

The Impact of Blended Learning on EFL Students' academic achievement in the Preparatory year program

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Abstract

In the post-covid-19 scenario when the education institutions decided to resume their campus-based studies, the threat of reemergence of the virus still loomed large. As a part of this strategy, most of the universities began to introduce Blended Learning programs where in the students were to attend 50% of their classes as face-to-face and 50% online. This integration of online and face-to-face classes occurred at a time when it was most needed. The present study is an attempt to discover the impact of the BL in the Preparatory year program on the academic achievement of EFL students. The students, being techno savvy, took great interest in their studies and not only a significant improvement was noticed in their overall academic achievement but a high academic confidence level was also observed in their general behavior. The study recommends that BL may be continued as a normal mode of studies for students with high motivation level and an appropriate EFL proficiency level. The students with low motivation and a weaker proficiency level should take a shorter foundation level course before allowing them to join any BL program.

Keywords: BL: Blended Learning, face-to-face, Blackboard, Synchronous, Asynchronous

Introduction

The enormous expansion of technology and its integration into people's daily lives has revolutionized the learning context. Blended learning (BL) is a pedagogical paradigm that emerged from the advancement of educational technology and digital learning. Although no single definition can be agreed upon by all scholars, the core concept of BL is to employ educational technology in a regular classroom and integrate face-to-face learning or face-to-face teaching with on-line learning or on-line teaching. BL is used to offer both digital on-line and print-based materials. (Oliver and Trigwell 2005: 17). A number of learning environments, such as an online environment, a face-to-face classroom, or a hybrid of the two, may be included in BL. It's a flexible strategy that allows students to access digital learning resources, learning activities, and even lectures from any location, at any time, synchronously or asynchronously by using virtual platforms as

'Blackboard' or 'Moodle'. The adaptability in the classroom has made BL popular among the teachers and students across the globe.

The term "blended learning" (BL) has become a buzzword in the language classroom. It has, however, been in use for about two decades, and its meaning has been continually shifting during that time. (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, and Francis 2006: 18).

It was first coined in the corporate sphere to describe a course that allowed employees to work while still studying. Training was offered via self-study manuals, videos, and the internet, rather than attending a residential conference. BL was adopted in part as a cost-cutting solution. (Driscoll 2002).

The phrase is still evolving. Another way to think of BL is as "a mix of real world and in-world," in which a teacher gives a face-to-face lecture and then arranges to meet with his or her students in a virtual world like "Second Life" for a follow-up class. (Claypole 2010: 36).

Improved learning outcomes can be achieved by combining the best of the instructor with the best of technology. (Sharma, P 2010)

Literature Review

Blended Learning has been incorporated recently into the Saudi education system with the main aim of confronting the massive challenges ahead in the field of e-learning. The Ministry of Higher Education of Saudi Arabia introduced BL as its preferred approach in 2006 to promote professionalism, leadership and quality education in public and private universities. Furthermore, it established the National Centre for E-learning and Distance Learning to fulfill the needs of Higher education in the Kingdom. Currently, 90% of universities in Saudi Arabia use Blackboard as an e-Learning platform to impart digital education in the university curriculum (Aldiab, Chowdhury, Kootsookos, Alam, & Allhibi 2019). One of the compelling reasons is the after-effects of the Covid-19 which is still threatening the world with its emerging variant, Omicron.

The decision to implement the Blended Learning program for EFL students in the Preparatory year program was a real

bold step at a time when there was no empirical evidence of its success as an academic program at the tertiary level of education. However, the two supportive elements were the teachers' expertise and experience of online teaching (during Covid-19 pandemic) as Almalki,(2011) and Alebaikan , (2010) recommended in their studies) and the students' familiarity with the use of online mode of learning (they were taught through online mode during Covid-19 pandemic as school students). These two factors also contributed a great deal in the success of the program.

We do find a few earlier studies but one factor which was common among all these studies was that the experimental group and the control group both were at a higher level of EFL proficiency and they were involved in higher order cognitive tasks and they could easily tackle the change from face-to-face to the online mode.(Al-Jarf, 2004). (Marsh, 2012).

