Research Article

The Effectiveness Of Blended Learning In Efl Context: An Experimental Study At Arab Open University-Ksa

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Abstract

Blended learning has been acknowledged as among the top 10 emerging trends in the field of knowledge delivery as identified by the American Society for Training (Alzahrani 2017). Its significant development in the context of higher education and corporate training is driven by the various advancements in technology as well as the wider access to information and communication technologies. Along with this development is the growing research interest on the concept of the approach. Blended learning use expanded in the past few years due to the pandemic of COVID-19 where the world shifted its learning from face to face into online learning. Therefore, the current study is one of such, investigating the effectiveness of adopting blended learning particularly in improving the English language capacity of the students at Arab Open University in Saudi Arabia. The results shown improvement in students' learning outcome and Support students' foreign language learning in informal settings. The current study recommends the need to develop the strategies used by tutors at Arab Open University to enhance the use of blended learning as well as developing the infrastructure that would support blended learning.

Keywords: Blended Learning, EFL, Teaching, Arab Open University

INTRODUCTION

There have been well-documented studies indicating the various issues faced by English language learners in Arab countries (e.g., Sajid, 2016; Al Nakhalah, 2016; Rabab'ah, 2003; Al-kunwelleh & Shoumali, 2000; Abbad, 1988). In Saudi Arabia for instance, English is taught via formal instruction in classrooms of more than 30 students by Arabic-speaking teachers. Evidently, the students are unable to practice using the English language in a more natural setting as they come across very few native speakers in the country.

As for the English language teachers, they are faced by the challenge of coming up with the most suitable methods for developing creative and stimulating lessons for their students. This naturally leads to the anticipation of using technological tools for improving learning and achieving better outcomes, on top of motivating the students to learn in more natural settings.

In the context of the United States, the teaching of the English language has been resorting more and more to the concept of blended learning (Ja'ashan 2015) which is defined as a flexible method combining one-on-one teaching/learning and remote learning (typically facilitated by the Internet). This current study investigates the practicality of using this method in light of the knowledge that a

major portion of language learning occurs in blended learning environments outside of the classroom. Hence, there is now a need to identify the best ways to incorporate technology into traditional classroom teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Today, technology has been widely accepted as a significant teaching and learning tool (Cuban, Kirkpatrick & Craig, 2001). According to Cuban et al. (2001), traditional teaching practices remain intact even with the integration of technology inside the classroom. The more pertinent question now is whether such implementation of technology can actually improve the outcomes of learning. Very few inquiries had been made in determining the role of technology in teaching i.e. whether it facilitates or hinders formal instruction (Murray, 2002). This current study therefore sets out to determine whether the integration of technology, particularly blended learning, can improve the teaching and learning of the English language.

Past studies had affirmed the significant effect of technology on academic achievement. Ja'ashan (2015) revealed that teachers who put their computer technology training and skills into practice in the classroom produce students with better problem solving skills. Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2006) found that students with greater engagement in online discussion forums have better achievements and more positive perception of the blended learning approach. The study also showed that the learning process is facilitated by both face-to-face lectures and online tasks.

Meanwhile, Sajid (2016) asserted that the effectiveness of blended learning can be measured qualitatively rather than quantitatively as the summative assessment of blended and one-on-one learning bears no difference. Despite that, Simonson, Schlosser and Hanson (1999) stated that students who engage in online learning demonstrate better performance than their counterparts who engage in traditional classroom learning primarily due to the former's advantage of being able to do their tasks and listen to videos repetitively.

Smith and Hill (2019) reported that the blended learning approach leads to greater learning levels than the traditional method in the context of business courses. The authors revealed that the combination of traditional and online teaching leads to improved exam performance. However, the integration of asynchronous and synchronous methods to blended learning leads to poor exam performance. The study also showed that students gain more clarity from face-to-face lectures.

Other studies that supported the positive effect of blended learning on student performance as opposed to pure traditional learning are Sun (2017), Alzahrani (2017), and Sankaran and Bui (2001). These results point to the various advantages of blended learning in terms of task accessibility, flexibility in making changes, and peer review availability.

