

Using Blended Approach for EFL Learning: A Step towards 21st Century Classrooms

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Abstract

The increasing use of technology for the teaching-learning activity has seen a significant change in the learning approach across the globe including the teaching of English as a foreign/second language. In this context, the teacher makes use of online classes along with the formal or in class approach for EFL learning. Consequently, the blended learning approach has seen an influx of research and considered as a potential area of research for the teachers. As opposed to the sheer use of e-learning, blended learning promotes the use of different technological equipment for EFL instructions in addition to the traditional method or face to face approach. Therefore, several higher learning centers have already started using blended learning to teach EFL learners. However, this phenomenon is more prevalent in the developed nations as compared to the developing countries like Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the author aims to determine the attitudes and perceptions of EFL learners towards the use of blended learning, as an ultimate recipient and recommends it for further implementation based on the findings of this study. The questionnaire has randomly been administered among a total of 70 undergraduate EFL learners of Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire consists of 10 closed ended items. Based on the collected responses of EFL learners against each item a quantitative analysis has been done using SPSS 26. The results indicate that most EFL learners believe that it has a positive impact and make learning more interesting. Further, the study has been concluded with the recommendations and practical implication in EFL learning based on the obtained results.

Keywords: blended learning, EFL learning, learner's attitudes, technology and education

1. Introduction

The last decade has seen a surge in technological advancements and its active use in teaching-learning environments including EFL classrooms. Consequently, the research has actively been investigating the impact of technical aids on learning. In this context, several researchers (Dudeny and Hockly, 2007; Rahman, 2020) report that the use of technology overall has a positive impact on learning outcomes including the present study. In the current outset, the teaching of EFL learning is beyond imagination without the active use of technology and electronic devices. Such use does not influence the teaching only but also enables researchers to plan strategies about tomorrow's classrooms which are going to be completely technology dependent. Therefore, several technological trends have turned out to be the fundamentals of teaching-learning practice in modern world EFL learning. In this context, several courses and teaching materials have been designed to cater to the needs of EFL learners including e-readers (like Kindle and so on). Taking the advantage of technology thousands of online and offline tools have already been designed and available in the market for EFL practice. Based on the learning needs EFL learners make use of the appropriate tool to achieve their goal. Certainly, this is seen as a transition phase where teaching-learning methods passing through paradigm shift by taking the advantages of technology, especially EFL learning. Hence, the teachers started using simultaneously face to face and e-learning approach to EFL education which is known as a blended learning method.

Due to its overwhelmingly positive impact mostly teacher prefers to use blended learning method as it is an amalgamation of both traditional and technological aided approach to teaching. Han and Wang (2021) reports that despite the dominant use of the traditional teaching method, the blended technique has largely been adopted by the teachers in classrooms in the last decade. Based on the fact that using both face to face and technology-integrated method i.e. blended learning does not benefit student only but also to the teacher. Another study by Albiladi and Alshareef (2019) claims that blended learning is an advanced and up to date technique of teaching which is an

outcome of technological revolution and its deep penetration in education. Furthermore, the authors also note that still, a complete dependency on traditional methods is the unjust or unfair use of technology, hence cheating with the students. Moreover, when most teachers believe that student-centric learning remains the core of teaching, therefore, they feel that using blended learning this goal can be achieved. As the core of blended learning is learner-centered, since this approach provides the learner with more opportunity to work and learner or by collaborating with groupmates, classmates this enables the teachers to prepare student-oriented strategies.

Moreover, blended learning attracts most students and teachers as a method mainly due to two fundamental characteristics i.e. anywhere/anytime and flexible learning environments which fit the 21st century teaching-learning arena (Rahim, 2019). Ju and Yun (2018) extend this discussion with the claim that blended learning provides learners with the opportunity of life-long learning when in-class learning becomes limited. In this context, blended learning does not restrict the learning only to the inside class situation but also provide the learner with the opportunity to learn outside the class. Therefore, blended learning is directly seen as the method which can fulfil the need of ELF learners in a fast-moving technological world. Additional, blended learning also enables learners with the opportunity to learn and develop critical thinking through numerous related materials available on the internet.