Moreover, the students in these studies were learning in a safe mode and low anxiety level (Krashen, 1988), (Dörnyei2005) and hence they could learn better and with a relative ease. Whereas in here ,the students were studying in a post covid world when they survived a pandemic which brought a large number of horrible deaths of family members and friends in relatively large numbers (BBC..2020) and they were certainly in great stress and education on the campus was not as easier and safer as it looked on the face of it.

The blended mode had long been in use much before the pandemic but none of the education experts were in favor of changing over formally from the normal centuries old tested mode of campus- based face -to --face learning which was more interactive and hence cognitively more productive with the maximum and meaningful availability of the teacher to guide at any point of academic journey.(Thornbury1996) But now as it was the need of the hour and the circumstances couldn't afford a 100% face-to-face mode of teaching and learning due to Covid-19 potential risks, blended learning was deemed as the only safer mode of instruction.

The following research questions were focused in the current study:

- 1- What was the students' perception towards BL?
- 2- How did BL contribute towards their higher academic achievement?

4.1 Research Data

Questionnaire

SD=strongly disagree; D=disagree; N= neutral ; A= Agree; SA= strongly agree

BL is...../.....	SD	D	N	A	SA	
Flexible access to learning	0 %	0%	10	70%	20%	
Time & cost saving	0%	0%	10	60%	30%	
Facilitates revision through recorded lectures	0%	0%	5%	75%	20%	
Improves learning experience	0%	5%	5%	80%	10%	
Improves communication environment	0%	0%	5%	80%	15%	
Improved feedback	0%	5%	20%	60%	15%	

Method

3.1 Description: A mixed method approach was adopted for the current study. Two groups were selected within the same EFL program(EGP)for the Preparatory year(UmmalQura University, Saudi Arabia). One groupwith 33 male students, received their input through the regular face-to-face class and the other group (32 male) (experimental group) was taught the same EFL course material in Blended Learning mode. (50% face-to-face and 50 % online(Blackboard platform). The program was to last for 15 weeks and there were 16 one-hourly weekly meetings in all. Both the control group and the experimental group took the same content material and the same number of teaching hours.

Description of the online mode: The experimental group attended 50 % of their lectures online through Blackboard Collaborate. They were sent a link and they entered the virtual class through their own official account on the Blackboard platform. It was a synchronous mode.

Both the groups were assessed on-campus in the midterm-course in week 8. The grades of the experimental group were significantly higher which were very motivating for them as well. However, the weaker students with a poor foundation couldn't score even satisfactory grades. The control group students' grades remained steady and normal and no significant change was observed in their performance.

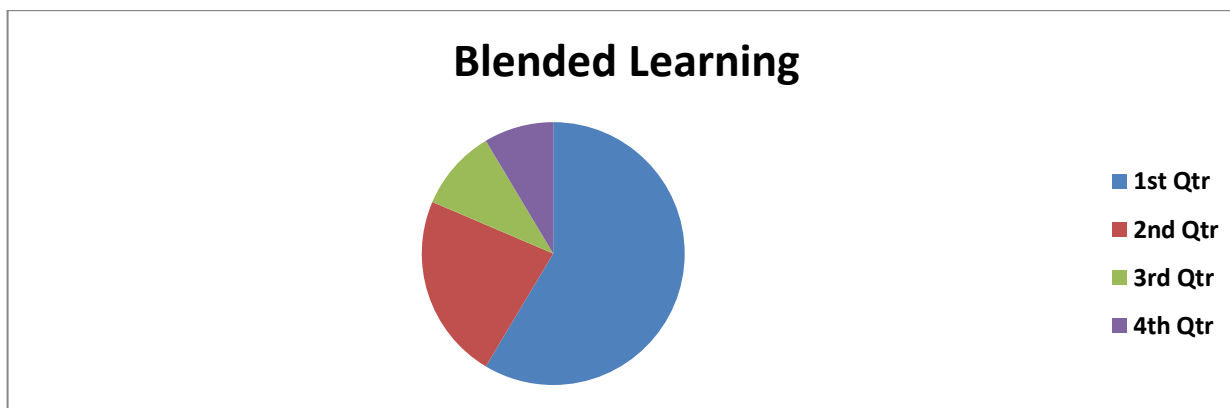
At the end of week 15, both the groups went through end of course assessment.

