Challenges to E-Learning at Queen Arwa University During COVID19: Faculty Experiences

Abdul-Malik Saif Al-Selwi
Buraimi University College, Oman
abdul-malik@buc.edu.om
ORCiD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0296-4909

Abstract

This study is an attempt to shed light on the challenges of e-learning in Yemen. It used a qualitative, descriptive, and explanatory research design with data collected in one of the Yemeni private universities, Queen Arwa University (QAU). A general qualitative inductive approach was adopted to analyze the qualitative data for major and emerging important themes. These challenges can be classified into three categories: challenges related to the academic staff and students (human resources), technical and library difficulties (material elements), and financial problems. The study explores various underlying reasons for these challenges, such as inadequate training for faculty, limited internet accessibility, and insufficient funding for technological infrastructure. As a result, the study recommends several actionable suggestions based on its findings, aimed at improving and mitigating the challenges faced by e-learning stakeholders (decision-makers, teachers, students, etc.) during the e-learning process. Furthermore, the study creates opportunities for similar future research on the actual use of e-learning in other Yemeni or Arab universities. The insights gained from this research could potentially contribute to the development of more effective and sustainable e-learning strategies in the region.

Keywords: Covid-19, E-learning, Higher Education, Queen Arwa University, Yemen

Introduction

The global education landscape has been dramatically altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating the adoption of e-learning worldwide (Abd el-Aziz, 2008, Aknoush, 2010; Alfallaj, 2020; Al-Khatib, 2020; Radha, 2020; Yousefi, 2016). This shift has been particularly challenging for developing countries where technological infrastructure is limited. The pandemic's impact on education has been unprecedented. According to the United Nations, it has caused the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners across more than 190 countries. The crisis has particularly impacted low and lower-middle income countries, where up to 99 percent of the student population has been affected by school closures. This situation has forced educational institutions worldwide to rapidly transition to online learning models. This sudden change highlighted the stark contrast between the education sector's technological readiness and that of other industries, which have seen significant technological advancements over the past century. E-learning, which relies on modern communication technologies, virtual classrooms, and learning management systems, has emerged as a crucial tool for ensuring educational continuity (Al-Kadi, 2017).

While some countries have already integrated information and communication technology (ICT) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) into their educational frameworks, others lag behind (Al-Taie, 2006; Altameem, 2013). In Yemen, the transition to e-learning is still in its early stages (Al-Kadi, 2017). Queen Arwa University (QAU), like other Yemeni institutions, began implementing e-learning systems in response to the pandemic during the 2019/2020 academic year (Al-Slafie, 2022: QAU Website). However, this shift faces numerous challenges, particularly related to technological infrastructure– a common issue in developing countries. The adoption of e-learning in Yemen is not just a temporary measure but a necessary step towards modernizing the education system and aligning it with global trends (Al-Kadi, 2017). However, the process is hindered by various obstacles common to developing and Arab countries, including limited ICT infrastructure, lack of technical expertise, and socio-economic factors.

Research Problem

Most international and Arab universities turned towards e-learning and distance education or remote learning, as they are aware of the advantages they achieve, whether at the economic level through profits or at the academic level (Alfallaj, 2020; Al-Khatib, 2020; Al-Kadi, 2017; Radha, 2020; Yousefi, 2016). These opportunities include educational opportunities for people who face difficulty to enrol in the traditional education system due to the outbreak of pandemics such as the Corona virus or other similar futuristic crises. Nevertheless, Yemen is one of the Arab World countries in the Middle East, where Arabic is the mother tongue of the population.

As in many Middle-Eastern countries, Yemen is one of the countries in which e-learning is still in its infancy (Al-Kadi, 2017). Therefore, there is a gap between the desired situation and the actual situation (some difficulties which the researcher experienced in the Yemeni context of a practical situation and wanted to obtain solutions for these challenges). The undesirable consequences of that condition are that most Yemeni higher education institutions, teachers and students encounter challenges and difficulties in using e-learning. Hence, the problem lies in the slowness of catching up with e-learning due to many difficulties and challenges represented by the unavailability of infrastructure and technology and the ability of faculty members and students to use these technologies. QAU, as one of the Yemeni private universities, is not an exception.

