University for periods ranging between

four and fifteen years. All of the teachers were Saudi nationals, and all had received training on using Blackboard when they started teaching online.

For the questionnaire, a link was sent via email and WhatsApp groups to over 200 students enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at the ELI who also experienced online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 275 female undergraduate students participated in the study. Among these students, 52% (n= 143) were enrolled in the academic English track, and 48% (n=132) were enrolled in the general English track. Access to male participants was difficult to obtain as the Saudi educational institutions follow a gender-segregated system. Figure 2 presents the steps taken to collect data.

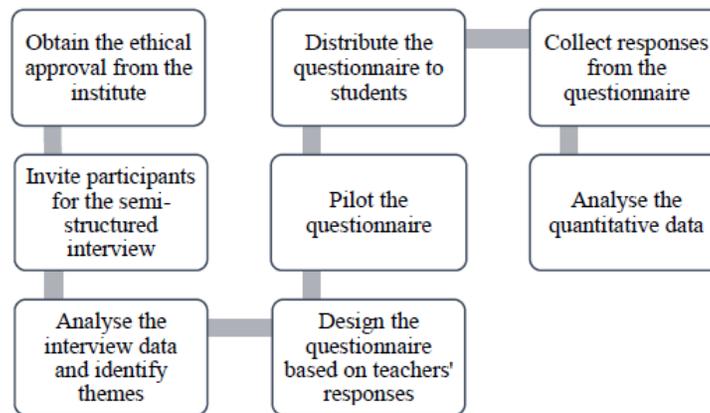


Figure 2. Data Collection Process

### 3.3 Procedure and Data Analysis

#### 3.3.1 Phase 1

The first phase of the study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with instructors teaching English to foundation year students at the ELI. The interview guide was adapted from Berry (2017) (see Appendix A). Each interview lasted for 30–40 minutes.

To analyse the interview data, the transcripts were imported to NVivo12 software to organise and code data thematically. The researcher used a coding scheme drawn from Garrison et al.'s (2010) COI theoretical framework to conduct the analysis for interviews (see Appendix B). The coding process was conducted across different stages. Firstly, an initial coding process was conducted to code everything that fit within the coding scheme (Berry, 2019). Secondly, the researcher analysed the un-coded data to look for emerging themes. Finally, themes that emerged were collated, and broad themes were assigned to identify the strategies that the teachers use to build learning communities in their classes.

#### 3.3.2 Phase 2

Since this study is an exploratory sequential study, the researcher designed a questionnaire based on the teachers' answers in the interviews. A pilot study was conducted with a group of 30 participants to check the reliability of the questionnaire. A Cronbach's Alpha test was also conducted to determine the reliability of the questionnaire, resulting in a score of .94. The questionnaire used the following five-point Likert-scale: 1 'strongly disagree', 2 'disagree', 3 'neutral', 4 'agree', and 5 'strongly agree'. All statements were written in Arabic to avoid any confusion that might occur and to ensure the participants' understanding.

After receiving the students' responses, the researcher used descriptive statistics to find the mean, standard deviation, and frequency of the responses. A one-sample *t-test* was then performed to examine if students' perceptions significantly differed in comparison to the population.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Interview Results

The analysis of teachers' interviews suggests that Saudi EFL teachers implemented several strategies to help build students' learning communities. This section presents the findings of the interview data divided into three themes.

#### 4.1.1 Promoting Teacher-Student Interactions

Due to the physical separation in online classes, online students may feel more isolated from their teachers and peers than students in face-to-face classes (Garrison et al., 2001). Therefore, the first strategy that teachers believed to be important in building learning communities was promoting teacher-student interactions by leading class discussions, creating WhatsApp and Telegram groups, and providing feedback.