The argument that traditional teaching is augmented by e-learning is further supported by Al-Madani (2015), Ali (2017), Aldosemani, (2019), and Aldiab et al (2019). As highlighted by Aldiab et al (2019), blended learning facilitates the assessment of students' needs hence elevating their performance via the creation of a flexible and accessible learning environment. Blended learning has also been deemed as "the single-greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today" by the president of the Pennsylvania State University (Young, 2002, p. A33) where both teachers and students play a significant role in ensuring its successful implementation.

Based on Aldosemani (2019) and Al-Madani (2015), they argue that blended learning entails the obligatory application of both classroom and online (off-classroom) learning. According to Sun (2017), a successful blended learning model integrates face-to-face learning; weekly online assessments and synchronous discussions; asynchronous discussions; the usage of e-mails; one-on-one meetings, and proctored final examination.

Meanwhile, Motteram, (2018) describes blended learning as the combination of traditional learning and remote learning. A particular course is deemed as blended when the textbook instruction is combined with IT components. Other examples of blended instructions include traditional workshops or seminars carried out via teleconference, traditional courses using e-mail correspondence, or traditional seminars broadcasted live on television.

The design of a blended learning model should be in line with the desired learning outcomes (Encyclopedia of Educational Technology, undated). The teacher is responsible for determining the instructional mode i.e. either online or in-class, as well as identifying the suitability and benefits of the various online delivery methods to the students' achievement level. Based on all the above, several Arab-based studies had set out to determine the applicability of blended learning in the teaching of English including this present study.

METHODOLOGY

This study is experimental in nature, demonstrating the experience of using blended learning in the teaching of English as a foreign language in a higher education institution in Saudi Arabia. The gathered data was analyzed and the outcomes verified.

Course Selection

This study focuses on the general English course (EL097) taken by most of students at Arab Open University (AOU) irrespective of their major. In this course, face-to-face lectures were conducted to teach new concepts and structures. Additional assignments were given using new materials to be completed via online activities.

Sample Selection

In this study, the researcher who also acts as the instructor selects 60 students under her tutorage in the summer semester of the academic year 2020-2021 at AOU. The students were divided into two groups of 30 in each. One group serves as the experimental group and applied with the new blended learning method. The other group serves as the controlled group and applied with only the traditional face-to-face learning method. As the students majored in different specializations, the researcher also divided them according to their specialization i.e. Business and Information Technology as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sample Distribution based on Specialisation

	No.	Percentage
Information Technology	36	60%
Business	24	40%
Total	60	100.0%

The samples were also distributed according to gender as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Sample Distribution based on Gender

	No.	Percentage
Male	22	36.6%
Female	38	63.3%
Total	60	100.0%

In-class Instruction

The course was held over two months in the academic year 2020-2021. Both of the groups; experimental and control groups applied the traditional (in-class) instructions. The topics that given to both groups were the same for both of in-class and experimental groups. The students in both groups performed all the writing exercises either in or outside of class. The researcher monitored the students' work and facilitated them individually whenever needed.

The students in both groups were assessed by instructing them to write persuasive paragraphs based on the writing rubric provided earlier in the semester. Their work was then graded accompanied by comments about their strengths and weaknesses as well as words of encouragement. All signs of improvement whether big or small were acknowledged. Deliberations about the answers were conducted both in class and online.

Blended Learning Methods and Instructions

On top of the face-to-face classes, the course materials and assignments were also provided via the Learning Management System (LMS) website. It is the students' obligation to participate in the given online activities which include group discussions as well as team and individual assignments.

Online Treatment (LMS; learning Management System)

For the experimental group, LMS is applied along with the in-class instruction. This user-friendly website is accessible to all students taking the course. The LMS materials are related to paragraph writing exercises with the objective of achieving the course's intended learning outcomes or ILOs. Students in the experimental group perform these course works at home or the university using the Internet. The students were already briefed earlier in the semester about the blended course components and how to use them. The online instructions were given during the weekly LMS discussion forums during the course of the semester.

For their first writing assignment, the students were engaged in error analysis in which they were required to comment on a paragraph written by one of their peers. Specifically, they were asked to identify errors in the paragraph and subsequently rectify them. As the students need to read each other's posts, they were also engaging in unintentional learning. This assignment had a 2-week deadline.