For that reason, I am working on the challenges of e-learning encountered by Yemeni translation undergraduate students, because I want to find out those challenges and difficulties in order to help e-learning stakeholders (decision-makers, teachers, students...etc.) using these data to solve e-learning challenges and difficulties. According to Borg (1963), research is a combination of both experience and reasoning. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) assert that "...certain kinds of reliable knowledge can only derive from experience" (p. 11). This is what they call 'empiricism'. They also emphasize the distinctive

advantages of observation as a research method. They assert that observational techniques have the capacity to produce data that is potentially more genuine and accurate compared to other methods. Ezzy (2002) emphasizes that the researcher's individual experiences play a crucial and inseparable role in the overall research process. Thus, I am working on e-learning, because I want to find out the e-learning difficulties and challenges that faced translation undergraduate students (all levels) during the COVID-19 era at QAU, to help e-learning stakeholders (policymakers, teachers, students, etc.) understand more about those difficulties and work more accurately to solve them.

Research Questions

This research paper attempted to answer the following questions:

1- What are e-learning challenges facing Yemeni translation undergraduate students at QAU during the COVID-19?
2- Why are there e-learning challenges facing Yemeni translation undergraduate students at QAU during the COVID-19?
3- How did QAU overcome the challenges during the pandemic?

Literature Review

E-learning has emerged as a hallmark of the information society in the 21st century, serving as an indicator of a country's progress and superiority. The concept, however, is broad and complex, encompassing various related terms. The term 'e-learning' gained prominence in educational discourse around the year 2000, as noted by Bell and Federman (2013). It serves as an umbrella term, incorporating concepts like 'web-based instruction' and 'computer-assisted learning.' Scholars have proposed various definitions for e-learning, each emphasizing different aspects: Al-Taie (2006) focuses on the flexibility of learning, describing e-learning as a system that allows for remote content delivery without requiring regular classroom attendance. Al-Harbish (n.d.) highlights the diverse electronic media used in e-learning, including CDs and the Internet, and notes that it can be synchronous or asynchronous, self-directed or teacher-assisted.

Al-Mousa (2014) emphasizes the use of modern communication technologies and multimedia in e-learning, stressing its efficiency in delivering information quickly and effectively. Aknoush (2010) described e-learning as an interactive, integrated electronic environment that facilitates curriculum delivery through electronic networks, incorporating multimedia elements and providing tools for guidance, assessment, and resource management. Abd Al-Hamid (2005, as cited in Al-Shalabi and Al-Maslamiya, 2020) presented e-learning as an interactive system for distance education, delivered on-demand through a digital environment, encompassing course creation, delivery, guidance, assessment, and process management. These definitions collectively paint a picture of e-learning as a flexible, technology-driven educational approach that leverages various digital tools and platforms to deliver content, facilitate interaction, and manage the learning process. It represents a significant shift from traditional classroom-based education, offering new possibilities for remote, self-paced, and multimedia-rich learning experiences.

In Yemen, for e-learning to be effective, particularly at the university context, several crucial elements need to be in place. These requirements can be broadly categorized into two main areas: (a) infrastructure and technical support and (b) human resources. Abd Al-Hamid (2006) outlines the essential components of e-learning infrastructure:

1. Computers for communication and browsing
2. Educational software applications to facilitate content delivery
3. Electronic networks connecting universities
4. The underlying network infrastructure

In addition to these foundational elements, modern e-learning platforms like Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams have become integral tools for content delivery. As for human resources, Abd Al-Aziz (2008) emphasizes that the success of an e-learning system isn't solely dependent on technological infrastructure. The human element is equally, if not more, critical. This includes E-learning specialists: A sufficient number of qualified

professionals capable of managing, maintaining, and optimizing the e-learning system. Technologically proficient educators and learners: Both teachers and students need to be able to use technology effectively to enhance the educational process. The human resource aspect underscores the importance of not just implementing technology, but also ensuring that all participants in the e-learning ecosystem are equipped with the necessary skills to leverage these tools effectively. In the Yemeni context, universities are striving to provide these essential requirements. However, the process likely faces challenges due to the country's economic among some other challenges.