##### 4.1.1.1 Promoting Class Discussions

The interviews revealed that teachers could promote classroom interactions with their students by using methods that would allow them to

connect with their students. For example, Farah and Ameena suggested that one way to make students feel connected to their teachers was by allowing them to express their ideas and thoughts. These respondents' comments are representative of what other participants stated:

*We usually have topics and exercises about opinions or a debate. So, I write the topic on the board and ask students who agree or don't agree. I keep reminding them that this is their opinion and that there is no right or wrong answer.* (Farah)

*I like to take their opinion on everything I do, and I always ask them, 'Do you like the way that I did this exercise'?* (Amena)

These responses suggest that teachers encourage students to participate in discussions and are open to new suggestions and ideas by, for example, seeking students' input on a certain topic, allowing them to reflect on assignments, and showing interest in what they are sharing, all of which could help students feel more connected to their learning communities.

Teachers also mentioned the use of Blackboard features such as the chat box, polls, and hand-raising to promote classroom discussion and connect students to the learning community:

*Some students prefer to use the chat box to answer questions than opening the mic and speaking up. I remind them that they can either type their answer in the chat or open the mic.* (Hala)

*Some students are shy and reluctant to speak. The chat could be a way to help them overcome their shyness and express themselves with confidence.* (Asmaa)

*One method that helps to create a sense of community is using polls in Blackboard. I can see that all students respond when I post a question, which makes the class alert and helps in facilitating discussion as a whole class.* (Eman)

*One of the features that I believe organises discussions is using the hand-raising feature. So, instead of having more than one student opening her mic and speaking, each one of them will raise their hand, and I start calling their names.* (Afra)

As these responses suggest, Blackboard features are a way to cultivate the learning community and engage students as a whole group, particularly in classes with many students, such as those at the ELI. The chat box allows reluctant or shy students to participate and engage in classroom discussion and allows students to interact without disturbing the lesson.

#### 4.1.1.2 Creating WhatsApp or Telegram Groups

Teachers also mentioned that creating WhatsApp and Telegram groups builds rapport with students and promotes teacher-student discussions:

*It is important to show students that you care about them and stay in touch the whole time. I always tell my students that they can contact me by sending a private message on Telegram or WhatsApp.* (Asmaa)

The interview responses suggest that the majority of teachers use different communication tools, such as WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels to help promote teacher-student interactions and build connections between them and their students. However, two teachers mentioned that they preferred not to communicate with students using WhatsApp and Telegram, favouring emails instead.

#### 4.1.1.3 Providing Feedback

Teachers indicated that providing feedback is another method that aids in building connections with their students. They stressed the importance of providing students with frequent spoken feedback:

*I believe that providing frequent feedback is very important, especially during the pandemic because online learning might be new to students, and they might still feel that they are confused or distracted.* (Afra)

*We should always provide students with frequent feedback because they cannot see our facial expressions.* (Asmaa)

Most of the teachers believed that feedback – specifically supportive, immediate, and frequent feedback – was key to cultivating learning communities in their online classrooms. The teachers reported that immediate feedback was needed due to the lack of facial expressions since teachers and students only used audio and chat to communicate.

#### 4.1.2 Promoting Student-Student Interactions

The responses indicate that teachers are determined to strengthen their relationships with their students while also recognizing the importance of promoting student-student interaction to build learning communities. Therefore, teachers sought to encourage students to communicate with each other by promoting communication via WhatsApp and Telegram channels, allowing them to choose their group members, and using online tools and Blackboard features to increase students' social presence.

##### 4.1.2.1 Promoting Communication Apps

The majority of teachers in this study encouraged students to communicate outside of the classroom with one another via WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels:

*I keep telling them that you need to help each other because right now is a difficult time for all of us. If you know how to do something, upload the video and send it to the WhatsApp group, showing it to other students.* (Zahra)

*Although we have a group on Telegram, I also encourage them to have a group of their own. It's good that they have their own space to talk and interact.* (Alaa)

The quotes illustrate that creating these groups in social networks such as WhatsApp and Telegram fulfil several functions. These groups could help students interact and communicate with one another and can help students in their academic achievements as well as in enhancing their wellbeing.