Their second assignment entailed writing about the negative effects of smoking based on a picture of two smokers uploaded by the researcher/instructor. The third assignment entailed having the students give their opinions on gender differences based on two videos uploaded unto the website. They were also required to answer several related questions using related vocabulary items. All three assignments were designed towards achieving the course's ILOs in line with the textbook materials.

Over the entire semester, the researcher took on the role of facilitator who responds to the students' learning needs, comments and requests. Public and private messages of encouragement were sent to the students to drive their interaction and communication. The researcher/facilitator had several tasks including searching for and posting related websites on the LMS, posting questions and discussion topics, as well as writing weekly model responses. The researcher would only highlight grammar errors on the students' posts and not correct them. Only students who had agreed to participate in the blended learning mode were included in the study. They were assigned with other ILO-related online tasks, but were not graded on them. Among the online learning activities were:

i. Downloading online videos, commenting and summarizing their opinions about issues highlighted in the textbook.
ii. Using certain websites as references
iii. Preparing presentations using Power Point Presentation.
iv. Performing error analysis on peer-written paragraphs, and thereby discussing the outcomes.
v. Expressing their opinions by commenting on given videos or photos.

Assessment Methods (Criteria for Evaluating Assignments)

Each week, the students would receive their online assignments via e-mail. Once done, the instructor corrected the students' work based on an overall scale. Each completed assignment was given 10 points; this means that for the three assignments, the students would receive 30 points which in turn represents 10% of the overall course. Another 40% was attributed to the first and second exams, while another 50% was attributed to the final exam.

The Definition of Blended Learning in EL097 Course

On top of face-to-face instructions, this course also incorporated the usage of ICT in the teaching and learning activities such as e-mail and discussion forums. In this study, blended learning entails the combination of face-to-face instructions and supplementary online learning activities i.e. an asynchronous approach towards improving student performance (Cracraft 2015). Basically, the in-class instructions were conducted face-to-face, whilst the off-school instructions were performed via online activities guided by the instructor.

The Objectives of Blended Learning in this Course

i. To drive self-directed learning and widen the students' language exposure via the effective integration of online learning into traditional classroom teaching.
ii. To enable the effective usage of lecture hours for materials that can be presented more effectively via face-to-face instructions.
iii. To allow flexibility in learning whereby the students can complete their online tasks anywhere, anytime.

Challenges with Blended Learning in this Course

i. The students were required to have at least basic computer technology knowledge.
ii. As the course entailed group assignments and activities, the students had to be open, flexible, and respectful toward each other.
iii. The online learning component was obligatory. The students had to take responsibility over the online learning materials and their own time management.

    iv.   The mere 10% grade allocation of this component out of the entire course's total mark was deemed demotivating by some of the students.

    v.   Some of the students did not put in their fair share of work in group assignments.

    vi.   There were issues of plagiarism in the students' work, forcing the instructor to upload their pre-test assignments to identify their actual style of writing.

Test Validity and Reliability

Five instructors were involved in the preparation of the exam questions of which validity in measuring the students' reading and writing skills was confirmed. These exam questions were similar to that of the pre-test. The researcher assigned an instructor for both of the experimental and control groups as well as the marker for the pre-test and final exam. The final exam's reliability co-efficient was (0.75).

Study Tools

The researcher established a pre-test to determine the initial language level of the experimental and control groups, and to verify that any significant improvements for the experimental group at the end of the course are due to the blended learning mode. Additionally, the university's intensive English Unit developed the unified final exam.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study sets out to answer the following research questions:

1. Is blended learning an effective technique for improving English language learning among students at Arab Open University in KSA?
2. Are there any noticeable differences in students' achievements based on their specialisation?
3. Are there any noticeable differences in the students' achievements based on their gender?

Towards that end, a pre-test was conducted for the students in both the experimental and control groups to ensure an equivalent head start. Table 3 presents the results of the pre-test.

Table 3: Differences in the Pre-test Scores Between the Experimental and Control Groups

Test	Means		Standard Deviation		df	t-test	Sig.
	Control Group	**Experimental Group**	**Control Group**	**Experimental Group**			
Pre-test	5.90	5.33	1.52	1.30	58	1.56	0.125

As shown above, there are no significant differences in the pre-test achievements of the students in both groups as the t-value is 1.56 at a 0.125 significance level. This indicates that the students' initial English proficiency levels are equivalent.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was carried out using the SPSS software specifically for calculating the mean, standard deviation, and percentage of achievement scores for both groups. The t-test was employed to determine the significance of the students' scores in the pre and the post-tests.

