Blended Education in the Attitudes of the Students of the Department of English at the Faculty of Languages/ University of Kufa- Iraq

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Abstract

The use of Blended Learning (henceforth BL) in higher education has increased significantly during the past decade all over the world and currently in Iraq where this educational strategy has been posed at the university level in the academic year (2020-2021) because of the Corona pandemic and its impact on education. Indeed, a radical change in the use of technology and instructional strategies is BL as a type of instruction that incorporates both online and face-to-face instruction.

The present research investigates the attitudes of EFL learners of the department of English at the Faculty of Languages/University of Kufa on BL. To achieve its objectives, the study has procedurally used a thirty-five-item questionnaire based on both Osguthorpe and Graham's (2003) goals for courses and Tang & Chaw's (2013) six learning aspects. After being tabulated and statistically treated, the results have been discussed and conclusions and recommendations have been drawn.

Keywords: Blending Learning, Attitudes, E- Learning vs. Traditional Learning, and Iraqi universities

Accordingly, the present research sheds the light on BL at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic specifically at the university level, taking into consideration the situation in the Iraqi universities. It is in fact a call for educators to take certain serious steps in the application of technology in the various classes and learning environments in general and to use BL in particular. It is believed that the applications of technology in general and BL in particular form a link between students' inner and the outsider worlds, especially at times of crisis. Due to the fact that many countries today are seeking to develop their education systems and that technology has proved itself as a vital part of effective modern education, the current study aims at providing some insight on the attitudes of students of the Department English Language at the Faculty of Languages/University of Kufa towards BL. As technology is no longer a luxury in any learning setting, teachers and their students need to think of technology as a tool for enabling them both to teach and learn easily and effectively.

2. Blended Learning
2.1.Conceptual Issues

Actually, the concepts and strategies of learning wherein learning could take place by the use of two distinct styles of interaction is described, by using different names, as 'BL', 'integrated learning', 'hybrid learning', 'multi-method learning', or 'mixed-method learning' (Bersin, 2004; Fakhir, 2015: 25). One of the general and inclusive research definitions Graham (2006,5) presents is that BL is a learning system that "combines face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated

1. Introduction

For Livingstone (2015), among others, higher education institutions must make every attempt to replace teacher-centered with more student-centered approaches. According to the rapidly changing internet technologies and the pandemic of Covid-19, institutions of Higher Education in Iraq have been forced to reconsider the way courses are delivered at the university level. Additionally, there has been, and still, a demand for *quality* in learning and teaching at universities; hence, BL is adopted as a strategy that is "used to facilitate a more student-centred approach" (ibid.)

Bleed(2006) thinks BL to go back to late 1990s and early 2000s when used as a means for offering students and faculty the best of both worlds: advantageous face-to-face instruction and the advantages of online learning, while minimizing the disadvantages of each. Sharpe et al, (2006, p. 29), however, have claimed that BL was established within 'workplace-based and campus-based learning' contexts of the UK Open University, in the late 1980s.

In a different vein, Bailey and Martin (2013) believe that the use of BL moves students from theory into practice; as such, students might gain some deeper understanding of all of the abstractions they go through. Those students tend to create opportunities for some more 'individualized education where they could feel, visualize, listen, and interact with the learning material.

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research has revealed that BL increases motivation and frequency of participation among students in their classroom activities (James, 2016). Some better academic achievements have been found in experimental works that prove the group exposed to BL outperformed the group taught by the traditional methods (Fakhir, 2015).

Although BL has been defined as combining face-to-face and fully online learning, it seems to presume much more than that. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) maintain that BL is the effective integration of these two components, not merely adding online elements to a face-to-face class. Researchers have attributed a number of benefits to BL, from improved learning outcomes, to increased student engagement and lower attrition than fully online learning alone.

Commenting on the elements of BL, Clark (2002) states that it includes five important ingredients: Firstly, the live synchronized and teacher-led learning events where all learners simultaneously participate in class activity such as live virtual classes; secondly, the online content involving the learning competencies that learners should individually achieve like the interactive training whether web-based or CD-ROM; Thirdly, collaboration where learners communicate with others in the provided settings such as e-mails, progressive discussions and online chats. The fourth element is assessment by which teachers measure learners' understanding; prior-assessments can be made before any live or self-paced activity in order to decide on the prior learning requirements, then post-assessments can also be made after the planned online learning activities in order to measure any learning transference. The final one is reference materials including 'on-the-job reference materials' that boost retention and transfer of learning.

2.3 Challenges and Difficulties

Adopting the BL strategy, educators have faced some difficulties and challenges that might lead to some consequences and could affect the learning process quality and even hinder its application in certain learning-teaching settings. Graham et al. (2005) focuses on the challenges encountering BL strategy. Such challenges show the role and significance of live collaboration, the learner selection and self-organization, the need for models for both sustenance and training, the need for creating balance between novelty and production, the need for cultural adaptation, and of the skill to handle the digital world.