Technological Limitations

Given the novelty of e-learning in Yemen and the scarcity of local research (Al-Kadi, 2017), this section reviews recent studies by Arab scholars focusing on e-learning challenges in the region, both during and before the COVID-19 pandemic. Al-Ghamdi (2022) investigated undergraduate EFL students' experiences with online classes at Al-Baha University, Saudi Arabia. The study identified technical issues, particularly internet access and device availability, as primary weaknesses. Alfallaj (2020) examined e-learning challenges and motivations for EFL students during the pandemic at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The study provides recommendations for various stakeholders involved in e-learning implementation. Al-Khatib (2020) explored critical success factors for e-learning and distance education, highlighting challenges related to teaching aids, educator and student readiness, and technology availability. Al-Shalabi and Al-Muslimiyya (2020) identified key requirements for successful e-learning in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study catalogued e-learning tools and challenges, offering suggestions to mitigate student difficulties. Yousefi (2016) focused on the application of modern technologies in e-learning within Algeria's higher education sector, examining implementation efforts and anticipated challenges. Altameem (2013) investigated major technical issues affecting e-learning delivery in Saudi Arabian universities, identifying four key areas: ICT infrastructure, security, access, and IT support.

While reviewing the studies from various Arab countries, several common themes emerge : a) Technical Infrastructure: Al-Ghamdi (2022), Alfallaj (2020), and Altameem (2013) all highlight issues related to ICT infrastructure, internet access, and device availability. This suggests that even in relatively well-resourced countries like Saudi Arabia, technical challenges persist. b) Human Readiness: Al-Khatib (2020) and Al-Shalabi and Al-Muslimiyya (2020) emphasize the importance of teacher and learner readiness for e-learning. This indicates that the human factor is crucial across the region, regardless of technological advancement. c) Institutional Support: Altameem (2013) and Yousefi (2016) both stress the need for robust IT support and institutional commitment to e-learning implementation.

However, disparities are also evident:

a) Resource Allocation: Studies from Saudi Arabia (e.g., Altameem, 2013) focus on optimizing existing systems, while research from less affluent countries may emphasize more fundamental infrastructure needs.

b) Pedagogical Focus: Some studies (e.g., Alfallaj, 2020) delve into subject-specific challenges (like EFL), while others take a broader institutional view.

This review of existing literature reveals a significant research gap concerning e-learning challenges specifically faced by translation students in Yemeni universities, including Queen Arwa University (QAU). To address this gap, the current study aims to investigate the obstacles encountered by Yemeni universities in implementing e-learning systems, with a particular focus on the difficulties experienced by undergraduate translation students at QAU during the 2019/2020 academic year amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining this understudied area, the research seeks to provide valuable insights into the unique challenges of e-learning in translation education within the Yemeni context. It's important to note that while this study aims to shed light on broader e-learning obstacles in Yemeni universities, its scope is limited to undergraduate students in the English-Translation department at QAU, a private Yemeni university, during a specific time

frame. This focused approach allows for an in-depth exploration of a previously unexamined aspect of e-learning implementation in Yemen's higher education landscape

QAU and E-Learning

Queen Arwa University for Academic Sciences was established in the academic year 1995/1996 by Professor Wahiba Farea under the decree of the Prime Minister, the President of the Supreme Council of Universities, No. (1) of 1996. As a result, the university takes the task of contributing to the provision of academically qualified graduates with the necessary scientific and practical expertise in this field. The university is constantly working to serve the Yemeni and Arab communities, and it proceeds from its vision to build a knowledge society in education and research. Its mission is based on the optimal use of modern technology, and many of its goals include providing a supportive educational and research environment based on technology. Recently, QAU teachers are also encouraged to use new technology in their classes for developing their expertise and materials (Queen Arwa University online, 2020).

QAU was the first Yemeni university to launch its website on the Internet and obtained a good evaluation and membership with UNESCO at the time. The website was officially launched and published on the Internet at the beginning of 1998 (Al-Slafie, 2022). The university has an excellent electronic infrastructure represented by many classrooms and computer labs equipped with some modern technologies such as smart boards, computers, data shows…etc., in addition to a radio and television studio equipped with the latest modern equipment and virtual classrooms, all of which were used in the e-learning system during the academic year 2019/2020.