Analysis Results

To answer the first research question i.e. the effectiveness of blended learning in improving the teaching of English as a foreign language at the university, the differences in the achievement scores of the two groups were calculated. Table 4 presents the results.

Table 4: Difference in the Final Exam Scores between Control and Experimental Groups

Test	Means		Standard Deviation		Df	t	Sig.
	Control Group	Experimental Group	Control Group	Experimental Group			
Final Exam	73.47%	82.40%	13.03	12.12	58	2.75	0.008*

The control group recorded a mean score of 73.47%, whilst the experimental group reported a mean score of 82.40%. There is a significant difference of 0.008 in the score between the two groups, favoring the experimental group. This is consistent with the results of Sankaran and Bui (2001) i.e. that blended learning, as opposed to the MLS system, improves student performance. Yet, there are studies that indicated otherwise i.e. there is no significant difference in the achievement of students engaged in traditional classroom instructions with those engaged in blended learning (Goyal and Tambe 2015). The mixed results may be due to the students' varying motivations to use the IT tools provided in the blended instruction (Sankaran & Bui, 2001).

Table 5: Differences in the Final Exam Scores between the Experimental and Control Groups based on Specialisation

Test	Means		Standard Deviation		Df	T	Sig.
	IT	Business	IT	Business			
Final Exam	86.38%	73.11%	10.06	11.86	28	3.14	0.004*

Final Exam Scores Differences
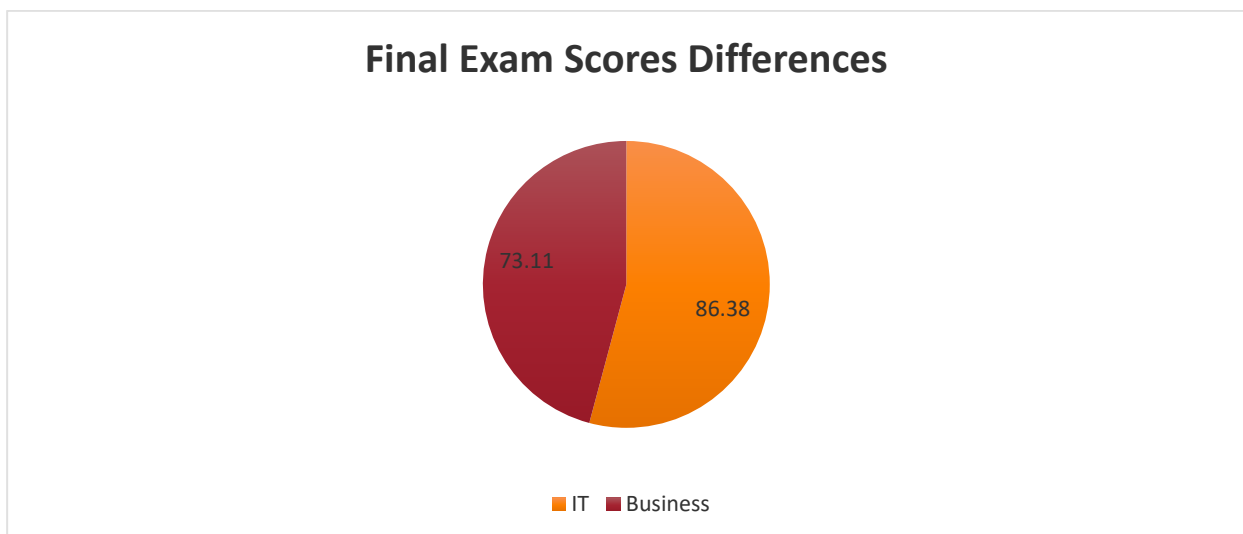
The table above shows that there is a significant difference in the score of the experimental group based on specialization, favoring the group majoring in Information Technology. The IT major group scored a mean of 86.38% while the Business major group scored 73.11%, rendering a significant difference of 0.004. To justify this result, the IT major students at the Arab Open University are required to use IT tools in almost all of their courses; hence, the usage of the LMS was more advantageous for them. Additionally, the English language is the medium of instruction in most of the courses.