#### 4.1.2.2 Allowing Students to Choose Group Members

Another practice that teachers believed would promote students' group cohesion and increase social presence was allowing them to choose their peers in group activities:

*I leave the decision in students' hands to choose their groups. I can see that this can make them feel connected to their group members.* (Farah)

Contrastingly, a small number of teachers believed that, in order to promote discussion among students in the group, it was necessary to select group members based on their levels:

*In group activities, I incorporate different levels of students together, for example, a high proficiency student with low achievers, so they can help each other.* (Asmaa)

Asmaa and some other teachers argued that discussions could be enriched if students of different levels worked together in one group, implying that low achievers could receive assistance and encouragement from high achievers.

#### 4.1.2.3 Using Online Tools

Many teachers mentioned that the integration of online tools and games such as Padlet, Kahoot, Quizlet, and Google Docs cultivates learning communities. The teachers stated that these tools help keep students be engaged:

*Tools such as Kahoot and Padlet allow students to participate; they help them become competitive and interact in a different way.* (Eman)

*I ask students to write their first drafts on a shared Google Documents, so I and other students would see them as they are actively planning and writing.* (Rahaf)

In contrast, Zahra and Nadia reported that their students preferred not to participate when they used these online tools:

*I have 39 students. When I use games like Kahoot or anything, a maximum of 10 students play with us. They may not enjoy it or just don't want to participate.* (Zahra)

*Students are bored of these tools. All of the other teachers use the same online tools. So, I avoid using them.* (Nadia)

#### 4.1.2.4 Using Breakout Rooms

Interview data suggest that using breakout rooms could help students experience deeper interactions with their peers:

*I see that using breakout rooms are very beneficial. I know that they are producing something, even if it is not related to the assignment, but at least they communicate and build a connection with their friends.* (Nadia)

*I believe that the best feature is breakout rooms. Actually, when I divide students into groups, they start communicating, discussing, sharing ideas, and answering questions.* (Afra)

According to Nadia and Afra, breakout rooms give students the chance to engage with their peers, which results in helping them improve academically and socially. On the other hand, teachers such as Alaa and Eman felt that using breakout rooms was not effective, particularly with a large number of students. These teachers argued that it was difficult to monitor all of the groups online and, in order to use this feature effectively, teachers needed to move from one room to another and listen to the students' discussion to ensure that they were participating, which is a time-consuming process. Alaa, Eman, and Rahaf considered discussion boards, where students can comment and share ideas with their teacher and classmates, to be a more effective feature in building learning communities.

#### 4.1.3 Promoting Student-Content Interactions

The majority of the teachers believed that incorporating strategies that promote teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction are important factors in developing learning communities in online EFL classrooms. In addition, the teachers indicated that connecting students to the content will aid in promoting learning communities, which may be achieved through improving clarity, relating topics to students' lives, and providing extra resources.

##### 4.1.3.1 Improving Clarity

Interview data indicate that clarifying instructions and activities, as well as ensuring the clarity of the lesson's objectives, helped students to feel connected to the class:

*We need to make sure that instructions are clear to all students, specifically in language classrooms because sometimes students do not understand what you are saying in English or are distracted. So, what I do is that I write the instructions on the white board. I send these instructions via a WhatsApp group, and I sometimes repeat them in Arabic.* (Farah)

Asmaa added the following:

*It is also important to be clear from the beginning of the lesson. You have to mention the objective of your lesson. This helps*

*students to stay focused and connected.* (Asmaa)

Thus, most of the teachers agreed that clarity of instructions and explanations was key in online classes and reported that ensuring the clarity of the course organisation and stating lesson objectives aids in cultivating learning communities.