The experimental group showed consistency in their higher grades while the control group's results remained normal. The weaker students in the experimental group couldn't make up and their grades remained below the required pass percentage.

3.2 Research design:

3.2.1 (A) As a part of mixed method approach, 10- point questionnaire (for quantitative analysis) was prepared on the Likert scale and was sent to the students through their emails and they were asked to complete and send back. The questionnaire wasadapted fromAkkoyunlu&Soylu (2008), originally designed to understand the perceptions of students and instructors regarding blended learning.

Encourages collaboration and sharing	0%	0%	5%	70%	25%	
Enhances peer interaction	0%	0%	5%	70%	25%	
Increases motivation to contribute/participate	0%	0%	10%	80%	10%	
Improves listening skill	0%	0%	10%	80%	10%	
Improves reading skills	0%	0%	10%	80%	10%	



3.1.2 Results (Quantitative analysisQuestionnaire)

As the pie chart shows, majority of the students agreed that the Blended learning program was flexible in time and space and they utilized it to their maximum benefit. (Mackenzie, Dirk &Promnitz-Hayashi, Lara & Jenks, Daniel &Geluso, Joe & Delgado, Roman & Castellano, Joachim &Hinkelman, Don, 2011)

Since the lectures on blackboard platform were synchronous and they were simultaneously recorded as well, the students had access to them at their own pace and convenience, they referred to them repeatedly for more comprehensive learning. (Kenney, 2011)

They also liked and used the easy communication feature available in the blackboard platform. They could contact their instructor for the feedback they needed on any learning component on the course. (Hani, 2021)

The discussion tool on the blackboard platform encouraged collaboration and peer interaction among the students which led to impressive learning outcomes evident in their assessment grades.(Uziak, Jacek &Oladiran, Tunde, 2011)

They found the blackboard platform very motivating; they reported it enhanced their engagement with the online tasks which they otherwise find boring. The findings is in congruence with the study conducted by Al Malki 2011 &Abdul Wahed Q. Al Zumor1, Ismail K. Al Refaai1, Eyhab A. Bader Eddin1 &Farouq H. Aziz Al-Rahman1 (2013)

Regarding the two receptive skills, listening and reading, they agreed (and it was observed as well) that they showed noticeable improvement. They not only listened to the online lectures both synchronously and asynchronously but also

were able to watch the recorded lectures later at their own pace and time and this helped them develop the listening skills to a great extent. These results agree with the Ruba and Lubna's (2014) study findings.

The opportunities to read repeatedly for comprehension exercises turned them into good readers and this overall improvement in these two skills contributed to their better performance in the exams which is so encouraging for these young men who are aiming at pursuing their professional studies in engineering and medicine. The results are supported by two earlier studies conducted by Ruba and Mais (2017) and Caruso, Marinella; Gadd Colombi, Anna; and Tebbit, Simon (2017).

Qualitative Analysis

4.1 Being the second part of the mixed method approach, the students of the experimental group were interviewed after their consent. The students were interviewed separately; it was made clear that their views will not be shared with anyone; they will be used only for the said research. The interviews were recorded.

The interviews focused the following aspects of the Blended learning:

- a. The most useful components
- b. The least useful components
- c. How they felt about the BL in general

Results 4.1.2 (Qualitative analysis)

The students were very appreciative of the blended mode of learning. They said they enjoyed the

Luxury of online learning attending from the comfort of their homes and being able to refer to them in recorded form anytime. They were able to revise and prepare better for exams. They said that they were able to listen to the target language repeatedly especially to the recorded lectures and this improved their listening skill. (Aji, Mahendra, 2017) 'Since he knew the context and that made it easier for him to decode the words and comprehend the content' Ali said.