Milheim (2006) additionally asserts that using BL strategy could encounter a number of challenges like the pressure resulted when teachers faced in responding to students' inquiries and continuously contacting them beside the difficulties related to the low skills of students in dealing with the technologies given.

instruction". Further, Bonk and Graham (2006: 5) think that BL is "part of the ongoing convergence of two archetypal learning environments" that of face-to-face classroom and of the distributed distance one. Hence, BL can best be defined as a combination of face-to-face and distance learning; it is, apparently, a type of education enhanced for certain groups of learners by a combination of the possible positive aspects of different approaches for learning (Kazu & Demirkol, 2014: 79). Indeed, BL is a mode of instruction for teachers who are trying to offer alternatives to the traditional classroom instruction.

Smythe (2011) states that BL is a practical framework comprising a variety of operative learning and teaching methods; it encourages using computer technologies to facilitate learning and making use of the various approaches for more engagement to motivate students. Accordingly, BL is defined in the present study as a teaching strategy based on the combination of using technology in the learning environment hand in hand with the traditional learning setting and tools; it aims to maximize learning in a setting turned from teacher-centered into student-centered classes. This ultimately promotes the teaching-learning process qualities and outputs as new potentials for long life self-learning.

In BL, students are offered an opportunity to face course content independently and are able to understand it in ways that may be different from those of students in other types of classroom. Thus, BL offers them a greater amount of autonomy in their learning (Sanprasert ,2010).

2.2 Advantages and Elements of BL

Emphasizing the qualities of BL, Marsh (2012) refers to some of the points that make BL powerful and effective. He states that BL basically provides students with a more *individualized* experience of learning because teachers can give them different tasks in accordance with the students' abilities and learning styles, in a way that could be difficult to be implemented in traditional class. It, further, provides some more *personalized* support in learning as students can receive hints and notes that are related to their particular tasks different from those generalized for the whole class. Marsh (ibid.) further asserts that BL supports and motivates students' *independent cooperative* learning, increases their involvement in learning, develops and supports a great variety of learning styles, provides some relaxing learning-environments for some already learned outcomes, and provides flexible routine of study.

For Zurita et al. (2015), BL can, furthermore, help students develop some important skills of the 21st century such as communication, information literacy, creativity, and collaboration; it also develops students' abilities to use digital technology for a wide range of purposes. Besides,

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devices available to achieve that program, and finally the specification of the financial and human resources to implement BL.

This strategy apparently offers general guidelines for educators to follow in order to implement successful BL programs; it further takes into consideration the different variables in relation to students' needs, teachers' skills, and content variation. Accordingly, Darrow et al. (2013) assert that students and staff are the most important components for implementing BL; so, they need to be encouraged, supported and empowered to facilitate some more effective and lasting learning. Hence, having consistent, collaborative, innovative, and supportive leadership seems to be the key factor in having more effective BL.

Offering this kind of effective framework for implementing BL, the crucial parts to focus on must also include having vibrant and assessable goals, whether short and long term goals, that should be are continuously evaluated.

Osguthorpe and Graham (2003: 232) explain that instructors are using BL in order to attain various goals for their courses. They first are used to achieve pedagogical richness as student learning can be improved by using class time for rich deep activities, and online time for dispensing information. They secondly achieve access to knowledge; the online part of BL courses can be used to enhance accessibility to information for students as web-based resources are vast in comparison to textbook content. Thirdly, social interaction that can be presented in BL environments cannot present in the full online learning systems, as social contact can take place face to face and continue online. The fourth goals is related to personal agency where BL can guarantee the development of self-directedness and control by the learner as an important tenet of instructional design. Blended learning environments offer students the opportunity to make choices in their learning, such as what and how they will study. Finally, most BL environments develop face to face rather than full online learning models. This is what can be called 'ease of revision'. That's why faculty often modify online components in response to student needs or the speed with which the course progresses. BL "has the potential to create a learning atmosphere that is flexible, responsive, and spontaneous" (ibid). Moreover, students being digitally literate enhance the chances of extending their lessons and conversations beyond the classroom (Kasraie& Alahmed, 2014).

3. Attitudes

3.1 Students' Attitudes

attitude can be defined as a hypothetical construct that represents an individual's degree of like or dislike for an item (Baker, 1992: 10).

Hofmann (2011) adds up some other challenges BL may face like ensuring the ability of participants to use technology successfully, changing the attitudes of teachers towards the BL effectiveness, administering and controlling progress of learners, finding best ways of match between the delivery medium and the performance goals, and believing the idea that online resources are interactive and not only instructing for learners. He also added that "obstruction, misperception, irritation, and unease may be accompanying interaction can undesirably affect productivity, learning, social relationships and overall achievement in addition to many challenges in evaluation, observation and classroom management".