4.1.3.2 Relating Topics to Students’ Lives

In addition, most teachers considered relating topics to students’ lives an important practice in building learning communities and engaging students in online classrooms:

*Topics have to be meaningful to them; they have to relate to their own interests. So, I try to make the topic more engaging.* (Rahaf)  
*To engage students in a reading class, I sometimes modify the passage to a topic that students can relate to or they are interested in.* (Afra)

4.1.3.3 Providing Online Resources

Additionally, during the interviews, some teachers, including Afrah, believed that sharing videos with students could help in supporting their learning:

*If students don’t understand a grammatical rule, I just search for it on YouTube, where you can find many videos that help.* (Afrah)

Overall, these responses suggest that teachers need to promote student-content interactions to help students feel connected to the learning community. Teachers believed that improving clarity, relating topics to students’ lives, and providing students with online resources help in facilitating learning communities.

4.2 Questionnaire Results

One of the aims of this research is to examine EFL students’ perceptions of the use of community building strategies in Saudi EFL online classes. The researchers analysed the data taken from the questionnaire statistically. The analysis involved descriptive statistics and inferential ones through a one-sample *t-test* that was conducted to assess if students’ perceptions differed significantly.

4.2.1 Descriptive Results

4.2.1.1 Promoting Teacher-Student Interactions

Students’ perceptions of the strategies that promote teacher-student interaction and result in building learning communities are presented in Table 1 below. The results show that students believed that the use of these strategies helps in building their sense of community. Most students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements. Receiving immediate feedback from the teacher had the highest mean score (M=4.47; SD=.669), with 93.4% of students agreeing that it helps in building a learning community in EFL online classes, followed by the strategy of using a variety of features during the synchronous session (M=4.44; SD=.763). Only two items in this subscale received a mean score below 4.0.

Table 1. EFL Students’ Perceptions of Strategies Promoting Teacher-Student Interactions

	Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	SD
1.	Communicating with my teacher in discussion boards develops my sense of community.	28.4	41.5	18.2	8.0	4.0	3.82	1.057
2.	Receiving frequent feedback from my teacher develops my sense of community.	36.0	45.8	14.2	4.0	0	4.14	.803
3.	Receiving immediate responses from my teacher develops my sense of community.	54.9	38.5	5.5	.7	.4	4.47	.669
4.	Communicating through multiple channels connects me more effectively with my teacher in the learning community (e.g., WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and emails).	48.0	39.6	8.4	3.3	.7	4.31	.817
5.	Participating in classroom discussions with my teacher develops my sense of community.	45.1	43.3	6.5	4.4	.7	4.28	.826
6.	Using various features in synchronous sessions develops my sense of community (e.g., polls, hand-raising, and chat box).	56.4	34.2	6.9	1.8	.7	4.44	.763
7.	Expressing my opinions and ideas freely develops my sense of community.	40.7	29.8	15.3	9.1	5.1	3.92	1.175
8.	Allowing students to use L1 during classes develops my sense of community.	39.6	41.5	12.7	3.3	2.9	4.12	.952

4.2.1.2 Promoting Student-Student Interactions

Table 2 below presents the results related to the students’ perceptions of the strategies that promote student-student interactions and result in building learning communities in EFL online classes. The results show that students positively perceived the strategies that connect them to their peers. However, the students also valued particular strategies more than others. Over 90% agreed that participating with their peers in breakout rooms connected them to the learning community (94.5%). Additionally, over 80% agreed that allowing students to select their groups (88%), utilising online applications (86.9%), and communicating through the chat box during synchronous sessions (80%) developed their sense of community in online EFL classes.

Table 2. EFL Students' Perceptions of Strategies Promoting Student-Student Interactions

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	SD
1. Communicating with my peers in discussion boards develops my sense of community.	32.7	46.5	14.2	4.4	2.2	4.03	.918
2. Communicating through different channels connects me more effectively to my peers in the learning community (e.g., WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels).	34.9	38.5	20.4	4.7	1.5	4.32	.836
3. Allowing me to select my group develops my sense of community.	49.1	38.9	7.6	3.3	1.1	4.15	.939
4. Participating with my peers in breakout rooms develops my sense of community.	58.9	35.6	3.6	1.1	.7	4.51	.691
5. Collaborating with other students via Google tools and Padlet develops my sense of community.	39.6	41.5	12.7	3.3	2.9	3.92	.921
6. Communicating with my peers through the chat box during the synchronous sessions develops my sense of community.	41.1	38.9	16.0	2.2	1.8	4.15	.895
7. Using online applications (e.g., Kahoot and Quizlet) develops my sense of community.	41.8	45.1	10.5	1.8	.7	4.01	.928