Lastly, the already published work in the area of EFL learning concerning blended learning has laid strong recommendations for its adoption based on technological factors. Therefore, in this study, the author aims to determine the perceptions of learners towards the use of blended learning in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia context.

2. Literature Review

The use of technology in EFL classrooms has a long and rich history. As a result, the journey of technological integration to EFL learning is seen from computer assisted language learning (CALL), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), and other approaches that involve technological integration generally used by the teachers to teach EFL/ESL learning. Therefore, research believes that blended learning lies in between these approaches used by teachers to felicitate teaching-learning activities. Taking this notion Zhang and Zhu (2018) claim it was impossible to design an educational framework to fulfil every student need until now, but with blended learning, it is possible to develop a flexible, anywhere/anytime, and motivating friendly learning atmosphere. This showcase the effectiveness of blended learning where even a personalized learning module can be designed using technology in addition to the traditional teaching method. Therefore, it is also believed that in near future using the only traditional method will be replaced with blended learning. Further, Dziuban et al. (2018) say that blended learning is a teaching approach that uses face to face method and technology integrated platforms simultaneously and has a significant impact on learning. As a result, Fakhir (2015) emphasizes that the ministry of education should fund more to blended research. This gives rise to the pinpoint question that the researcher should explore the different factors that lead to the better implementation of blended learning in 21st century classrooms.

In fact, blended learning is a way out to the traditional teaching method rather using the two i.e. traditional and technology driven method together to as a new teaching method to survive in the technological society. Furthermore, Albiladi and Alshareef (2019) opine that blended learning as a teaching method is seen as the plank between education methods and online learning. As a result, the integration of technology in teaching method is the new paradigm shift in the field of teaching-learning activities. Therefore, a lot needs to be restructured in terms of the teaching methodology, especially in EFL learning.

Moreover, the growing trend for the adoption of blended learning in EFL classrooms remains on flexibility i.e. anywhere and anytime learning opportunity. In this regard, Oweis (2018) reported in his study that blended learning has a positive impact and enable learners with greater motivation and better use of the English language. Additionally, learners claimed that using blended learning they had enough time both inside and outside the classroom to learn and practice the language. Due to flexibility, they have also mastered proficiency in a given language. Therefore, the application of blended learning requires in class restricting and existing methodology, this is also considered as the upgraded platform of EFL learning. Accordingly, Sharma and Barrett (2018) claim that the characteristics of blended learning yet to be fully utilized in ELT domain, as it opens numerous interesting innovative and creative ideas for teachers. As they propose a blended framework based on the certain factors which proved to be effective not only for students but to the educational institute also, such as, improvement in learner's overall English skills, independent learning, critical thinking, and so on.

Besides all, blended learning has also a significant impact on the overall leaning achievements and performance of the learners. Considerably, Akbarov et al. (2018) report in their study that blended learning has brought a positive change in EFL learner's performance with a noticeable surge in their motivation level. This overall cultivated into academic achievements. The results of this study further reports that learners show a positive bend of mind during

the class towards a blended learning approach. Further, yet another study by Dziuban et al. (2018) reports that blended learning enables learners to measure and evaluate their learning process, which reflects on their overall academic scores. Additionally, blended learning promotes collaborative learning, so students get fairly more opportunities to learn from their peers or colleagues in an academic environment. Taking the advantage of such circumstance Oweis (2018) reports that blended learning has a greater impact both on the motivation and academic achievement of the students as compared to the solo use of traditional teaching method in EFL classrooms.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants

In this study, to determine the perceptions of EFL learners' towards the use of blended learning and their readiness if implemented in formal teaching. A total number of 70 students have been asked to fill in the questionnaire belonging to under-graduate level at Qassim University. The participants belong to the age of 18 to 25 years. In the following table 1, their demographic details have also been presented.