Moreover, Zayton (2005) adds other challenges related to slow internet connections that hinder the learning procedures and may cause participants some difficulties in online activities. Some other challenges may include the high costs of BL such as those of hardware, facilities, software programs, and the execution of electronic communication between educational institutions, specialists and students, and finally the need for training programs special for academic staffs to use computers and the internet.

The researcher thinks that the majority of such difficulties can be overcome by examining the advanced countries experience in this respect, having well-equipped infra-structure, securing suitable teaching environment and the required financial support, providing clear systematic plans based on educational principles under the supervision of experts in English language learning and information technology. This will create a real effective BL environment for teaching English.

2.4 The Requirements for Implementing BL

Darrow et al. (2013) have identified a roadmap for an effective implementation of BL as they have come up with a six-element strategy for the planning and implementation of BL; it includes: leadership, professional development, teaching/instructional practice, operations/ administrative systems/ policies, content, and technology. It assumes the employment and choice of the right teachers, an ongoing tailored professional development which is based on the staffs' and teachers' needs centered on pedagogy, technology tools and content. It also assumes the identification of any indicators of the ongoing formative assessments that could help measure the success of the program, the preservation and support of the technological infrastructure and

It is worth mentioning that the study of attitudes is at the core of social psychology. Attitudes are considered the most important and critical factor that determines one's success. An

In the present study, the instrument for collecting data is a google-form online questionnaire. The thirty-five-item questionnaire was designed by using a google form according to Osguthorpe and Graham's (2003) goals for courses (*cf.* 2.5) and Tang & Chaw's (2013) six learning aspects (*cf.* 3.1 above). The validity of the questionnaire was tested by the including 25 students in a pilot study that helped modify, eliminate flaws, and ensure the reliability of the questionnaire. Then, it procedurally was put into practice by being filled by 90 participants of the Fourth Class students in the Department of English at the Faculty of Languages/ University of Kufa - Iraq in the academic year (2020-2021).

The results of the questionnaire were analyzed and the frequencies and percentages were calculated for the final results and conclusions. Regarding the students' attitudes here, they were as follows, as shown in Table 1.:

1. Positive attitude for 75% and more
2. Average attitude for 74%-50%
3. Negative attitude for 49% and less

Furthermore, Bohner and Dickel (2011, 2) state that an attitude is an evaluation of an object of thought. Attitude objects comprise anything a person may hold in mind, ranging from the mundane to the abstract, including things, people, groups, and ideas.

Attitudes towards BL, according to some authors like Tang & Chaw (2013), can be examined within the following six learning aspects: learning flexibility, study management, technology, online learning, online interaction, and classroom learning. Attitudes investigated in such a way are indicators of student's readiness for BL.

Interestingly, students who generally have positive attitudes, with great levels of motivation, towards learning should also have more positive attitudes towards online learning in blended courses (Zhu, Au, & Yates, 2013). In general, applying BL model to the classroom activities has a significantly positive impact on students' attitudes to this system of learning (Lin et al, 2017: Ireland et al, 2009).

3.2 The Questionnaire

Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages of Students' Attitudes towards BL

No.	Item	Frequencies				Attitude
		Agree	%	Disagree	%	
1	Blended learning enables a student to become more involved in the learning process.	85	94%	5	6%	POSITIVE
2	Blended learning improves my learning skills in learning English	84	93%	6	5%	POSITIVE
3	Combination of an online class learning and traditional in- class learning is more effective than using one-way delivery of information	82	91%	8	9%	POSITIVE
4	Blended learning reinforces interaction between teacher and students	82	91%	8	9%	POSITIVE
5	With Blended learning I can control how fast or slow I move through lessons	79	88%	11	12%	POSITIVE
6	Tasks in the blended learning are understandable	77	85%	13	15%	POSITIVE
7	Blended learning encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning.	76	84%	14	16%	POSITIVE
8	Blended learning sessions are more meaningful	76	84%	14	16%	POSITIVE
9	Blended learning involves joint participation and work	75	83%	15	17%	POSITIVE
10	With blended learning the information is obtained by more than one way	75	83%	15	17%	POSITIVE
11	Blended learning assignments give me opportunity to read and learn more	73	81%	17	19%	POSITIVE
12	Blended learning helps learners become self- knowledgeable	73	81%	17	19%	POSITIVE
13	Blended learning seems to me more comfortable than traditional training	71	79%	19	21%	POSITIVE
14	online video, audio, discussion forms and electronic material helped me in the learning process with blended learning	70	78%	20	22%	POSITIVE
15	Blended mode learning boosted my motivation to achieve of success and helped me get more information	70	78%	20	22%	POSITIVE
16	blended learning is comprehensible	69	77%	21	23%	POSITIVE
17	Blended learning gives us deeper information of the subject	69	77%	21	23%	POSITIVE
18	blended learning allowed me to use different computer programs	67	75%	23	25%	POSITIVE