4.2.1.3 Promoting Student-Content Interactions

Table 3 below shows students' responses related to their perceptions of the strategies that promote student-content interaction and develop their sense of community in EFL online classes. The results show that a high percentage of students believe that stating the lesson objectives clearly (95.3%), linking topics to their lives (95.2%), and providing explanations to students (92.7%) aid in developing their sense of community. However, clarifying instructions through using L1 was rated the lowest on this subscale.

Table 3. EFL Students' Perceptions of Strategies Promoting Student-Content Interactions

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	SD
1. Clarifying the course organisation develops my sense of community.	50.9	37.8	7.6	2.5	1.1	4.51	.612
2. Stating the lesson objectives clearly develops my sense of community.	56.4	38.9	4.0	.7	0	4.27	.777
3. Clarifying instructions develops my sense of community.	42.9	44.7	9.5	2.2	.7	4.37	.760
4. Providing explanations to help understand the content develops my sense of community.	49.1	43.6	4.0	2.2	1.1	4.49	.641
5. Clarifying instructions through using L1 develops my sense of community.	32.0	31.6	21.1	9.1	6.2	3.74	1.179
6. Providing different resources (e.g., websites, YouTube videos, and pictures) develops my sense of community.	40.7	29.8	15.3	9.1	5.1	4.35	.816
7. Relating topics to my life develops my sense of community.	63.6	31.6	2.5	1.5	.7	4.56	.688

4.2.2 Inferential Results

The researchers conducted a one-sample *t-test* to assess if students' perceptions significantly differed. The one-sample *t-test* examined whether the mean score of each variable exceeded 3. This hypothesised value was used as it is the midpoint of the score range on the Likert scale. A 95% confidence interval for the mean was computed for each variable. The results suggest that the mean of all variables was higher than the normal score of 3, with a statistically significant difference of  $p < .001$ . This finding indicates that students in this study positively perceived the use of all three strategies in building learning communities in EFL online classes. However, the strategies that promote student-content interaction had the highest mean score ( $M=4.32$ ), indicating that students believed that these strategies mostly aid in cultivating learning communities in online classrooms. Table 4 presents the *t-test* results of all the three variables.

Table 4. T-Test Results

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Promoting teacher-student interactions	4.18	.478	.001	1.18591	1.1652	1.2736
Promoting student-student interactions	4.15	.488	.001	1.15688	1.0989	1.2148
Promoting student-content interactions	4.32	.457	.001	1.32675	1.2725	1.3810

Note: Test Value=3

5. Discussion

This mixed-methods sequential study was conducted to explore the strategies that Saudi teachers implement to build learning communities in EFL online classes and investigate Saudi students' perceptions of the implementation of these strategies. In this section, the researchers discuss and interpret the results in response to the two research questions.

In response to RQ1, 'What strategies do EFL teachers use to help build students' sense of community in Saudi EFL online classrooms?', the findings indicate that teachers implement various strategies to build a learning community in online classes. These strategies were divided into three broad themes: strategies that promote teacher-student interaction, strategies that promote student-student interaction, and strategies that promote student-content interaction.

5.1 Strategies that Promote Teacher-Student Interactions

A key strategy that teachers believed would aid in connecting students with teachers and the learning community is classroom discussion. This finding echoes Garrison's (2007) who reported that online discussions create a community of inquiry in online classes. Teachers

emphasised the importance of students' participation in classroom discussion and encouraged students to express their thoughts and ideas freely, which can help in sustaining social presence and establishing effective communication in the learning community (Vaughan & Garrison, 2019). This finding is also consistent with past research showing that allowing students to openly express ideas facilitates classroom discussion and creates rapport between teachers and their students (Berry, 2017; Garrison, 2007).