Safwan said, 'I even learnt the intonation patterns by listening to the recorded lectures and that made the listening exam a piece of cake for me.' Ahmad said, 'I learnt to follow the pace of lecture by listening to the key words in the lecture and later I was able to summarize the topic of the lecture.'

The complementary face-to-face meetings gave them a confidence of being under the guidance and supervision of their teacher. They felt that online and face-to-face modes complemented each other. (Kjærgaard, 2017 & Hockly, 2018). Some shy students said they gained confidence by participating freely in the online discussions and they felt their considerable improvement in their English language proficiency. (Tomlinson and Whittaker, 2013)

The all-time accessibility of the content material on the Blackboard platform facilitated their learning as they pointed out. They were of the view that (you) learn better if you are able to follow the online instructions before the online lesson starts.

Regarding the online assignments, they said they could conclude that self-discipline and timely response is the key to success. (Graham, Alley and Ure, 2006)

They felt satisfied with the delivery on the blended learning course in general. However, they were of the view that a short training would be very supportive for those students who are less technosavy well before the commencement of the course. (Matthew Lynch, 2020)

Discussion

The students of the experimental group observed that they felt more motivated as technology was more engaging and they also learnt more easily. (Holley & Oliver 2010)

They were of the view that they became more independent learners as they learnt to use technology for learning the EFL. (Lopez-Ozieblo, 2018)

BL gave them an opportunity to more in contact with their instructor and they got the feedback on their assignments more regularly and this accelerated and facilitated their learning. (Chen & Jennifer, 2015).

Their comprehension level improved faster as they had more time to read the text at their own pace in the comfort of their home environment. (Rombot, Olifia & Boeriswati, Endry & Suparman, M. 20200)

They improved their language abilities, particularly listening, by listening to the recorded lectures multiple times to clarify any points they missed during the lectures. (Aji, 2017)

They were able to learn in the peer groups discussions which were regularly held at the end of every month.

A blog post was created on the blackboard wherein they posted on topics of general interest and this improved their writing skills.

Blackboard as an online academic platform proved to be very successful during Covid-19 and in the post Covid-19 scenario and is getting very popular as the students and teachers have developed the required technical skills to use it for teaching and learning.

After excessive use, the students also became familiar to the assessment tools available on the Blackboard; quizzes, tests assignments, and exams. The automatic grading gave the students immediate feedbacks which help them learn better. (Rahmani & Min, 2019)

Conclusion

Blended learning is a wonderful mix of online and face-to-face learning that gives students the best of both worlds. Students learn more effectively and perform better on exams as a result. The online component gives hands-on practice, while the face-to-face option allows for social interaction, which is an important aspect of the language learning process. As a result, learners have more confidence in using EFL, and their academic language competency improves, leading to higher academic accomplishment across the board.

The study is indicatively applied in the sense that BL might be considered for subjects other than EFL. However, design of online material should be attended to before embarking on any such undertaking.

The weaker students should be given remedial coaching before they join any BL program as their poor proficiency is a hindrance to their learning and they don't feel a part of the group and hence perform very badly on the course. (Aldosemani, Shepherd & Bolliger 2018 & Sawaftah & Abdulmajeed, 2016)

In higher education, BL might prove more useful wherein cost due to travelling and accommodation is a defining factor and unfortunately many good students are unable to pursue their education and suffer from frustration.

BL might be offered as an option for all the students in all the courses so that students might avail it if they could not

attend the classes on campus due to economic constraints, some illnesses, natural or man-made calamities such as pandemics, wars etc. BL should be accepted as a normal form of studies and no discrimination should be made in recruitments on the basis of mode of studies. BL has made learning more practical and convenient for students and they learn more in less time and with less money and more comfort.

Limitations & Recommendations for further research:

Since the current study focuses only male students, it might be replicated with female students at the tertiary level of education. Moreover, the research may be extended to other disciplines of higher education.

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