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19	Blended learning helps me use more than one sense in learning	67	75%	23	25%	POSITIVE
20	The instructor has more time to provide feedback on time when doing interactive students assignments	66	73%	24	27%	AVERAGE
21	Materials in the blended learning platform is very good organized	64	71%	26	29%	AVERAGE
22	Blending learning enhances my achievement	60	67%	30	33%	AVERAGE
23	Blended learning provides more time for communication with instructor and doing my assignments than in classroom	58	64%	32	36%	AVERAGE
24	Blended learning simplify the educational course	55	61%	35	39%	AVERAGE
25	Blended learning helps learners feel self-confidence.	55	61%	35	39%	AVERAGE
26	Blended learning brings me relief and comfort	54	60%	36	40%	AVERAGE
26	Blended learning pays my attention to different topics	54	60%	36	40%	AVERAGE
28	Blended learning decreases my distraction	53	59%	37	41%	AVERAGE
29	Assignment instructions in blended learning mode is easy to be followed	53	59%	37	41%	AVERAGE
30	Blended learning contributes to my social isolation	52	56%	38	42%	AVERAGE
31	There are no difficulties to use E-learning platform that is used in blended learning	51	57%	39	43%	AVERAGE
32	My mobile devices (mobile, tablet) help me in learning English as a Foreign language	50	56%	40	44%	AVERAGE
33	We need to be trained how to work in blended learning	48	53%	42	47%	
34	connectivity problems and low speed internet cause to reach difficulties with blended learning online resources	46	51%	44	49%	AVERAGE
35	Blended learning brings more knowledge than learning in the classroom	46	51%	44	49%	AVERAGE

1.BL, for the Iraqi university students of the Faculty of Languages, is more than just combining some online components to the traditional classroom; it seems to be a process of selecting the most appropriate of them both to achieve certain objective by a specific learning intervention.

2.Students have positive attitudes towards BL as a combination of online class learning and traditional in- class learning and a more effective strategy than either of them; it, hence, follows that with BL the information is obtained by more than one way.

3.Students believed BL assignments give them opportunity to read and learn more.

4.EFL environments as changing educational environments can follow modern development in technology and education.

5.BL can be a key solution for Colleges in The COVID-19 Era, if well invested by the use and development of teachers and staffs, learners, content, and other related requirements. It, then, could provide the EFL environment with the variety required for effectively engaging learning experience.

5.2 Recommendations

It is recommended here that:

1.specialized training programs for the teachers, staffs, and learners to use computers, instructional technologies, and the Internet equipment should be seriously taken into consideration as steps in facilitating successful BL.

2.the designed courses with BL systems should be carefully planned in detail and regularly double checked to fix possible problems that may affect the efficient performance of the system and, then, experienced instructors in technology should be chosen to teach such courses effectively.

3.further research should be made to explore the differences between different teaching approaches to BL in the various EFL environments, then, accordingly to provide a better understanding of the attitudes towards BL.

4.Discussion of Results

As has been shown in Table (1) above, the study has revealed that students, studying English as a Foreign language (EFL), prefer BL to traditional classroom teaching in EFL context in their courses.

As the purpose of this study was to explore Iraqi University students' attitudes of towards BL, the results of the study indicated that students have had positive attitudes to BL. They prefer BL and believe that the combination of online and traditional class learning is more effective than using either of the one-way delivery of information. Furthermore, answers to the items of the questionnaire have revealed that most students expressed positive attitude to this type of learning; this goes in line with opinions of many researchers. Overall, the results have evidently shown students satisfaction with the application of BL because they believe that it improve their learning skills and made the learning process collaborative, interactive and interesting. It has also been confirmed that BL promotes interaction between the teacher and students outside classes and gives students more time to complete tasks.

As indicated by figures and percentages, the results have shown that a percentage of 94 % of the respondents see that blended learning enables a student to become more involved in the learning process. Besides, 93% of the sample statistically see that BL improves their learning skills; percentages ranging from 94% to 75% of students believe that BL helps them use more than one sense in learning and, thus, positive attitudes have truly realized.

However, 73% to 50% of the respondents, representing the attitude indicated in items 20-35, have shown that instructors have more time to provide feedback on time when doing interactive students assignments to the item that BL brings more knowledge than learning in the classroom. The last two items show also the average attitude of students since they get the same frequency and percentage that of 51% to show agreement among students' attitudes.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The present study has come up with the following conclusions:

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