With the outbreak of the Corona pandemic (COVID-19), the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Republic of Yemen issued a decision (no. 37 of 2020) to suspend studies in all higher education institutions on February 15, 2020. Consequently, based on the decision of the Ministry of Higher Education regarding the continuation of the educational process under the precautionary controls and measures followed in the light of the Corona pandemic, and on the results of the emergency meeting of the University Council, and the University President's Decision No. 23 of 2020, QAU announced to the university's members (faculty and students) the resumption of study for the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020 using the e-learning system via the university's e-learning platform, (Queen Arwa University online, 2020) in all colleges and departments. Accordingly, teachers and students obtained the login data to the platform and an educational video was later published on the steps of learning and attending the lesson using the e-learning system. Some teachers differed in using different methods in delivering e-lectures from using presentations (PowerPoint), in PDF format or through videos recorded using different applications such as Camtasia, AnyMP4 Screen Recorder, Recorder Pro 6.04 Ice Screen, etc.

Although all these positive developments have taken place, the current e-learning situation at QAU suffers from some difficulties and shortcomings. Generally, e-learning in Yemen is suffering from some inconveniences up to now. It is beset with a multiplicity of difficulties. It faces some difficulties and challenges that are common in Yemeni public and private universities. These challenges are addressed from the reality of my experience, observation and current work as a faculty member of English and Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at QAU. This study is, therefore, limited to only one Yemeni private university, and only one of its departments, English - Translation.

Method

The research context is QAU, which is located in the Capital Sana'a in the north of Yemen. This study is qualitative, descriptive and explanatory in nature. It seeks to find out what knowledge exists about e-learning at QAU, one of the Yemeni private universities, what type of challenges and obstacles existed and encountered by translation undergraduate students and why there are more challenges and difficulties. It describes the developments and practices of e-learning at QAU. It focuses on describing, understanding and clarifying translation undergraduate students' experience with e-

learning. It is interested in gaining insights from the researcher's personal and prior experience and observation (field notes).

With qualitative information, the researcher has adopted a general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis for major and important emerging themes. This approach allows "research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2003, p.2). Therefore, one way of displaying qualitative data is the 'thematic conceptual matrix' (Lynch, 2003, p.142), in which the researcher has organized initial themes into a classification system of some sort (i.e., the main themes of the research questions and hypotheses). Thus, the qualitative data was analysed interpretatively.

Results and Discussion

As stated before, this study used a faculty perspective to unpack challenges and prospects of E-Learning at Queen Arwa University which experienced e-Learning under the pressure of Covid pandemic. It mainly explores existing knowledge about e-learning at QAU, challenges, and difficulties that translation undergraduate students underwent during the Covid-19 pandemic from the researcher's personal experience and observation as a faculty member of English and Dean of the College of Arts and Human Sciences.

Although e-learning is considered an alternative to conventional learning, several challenges and difficulties have been created to translation undergraduate students. The most important difficulties and challenges facing these students at QAU can be classified under three categories: challenges related to the academic staff and students themselves, technical and library difficulties, and financial difficulties (research question # 1). They can be summarized as follows along with the main reasons behind them (research question # 2).

Faculty members and students

One of the biggest problems facing the faculty members and students is the lack of participation in the making of this type of education, and the lack of readiness of most of them to use modern technology in the learning process or the so-called illiteracy of using the devices and technologies used (computer literacy). This is not a derogation from them, but it is an imposed reality created by the recent discovery of many technology devices and applications. The gradual and significant shift towards technology was a shock to this category, which is now under a fait accompli that necessitates the use of technology. However, faculty members are facing great challenges to keep pace with this sudden shift, and there is no doubt that they will face a challenge represented in the speed of their students (the new generation or the Internet generation) in keeping up with technology compared to them.

In addition to that, one of the difficulties observed in this context is the unavailability of devices and equipment for the teacher and student, and it is represented in the lack of required hardware (i.e., a computer or smartphone) to access the Internet for some faculty members and most students, as many of them do not have computers. The Internet is not also easily accessible to either teachers or students, though the worldwide implementation of the Internet nowadays. All these hindrances are being faced by all beneficiaries of e-learning at QAU, so the current situation is entirely challenging.

The large number of students in the educational institution is another challenge as it does not help in pursuing electronic courses, virtual classes, and multimedia. Many students also live in rural or remote areas, and find it difficult to keep up with the basic technical requirements of e-learning, such as lack of adequate infrastructure to support internet access and poor cellular coverage. Besides, many of them are unable to use basic programs such as Microsoft Word and PowerPoint and therefore cannot deal with their files (providing enough space for learning). Furthermore, one of the challenges face some students in the era of e-learning is their resistance to change, so this does not allow them to adapt to the online learning environment.