Additionally, the results suggest that teachers believe that using Blackboard features, such as the chat box, hand-raising, and polls promotes classroom discussion. This result is consistent with those of other studies and suggests that teachers should use the features that platforms offer to encourage students' participation and give them the freedom to participate in their preferred way (Martin et al., 2012; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Teachers may also benefit from this technology to keep online discussions effective and organised. For example, features such as the chat box may increase participation and engagement in class, especially for less vocal students. Hand-raising can be helpful to form an organised mode in which each student gets an equal chance to participate.

As seen in other studies (Berry, 2019; Martin et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2017; among others), a common thread among teachers was the importance of their availability for their students and giving immediate feedback as strategies that create a learning community in EFL online classes. As articulated by one of the teachers in this study, 'We should always provide students with frequent feedback because they cannot see our facial expressions'. Teachers understand that their presence is important in helping students feel connected to the learning community. Therefore, teachers tend to use different means of communication such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and emails to remain connected to their students.

### *5.2 Strategies that Promote Student-Student Interactions*

Moreover, the findings of the current study suggest that teachers are actively attempting to decrease the feeling of isolation that students experience in online classes. To do this, teachers have implemented a number of strategies that connect students to their peers inside and outside of the classroom. The findings observed in this study mirror those of the previous studies that have examined the positive effects of peer interaction in building the learning community (Kurucay & Inan, 2017; Makri & Vlachopoulos, 2018). As found in previous research, students collaborate more effectively when they feel connected and engaged (Vaughan & Garrison, 2019). Therefore, teachers often offer students time and space to break social barriers and build a sense of belonging with each other. Teachers also indicated that they encouraged students to create WhatsApp and Telegram groups in order to communicate outside of the classroom. Similarly, previous research has shown the positive effect of using WhatsApp in creating a friendly environment among students (Al-Omary et al., 2015).

Similar to Abdelmalak (2015), the findings reveal that some teachers incorporate online tools such as Google Docs and Padlet to connect students to the learning community. It appears that teachers are attempting to develop high levels of cognitive presence as the incorporation of these tools allows students to share ideas, construct knowledge, and reflect on their peers' work (Garrison et al., 2001). On the other hand, some teachers expressed a reluctance to use tools such as Padlet, Kahoot, and Quizlet. A possible explanation for this reluctance might be that the extensive use of these tools caused boredom among students, and teachers need to be moderate in using these tools.

Additionally, in contrast to Martin et al. (2012) and McDaniels et al. (2016), the findings of the current study show that teachers had mixed views regarding the integration of breakout rooms. This discrepancy could be attributed to the large number of students in each class. In fact, teachers who have a smaller number of students considered utilising breakout rooms an effective strategy that cultivated the learning community. As shown earlier, Alaa and Eman expressed negative attitudes toward using breakout rooms in their classes. This finding was unexpected and suggests that policy makers should consider minimising the number of students enrolled in online classes and specifically in EFL classes, where peer interaction helps students develop fluency and accuracy (Tratnik et al., 2019).

Lastly, the present findings appear to be consistent with existing research suggesting that the use of discussion boards in online classes increases students' sense of community (Yang, 2016). A possible explanation for this finding might be that teachers can view students' input on the topics discussed, which may aid in increasing both social and cognitive presence.

### *5.3 Strategies that Promote Student-Content Interaction*

The results suggest that teachers implement a number of strategies that connect students to the content to aid in cultivating a learning community. The findings point toward the crucial role of clarity in stating lesson objectives and instructions in this process. While this finding is in line with previous research (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018; Murray et al., 2012), some teachers added that using the L1 can help to clarify instructions for low-level students, which is also supported by previous studies (Farrelly & Sinwongsawat, 2021). The findings further reflect the importance of providing online resources to promote the learning community (Hersman & Schroeder, 2017). Teachers confirmed that sending extra resources, such as videos, helps students understand the content more accurately and supports their learning. Another important strategy that teachers believed would help in cultivating students' sense of belonging was relating topics to students' lives. Teachers found that using authentic examples allows students to be engaged in the learning community and master the subject.