Table 6: Differences in the Final Exam Scores between the Experimental and Control Groups based on Gender

Test	Means		Standard Deviation		Df	T	Sig.
	Female	Male	Female	Male			
Final Exam	84.86%	76.67%	10.44%	14.40%	28	1.76	0.09*
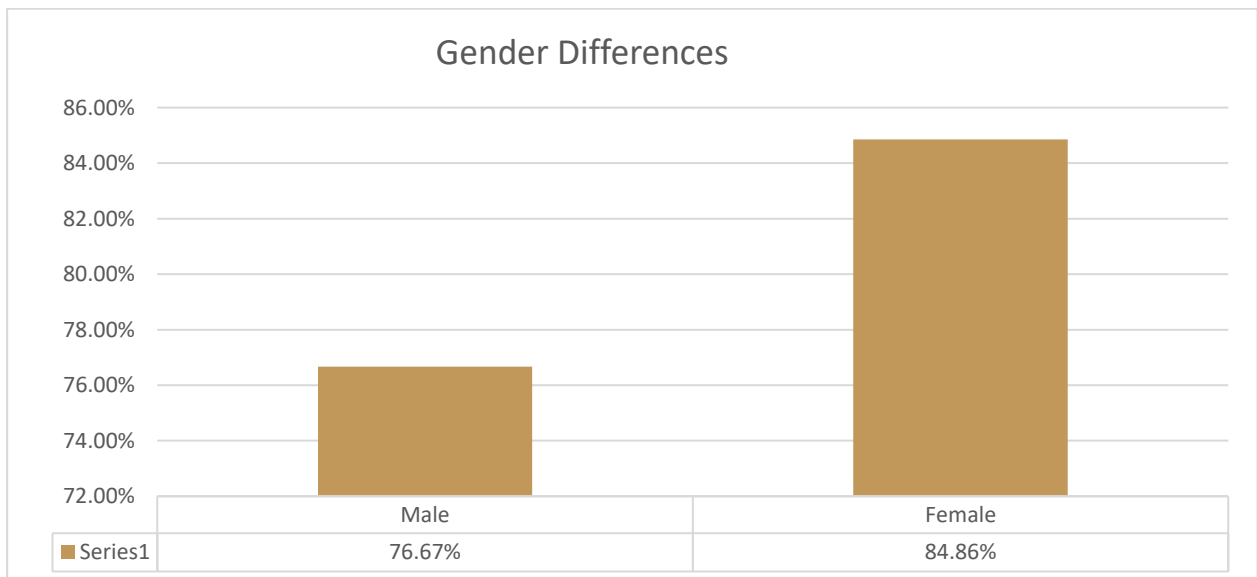
Based on the table above, the male students recorded a mean score of 76.67% in the final exam whilst the female students scored 84.86%, rendering a significant difference of 0.09 in favor of the latter. At AOU, the female students have always performed better academically and they make up more than 60% of the overall university enrollment. The female students also have a higher online participation rate than their male counterparts, leading to their higher overall performance as suggested by Arbaugh (2000).

Learning Outcomes

By the end of EL097 course, students who enrolled in the experimental group were able to:

    i.   Use relevant written, oral and visual media to communicate in a clear and correct manner.

ii.   Demonstrate interpersonal skills via effective listening and relationship building with their peers.

iii.   Participate in active learning i.e. by analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating information instead of merely listening and memorizing.

iv.   Demonstrate effective technology-based collaborative skills i.e. by participating in group assignments and ensuring their effective roles, and supporting effective communication via active listening and proper feedback give-and-take.

As for the instructors, by the end of the course they were able to:

i.   Improve the students' comprehension and usage of relevant terms.
ii.   Develop technology-driven group effectiveness skills.
iii.   Develop the students' communication skills via idea and opinion sharing.
iv.   Support the students' foreign language learning in informal settings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Blended learning is a highly beneficial approach for supporting effective teaching and learning, but it requires solid commitment from both the teachers and students. Hence, there is a need to train teachers about the techniques and strategies of blended learning which they can subsequently pass on to their students. There is also a significant need to improve the facilities and infrastructure that would support blended learning including high Internet speed and strong wireless Internet connection.

Acknowledgment

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