Technical challenges (technology):

Technology becomes part of all spheres of life throughout this brave new world. There are different levels for this challenge, including:

Poor internet connection

The Internet pushes e-learning in an expected direction, so it has been nominated for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, as it has virtually revolutionized the world ("Internet in running for 2010", 2010). "Global computer networks and the Internet make information available any time and any place" (Austermühl, 2014, p.6). However, one of the challenges that QAU students faced in their use of the global network of information, the Internet, was the difficulty of accessing the university's e-learning websites, whether inside the university or in their homes due to the continuous interruption of the communication process, which disrupts the learning process, and the difficulty of downloading files shared in E-courses which takes a long time to communicate and download.

In addition, the Internet service (Internet speed and Internet packages) may not be available at all, and if the Internet service is available, it may be slow, costly in comparison to the people's income, or perhaps with insufficient packages to cover video presentations and large materials, and thus the learning experience of students becomes a hectic one. Table 1 presents a summary of the latest available data about the country, Yemen, its population, GPD, and most importantly the Internet users and penetration per IWS according to the Internet World Stat (2023).

Table 1. Internet usage statistics in Yemen (Internet World Stat, 2023

YE - 30,938,435 population (2022) - Country size: 528,076 sq. km
Capital City: Sana'a - population 2,973,000 (2020)
GDP (per capita): $ 758 (2020) per World Bank.
8,243,772 Internet users in Jan/2022, 26.6% penetration, per IWS
3,564,800 Facebook subscribers in Jan/2022, 11.5% penetration.

As can be seen in Table 1, 26,64% (8,243,772) of the population use the Internet. This may be due to the poor IT infrastructure, the current socioeconomical and political situation within the country and the deplorable conditions of most of the population.

The lack or unavailability of computers and their accessories in sufficient quantity and quality is another technical problem. The haste, sudden and emergency shift from conventional classroom-based or face-to-face learning to virtual one, e-learning without good planning may be behind the lack of care for preparing the classroom environment and providing sufficient computer labs, computers and their accessories.

The difficulty of providing electronic libraries and repositories of educational objects was another challenge. The unavailability of electronic libraries, including e-books and encyclopaedias, and their integration into the e-learning system, has made e-learning lose some of its main objectives.

One of the most important financial difficulties faced by the e-learning process is related to the economic situation of the country as a result of the nonstop war which started in 2014, and the inadequacy of financial resources. Accordingly, the most important financial difficulties facing the e-learning process are the high prices of technological means, the high costs of training human cadres, and the high cost of periodic maintenance of machines and appliances.

All the above-mentioned challenges coincide globally with Radha, Mahalakshmi, Kumar & Saravanakumar (2020) who affirm that e-learning has created a lot of challenges for students and academics.

Yemen faces distinct challenges that may exacerbate e-learning difficulties. The economic constraints in such a low-income country, Yemen, likely faces more severe resource limitations than its Gulf neighbours, potentially affecting both institutional capacity and individual access to technology. Besides, the ongoing conflicts in Yemen may disrupt infrastructure development and educational continuity, creating additional hurdles for e-learning implementation. Moreover, Yemen may experience a more pronounced urban-rural divide in terms of internet access and technological literacy, potentially exacerbating educational inequalities. Further, Yemen, unlike some other Arab countries that had pre-existing e-learning initiatives, Yemen's sudden transition due to COVID-19 may have been more abrupt and challenging. Also, Yemen's ongoing challenges may have led to an exodus of skilled professionals, potentially limiting the pool of qualified e-learning specialists and tech-savvy educators.

Unique Challenges for Translation Students at QAU:

The focus on translation students at Queen Arwa University (QAU) presents several unique considerations. Firstly, translation studies often require specialized software and resources. The availability and accessibility of these tools in an e-learning environment can pose significant challenges. Secondly, collaborative learning is a vital aspect of translation, benefiting greatly from peer review and joint work. Replicating this collaborative environment online may prove particularly difficult. Thirdly, translation requires deep cultural knowledge, and e-learning platforms may struggle to provide the rich cultural context that in-person interactions facilitate.