In response to RQ2, 'How do EFL students perceive the use of these strategies in promoting building learning communities?', the results show that students positively perceived the use of strategies that teachers implement to cultivate the learning community in the Saudi EFL online classes. However, some strategies were found to be more important than others.

### *5.4 Students' Perceptions of Strategies that Promote Teacher-Student Interaction*

The findings of this study suggest that students positively perceived the use of strategies that promote teacher-student interaction in online learning communities. Specifically, students appreciated receiving immediate responses from the teacher; this finding is supported by

Martin and Bolliger (2018) and Watson et al. (2017), who also emphasise the importance of providing students with immediate feedback to increase teachers' presence.

Using the features offered by the online platform in synchronous sessions was rated the second highest. It is possible that these features also help to enhance teacher presence and promote teacher-student interactions (Martin et al., 2012). Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019), for example, remark that the use of these features organises interaction and supports students' learning. This finding aligns with McDaniels et al. (2016), who reported that students appreciated the use of Blackboard's features in promoting online communities.

Interestingly, communicating with teachers on discussion boards was rated the lowest in this category. A possible explanation for this finding might be that English lectures in this context last for three hours every day. Therefore, students might find asynchronous discussion a burden. These findings are similar to those of Martin and Bolliger (2018), who found that participating in discussion boards outside of the classroom was rated as the least important strategy.

Allowing students to use their L1 during classes was rated the second lowest in this category. It should be noted that English in Saudi Arabia is used as a foreign language; therefore, English is used on a small scale outside of the classroom, which may indicate a high level of awareness of the importance of practising the language inside the classroom. However, existing literature has not shown evidence that using the L1 might help in building a learning community, though it could be linked to allowing learners to freely express themselves (Berry, 2019). This finding is significant as some teachers heavily use L1 as they believe that it aids students' understanding and breaks down barriers.

### *5.5 Students' Perceptions of the Strategies that Promote Student-Student Interaction*

The findings of the current study suggest that Saudi EFL students held positive attitudes towards the implementation of the strategies that promote student-student interactions in building learning communities. The strategy that received the highest score in this category was participating with their peers in breakout rooms. This finding is consistent with that of existing studies (Berry, 2017; McDaniels et al., 2016) who found that using breakout rooms significantly strengthens students' relationships with their peers and allows them to discuss content. This tends to develop cognitive presence by increasing higher-level thinking (Garrison, 2009).

Students in the current study also valued communication with their peers through different channels. This finding suggests that students require continued interaction with their peers due to the social isolation that they might have experienced during the pandemic. Therefore, the use of these communication channels may allow students to easily reach out to peers. The study supports the findings of the existing literature in which students reported that WhatsApp was a useful tool for sharing knowledge and engaging at any time (Panah & Babar, 2020). The present study's findings might be also linked to Dixon's (2010), who found that having multiple channels to communicate with students increased engagement.

The responses also suggest that students held positive attitudes toward allowing them to select their groups while working with peers. Students need to feel connected to their peers in order to freely work together. As noted by Vaughan and Garrison (2019), students should feel free to share their feelings and thoughts to achieve effective communication with peers.

Although the findings of the current study suggest that students respond positively to collaborating with other students via Google tools and Padlet, this item received the lowest mean score in this category, which is inconsistent with prior findings (Nadeem, 2021). It seems possible that this result is due to the negative overuse these tools, as some teachers indicated.

### *5.6 Students' Perceptions of Strategies that Promote Student-Content Interaction*

Additionally, students in this study positively perceived the utilisation of the strategies in this category. Of the three categories, this one had the highest mean score (see Table 4). Here, stating lesson objectives clearly and providing explanations to students were the two highest rated items. These findings align with those of Dunlap and Lowenthal (2018) and Murray et al. (2012), who point out the importance of clarifying instructions to help build a learning community.