Table 1. *Showing Learner's Demography*

<i>Gender</i>	Number	Percent (%)
Male	35	50
Female	35	50
<i>Age</i>		
18-20 years	42	60
21-25 years	28	40
<i>Education</i>		
Under-graduate	70	100
<i>Total</i>	70	100

3.2 Instruments

The used instrument for the data collection was a questionnaire which consists of 10 close ended items. The questionnaire is broadly divided into two parts i.e. part one seeks to obtain demographic details of the learners' while the second part is based on the main questions that aim to determine the readiness and perceptions of EFL learners towards blended learning and its impact on the learning achievements. Further, the questionnaire has been prepared using 5-point Likert-scaling systems. Where 1 stands for strongly agree (SA), 2 agree (A), 3 neutral, 4 disagree, and 5 strongly disagree (SD), respectively. Only one set of the questionnaire has been administered since the objective of the study is to determine the perceptions of learners only as being the ultimate recipients.

3.3 Procedure

This study aims to make a quantitative investigation out of collected data. Therefore, the questionnaire has randomly been distributed among 70 undergraduate learners, includes both males and females enrolled at Qassim University in December 2020. The distribution of the questionnaire has been done using the electronic method i.e. internet. After collecting the learner's response against each item related to blended learning approach, a quantitative analysis has been done using SPSS 26. The obtained results have been illustrated in the following section following the discussion.

4. Results and Discussion

In this sub-section, the overall picture about the perceptions of EFL learner's towards the use of blended learning method in EFL learning and their overall impact on learner's academic achievement or performance has been presented in the following table 2. The table consists of a total of 6 columns i.e. column 1 displays question, column 2 to 6 the response has been measured according to the 5-point scaling system i.e. strongly agree to strongly disagree. Each column is divided into two parts, the left partition shows the total number of responses against each scale and the following partition depicts their percentage.

Table 2. Showing EFL Learners' Response towards Blended Learning Approach

Questions (Items)	SA		A		N		D		SD	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. Do you agree that blended learning is the need of the hour and future?	13	18.57	39	55.71	17	24.28	1	1.42	-	-
2. Do you agree that blended learning is easy to use and makes learning interesting?	17	24.28	33	47.14	11	15.71	5	7.14	4	5.71
3. Do you agree that blended learning creates a more diverse and collaborative environment between teacher and student?	14	20.0	40	57.14	9	12.85	7	10.0	-	-
4. Do you agree that blended learning enables students to think critically?	12	17.14	29	41.42	15	21.42	9	12.85	5	7.14
5. Do you agree that blended learning motivates students towards learning?	21	30.0	25	35.71	16	22.85	6	8.57	2	2.85
6. Do you agree that blended learning enables learners with better workload management during task completion?	23	32.85	31	44.28	7	10.0	4	5.71	5	7.14
7. Do you agree that blended learning has a positive impact on overall learning?	16	22.85	27	38.57	15	21.42	7	10.0	5	7.14
8. Do you agree that blended learning provides up to date learning materials?	28	40.0	24	34.28	13	18.57	5	7.14	-	-
9. Do you agree that blended learning provides learners with immediate feedback?	22	31.42	27	38.57	11	15.71	8	11.42	2	2.85
10. Do you agree that blended learning enables students with better goal setting?	14	20.0	24	34.28	23	32.85	2	2.85	7	10.0

Before going into the details of the interpretation of the results, the recorded response against each item has been illustrated in the above table 2.

The Q1 "Do you agree that blended learning is the need of the hour and future?" has received the total number of responses like 13 strongly agree (18.57 %), 39 agree (55.71%), 17 neutral (24.28%), followed by 1 disagree (1.42%) whereas no response has been recorded for strongly disagree.

Similarly, Q2 "Do you agree that blended learning is easy to use and makes learning interesting?" says that 17 strongly disagree (24.28%), 33 agree (47.14%), 11 neutral (15.71%), 5 disagreed (7.14%), and 4 strongly disagree (5.71%).

The Q3 "Do you agree that blended learning creates a more diverse and collaborative environment between teacher and student?" shows that 14 strongly agree (20.0%), 40 agree (57.14%), 9 neutral (12.85%), 7 disagree (10.0%), and none of the respondents chooses to strongly disagree.

Further, Q4 "Do you agree that blended learning enables students to think critically?" responses are as follows; 12 strongly agree (17.14%), 29 agree (41.42%), 15 neutral (21.42%), 9 disagree (12.85%), and 5 say strongly disagree (7.14%).