Moreover, translation studies often involve practical components, such as simultaneous interpretation practice, which may be hard to replicate online. Additionally, translation students frequently need access to various reference materials and corpora. Ensuring online access to these resources can be challenging, especially if they were previously available only in physical libraries. Furthermore, translation students may need to quickly adapt to using online translation tools and computer-assisted translation (CAT) software, which could be particularly daunting if their prior experience was limited to traditional methods. Lastly, evaluating translation quality in an online environment may require new assessment methods and tools, posing challenges for both educators and students.

Recommendations

E-learning's difficulties and challenges encountered by learners addressed in this study reflects the reality from within the phenomenon: from the researcher's own experience, observation and current work as a faculty member with special reference to translation undergraduate students (all levels) during the COVID-19 Era at QAU. The challenges might be common in most Yemeni public and private universities. The findings of this stud could be used to provide some recommendations:

1. Forming a technical committee of specialists (including teachers and students) to set standards and determinants of e-learning in the Yemeni context after reviewing the best practices followed in various countries to keep pace with these developments, and disseminate them to all Yemeni universities to work with them uniformly.

2. Restructuring traditional universities, shifting them to smart electronic universities and establishing and providing basic infrastructure commensurate with the application and start of e-learning technology. There is vital need for a strong e-learning programmes which cope with the demands of learners on the one hand and the modern demands of technology on the other.

3. Applying appropriate planning to overcome many of these obstacles and difficulties, so using e-learning technology requires good planning and identification of the previous requirements for the application process of electronic devices in quantity and quality. The application process will not be in the same conventional environment without its development.

4. Organizing courses for teachers who feel weak in e-learning and its various means. They should be encouraged to use new technology in their classes for developing their expertise and teaching materials.
5. Providing students with the skills of e-learning in internal coordination between educational institutions and without a noteworthy cost. The courses in the basics of computer literacy and having a basic knowledge of computer hardware will enable students to manage their university curriculum in an organized manner without difficulty, will enhance their knowledge in this field, and will help them to participate in e-learning without interruption or obstacles.
6. Providing high-speed internet to cover video presentations and high-volume materials. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research should facilitate rapid connection to the global network of information for universities, students and faculty members and provision of devices (Wi-Fi) at preferential prices temporarily for students who are financially unable to pay the subscription.
7. Providing electronic libraries, including books, electronic magazines and encyclopaedias, and integrating them into the educational system. The availability and use of audio/visual aids and a range of resources such as e-books and encyclopaedias, and ease the use of the Internet will create a good environment for e-learning at QAU. Students should be encouraged to use all available facilities inside the library.

All these implications can be used for improvement and worked as solutions for the abovementioned challenges encountered by translation students at QAU and other similar universities

Conclusion

This study presents the circumstances in which e-learning took place in one Yemeni university, QAU. As stated before, the use of e-learning systems is still in its infancy in Yemen. Despite the delay in Yemeni universities in applying this system, they, at present, have a great interest in this field, whether through the availability of infrastructure or through encouraging academics and students to use this technology because of its advantages and the latest undesirable events, such as COVID-19 pandemic. QAU, like other Yemeni universities, is new in the application of e-learning systems. Despite this type of education has many advantages and benefits, it faces some obstacles and challenges in the Yemeni context, such as those related to the human element (students and teachers), infrastructure, technology (access to the Internet, etc.), or financial difficulties, so this study has some valuable recommendations and suggestions which will be helpful to e-learning stakeholders (decision-makers/policymakers, teachers, students...etc.). Finally, this study can open a window for further future studies. Similar qualitative and/or quantitative studies on the actual use of e-learning can be conducted in other Yemeni or Arab universities.

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Author:

Dr Abdul-Malik Saif Al-Selwi is an assocaite professor at Buraimi University College, Oman. He also served as the Dean of the College of Arts and Human Sciences and the Chairperson of the English Department, Queen Arwa University in Sana'a, Yemen. He has had thirty-year experience with Taiz University, Al-Saeed University, and Queen Arwa University in various academic and administrative posts. He teaches courses of Applied Linguistics, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Translation. His research interests focus on Applied Linguistics, ESP, teacher and program evaluation, ESP and literature, general and specialized translation, and uses of various technologies for translation. He is a member of editorial and reviewers boards of some research journals in Yemen and outside. He has published some journal articles in his fields of interests.