Furthermore, relating topics to students' lives was rated highly in this category. Specifically, 95.2% of students viewed relating topics to their lives as an important strategy that developed their sense of belonging (see Table 3). Moreover, students emphasised the importance of using everyday examples to help them understand the content more accurately, which reflects the findings of Martin and Bolliger (2018) and Watson et al. (2017), who found that students valued the inclusion of meaningful topics and activities that reflect their interests.

Finally, using the L1 to clarify instructions was rated the lowest in this category, which is inconsistent with prior findings. Farrelly and Sinwongsuwat (2021) found that the use of L1 helps students to understand new concepts in second language classes. It seems that students understand the importance of language practice, which may be why there is variance in students' responses.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

This study has some limitations that must be highlighted. Firstly, the findings of the qualitative data cannot be generalised as the study was conducted among a specific population. Secondly, due to the nature of exploratory studies, the list of strategies included in the questionnaire does not include all of the strategies in the COI framework. Instead, the questionnaire only included the strategies that teachers prioritised in the interviews. Finally, the sample size was small as it was drawn from the female section only and did not include the male section due to accessibility reasons.

Future research may investigate additional strategies that promote learning communities in EFL online classes. Researchers could also focus

on comparing between experienced and inexperienced teachers in implementing strategies. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to interview students and understand their reasons for preferring certain strategies over others.

## 7. Conclusion

This study explored strategies that Saudi EFL teachers implement to cultivate a learning community and investigated students' perceptions of the use of these strategies. The findings suggest that teachers implement a variety of strategies that aid in promoting teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, and student-content interaction in order to increase students' sense of belonging. The findings also suggest that students held positive attitudes toward the use of these strategies. Therefore, this study recommends implementing teaching strategies that promote all types of interaction in online EFL classes. Teachers should realise the importance of these strategies and receive professional development training that would allow them to integrate them into their online classes.

## Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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## Appendix A

1. What is your name? What is your degree? How long have you been teaching at King Abdulaziz University?
2. Did you experience teaching online before the pandemic? If yes, how is your experience different from these days?
3. How does teaching online differ from teaching face-to-face?
4. What are the challenges in terms of students' interaction that you are facing with online teaching?
5. According to the literature, one challenge that online students experience is creating community. Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. Based on the literature, community is defined as a site of frequent interaction, engagement, and mutual support. In a community, members trust each other and support each other toward shared goals. Would you describe your classes as learning communities? Why? Why not? Can you give examples?
7. As an instructor, what is your role in supporting students' sense of community in your classes? Do you play a role in supporting their sense of community inside and outside of class? How?
8. Inside the classroom, what do you do to promote peer interaction and connection? Are there teaching strategies, assignments, etc. Can you give examples? How about outside the classroom?
9. What resources do you think online teachers need in helping facilitate peer-to-peer interaction, engagement and community?
10. What strategies do you use to facilitate dialogue and discussion in your online classes?
11. What activities do you use to promote reflection and critical thinking in the online class?
12. What are the features in blackboard that help you in building a learning community? Give examples.
13. Did you receive any training (professional development) in using these features? Describe. How did it affect your teaching practice?
14. Talk about your experience as a teacher... Are there any things that you experience as a teacher that make it harder for you to facilitate community?
15. Is there anything else we have not mentioned about creating and maintaining an online community that you would like to add?

## Appendix B

### Coding Scheme

This coding scheme is taken from Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2010). The first decade of the community of inquiry framework: A retrospective. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(1), 5-9.

**Social Presence** –the ability of learners to project their personal characteristics into the community of inquiry, thereby presenting themselves as “real people.” Examples of social presence include self-disclosure, humor, open communication, continuing threads, and addressing the group using inclusive pronouns.

**Teaching Presence** - the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes. Examples of teaching presence include using the online medium effectively, including all students in discussions and encouraging student contributions.

**Cognitive Presence** – the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication. Examples of cognitive presence include making connections to course content and real world experiences.

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