Whereas the responses of Q5 “Do you agree that blended learning motivates students towards learning?” reveals that 21 strongly agree (30.0%), 25 agree (35.71%), 16 neutral (22.85%), 6 disagree (8.57%), and 2 strongly disagree (2.85%).

In line, Q6 “Do you agree that blended learning enables learners with better workload management during task completion?” received 23 strongly agree (32.85%), 31 agree (44.28%), 7 neutral (10.0%), 4 disagree (5.71%), and 5 learners strong disagreed (7.14%).

Furthermore, the learners have responded to the Q7 “Do you agree that blended learning has a positive impact on overall learning?” in such a way that 16 strongly agree (22.85%), 27 agree (38.57%), 15 neutral (21.42%), 7 disagree (10.0%), and 5 strongly disagree (7.14%).

The recorded responses for Q8 “Do you agree that blended learning provides up to date learning materials?” are as; 28 strongly agree (40.0%), 24 agree (34.28%), 13 neutral (18.57%), 5 disagree (7.14%), and no response received for strongly disagree.

Similarly for Q9 “Do you agree that blended learning provides learners immediate feedback?” 22 strongly agree (31.42%), 27 agree (38.57%), 11 neutral (15.71%), 8 disagree (11.42%), and 2 strongly disagree (2.85%).

Finally the responses for Q10 “Do you agree that blended learning enables students with better goal setting?” 14 strongly agree (20.0%), 24 agree (34.28%), 23 neutral (32.85%), 2 disagree (2.85%), and 7 strongly disagree (10.0%).

As per the data presented in above table 2 shows that items revied an overall agreement of 60% from the learners except item no. 10 and 4 i.e. 54.28% and 58.82%. However, the overall response of the learners shows clear indication towards the efficacy of blended learning. This gives rise to the feeling that learners show readiness for the adoption of blended learning based on the fact it creates a diverse and collaborative learning environment which help learners in improving academic performance and motivation. This is evident from the results of question 5 and 7 which has received overall agreement (strongly agree + agree) of 65.71% and 61.42%, respectively. Further, the results of the items 9 and 10 show that blended learning also helps learners to improve performance based on the immediate feedback and also enables with the better goal setting for future, as the learners show the overall agreement of 69.99% and 54.28%, respectively. On the contrary, there are very few items which have received a lesser amount of disagreement which can be concluded as having a mild effect or no effect on the overall results of the study.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study indicate the EFL learners’ perceptions and attitudes towards the use of blended learning. However, the nature of the items of other study did not pay attention to cover different aspects keeping in view the 21st century classrooms situations, but this study tried to capture it and the percentage of agreement is quite relaxing. Therefore, the results of the study may be used to design a blended learning module of EFL learning.

Further, the results of the study are clear indicators that learners tend to show a positive attitude towards a blended learning approach that has a greater impact on the overall learning of the students. Hence, students show complete readiness towards the migration of blended learning from the existing methodology, as they also feel that the old method is time consuming and outdated when the world is moving fast towards deeper into the technology. They also claimed that blended learning is quite exciting and learning becomes fun, hence, more time is spent during learning (item 2). Despite not full integration of blended learning learners believes that it is a future method of EFL learning as they show 74.28% of agreement (item 1). As per the existing method, they are not fully independent and exposed to the less collaborative environment but they show overwhelming agreement towards the item no. 3 i.e. 77.14%, based on the fact that if students are promoted to the collaborative learning so they will get a fair opportunity to learn more with update learning materials using online source or tool. Therefore, the author recommends that the students should be familiarized with different reliable online educational tools.

In conclusion, the author states that blended learning is the only option for learning rather the argument is that using technology in education especially as a methodological implementation see a possibility of getting a superior grade and higher motivation towards learning as evident in many studies. Further, blended learning is also effective and interesting to use for both learners and teachers. Therefore, timely analysis of the overall performance of the students is needed and accordingly effect digital aid will be employed based on the individual or group of students’ preferences. The overall results of the study clearly indicate that when full integration of blended learning takes place in EFL learning it will have a significant and impressive amount of learning output or academic achievement of the students as compared to the traditional methods of teaching.

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