

Developing Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Blended Learning Environment

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تطوير تعلم اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية ضمن اطار التعليم المدمج

ملخص:

من الواضح أن كل مدرس مثالي يسعى إلى عمل كل ما هو جيد و مفيد لطلابه بهدف تطوير أدائهم الأكاديمي. ومما جعل ذلك ممكناً، ما يشهده العالم من تطور تكنولوجي وانتشار سهولة الحصول على المعلومات وتكنولوجيا الاتصالات التي سهلت و ساعدت على النمو السريع لأسلوب التعليم المدمج على المستوى الجامعي وبيئة التدريب المشترك. وقد تم تصنيف التعليم المدمج من قبل الجمعية الأمريكية للتدريب و التطوير على أنه واحد من 10 مجالات حديثة من حيث صناعة إيصال المعرفة (Finn, 2002). ومنذ ذلك الحين ازدادت بيئة التعليم بشكل واسع في مجالي التعليم الرسمي وبيئة التدريب المشترك. وهناك اهتمام متزايد بمفهوم التعليم المدمج وما دل على ذلك زيادة عدد الكتب و المقالات العلمية و التجارية و التي تتطرق بشكل مباشر إلى التعليم المدمج و القضايا المتعلقة به. ومن هذا المنطلق فإن الدراسة الحالية تبحث أثر تطبيق منهج التعليم المدمج و مدى ملائمة المنهج في تطوير مهارات الطلاب اللغوية في جامعة النجاح الوطنية.

Abstract:

Obviously, every caring teacher wants to do a good job for his or her students by looking for new methods to improve his/ her students performance. Technological advances and widespread access to information and communication technologies have facilitated the rapid growth of blended learning approaches in both higher education and corporate training contexts. The American Society for Training and Development also identified blended learning as one of the top 10 emergent trends in the knowledge delivery industry (Finn, 2002). Since then, the visibility of blended learning environments has increased dramatically in both formal education and corporate training settings. There is increasing interest in the concept of blended learning as evidenced by greater numbers of books, journal articles, and

trade magazine articles that directly address issues related to blended learning. This research will investigate the effect of implementing blended learning and its appropriateness in developing students' language skills at An-Najah National University.

Introduction:

Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers (Bakir 2010, Rabab'ah 2003, Al-kuwelleh & Shoumali 2000, Abbad 1988). The students in Palestine, for example, learn English in their native country, where the native language is Arabic. The only way to learn English in Palestine is through formal instruction, i.e. inside the classroom where the language teachers in schools and universities are native speakers of Arabic, and there are usually large classes with more than 45 students.

Therefore, there is little opportunity for students to use English outside classrooms or through natural interaction in the target language. This is only possible when students encounter native speakers of English who come to the country as tourists, and this rarely happens.

Mostly, English language teachers ask themselves, “What are the best methods and procedures I can use to make a productive and exciting lesson for my students? What new tools of technology can improve learning to give performance and ideal better results? How can we encourage our students to learn outside the classroom?

Blended learning is a popular topic in English Language Teaching as it has been increasingly opted for by many people in the United States (Allen et.al, 2007) .It is a flexible approach that combines face-to-face teaching/learning with remote (usually internet-based) learning and this research is about investigating its usefulness to overcome difficulties as studies have shown that most language learning happens outside the classroom, in a blend of

various learning environments. How can we integrate traditional classroom teaching with hi-tech alternatives?

Literature Review:

It has been a common belief that technology is a good tool to improve teaching and learning (Cuban, Kirkpatrick, & Craig, 2001). It has been found that even if teachers use technology in the classroom, the efforts made don't change the existing teaching practice (Cuban, et al., 2001). The fact whether technology did really make a difference in improving students' achievement is still questionable. There is very scientific research addressing whether technology is a burden or an effective tool in increasing the academic achievement in the history of teaching (Murray, 2002). Therefore, this study will decide whether technology, specifically blended learning, has an effect on improving students' achievement in English language.

Researchers have conducted a few research papers affirming that technology can play a positive role in improving academic achievement. Wenglinsky (1998) has done research into the effect of using technology on the students performance and found that it depends on the method the teachers adopt. To put it right, he has come up with the conclusion that teachers who have used the computer technology to develop their students problem solving skills really had training and skill in using technology. Therefore using technology for the sake of practice is more beneficial and rewarding than just merely theoretically based employment.

Akkoyunlu and Soylu conducted a study (2006) to investigate the view of students regarding the blended learning environment. The results of the study revealed that the more

the students participate in the online discussion forums, the more they achieve and the more positive views they develop towards blended learning. Moreover, the study revealed that both the face-to-face lectures and the online tasks contributed to the learning process.

Research into whether blended learning is effective is reflected qualitatively instead of quantitatively. (Arbaugh, 2008) stated that this is due to the fact that there is no difference in terms of the summative assessment between blended and face-to-face courses. However, when performance (Simonson, Schlosser, & Hanson, 1999) is a factor, students in the online course performed better than the students taking the same activities in the traditional classroom environment mainly because the students could repeat the task and listen to the videos more than once.

Many research papers affirm the importance of blended learning in the sense that it reports higher levels of learning if compared to traditional modes of in-class lecturing (Clouse and Evans, 2003). In their study on the effect of applying blended learning to the teaching of specialized courses in business, they found that when face-to-face and online teaching environments are combined, the performance of students on exam questions improved. But, when the asynchronous and synchronous approaches to blended learning are introduced, the level of achievement on exams was poor. Yet, the students indicated that the traditional lectures revealed more clarity. Sauers and Walker (2004) found that students in a blended course indicated that their course system is more beneficial than the traditional face-to-face lectures.

It is also evident that when blended learning activities are given to the students of the blended and the traditional courses, those enrolling in the blended performed better (Simon, etl.al., 1999) . This is due to the accessibility of the tasks, the possibility of making the

suitable changes, and the availability of peer reviews. Other researcher affirmed the fact that blended learning improves students' performance (Sankaran and Bui ,2001).

Recently, Blended learning combines online and face-to-face instruction (Reay, 2001; Rooney, 2003; Sands, 2002; Ward & LaBranche, 2003; Young, 2002).

Kerres (2002) affirms that the blended learning approach addresses from the very start a needs assessment approach. Therefore, traditional teaching is the main ground that is supplemented by the e-learning approach. The e-learning environment facilitates and adds to the students' performance level by creating a flexible environment that is reachable and accessible anytime.

The president of Pennsylvania State University was quoted saying that the combining of online and traditional instruction was “the single-greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today” (Young, 2002, p. A33). Therefore, the new venture into blended learning is a great mission on both the teachers and students as well. Both need to implement blended learning and describe the results.

Rovai and Jordan (2004) indicate that in accordance with the insights provided by Colis and Moonen (2001), blended learning is correlates both traditional and online learning so that learning is obligatory both in-class and even online either at home or on campus.

As for the course design, Martyn (2003) has designed a successful blended learning model which is designed as follows:

1. Face-to-face component.
2. Weekly online assessments and synchronous chat.
3. Asynchronous discussions.
4. E-mail.

5. Final face-to-face meeting.
6. Proctored final examination.

Smith (2004) presupposes that blended learning is a novel trend in education for the sake of distance education which is nowadays combined with the traditional (or stand-up) education. He describes some IT components of teaching that if combined with the textbook, the course is considered blended. The following types of educational technologies may clarify the point:

1. Traditional workshops or seminars in conjunction with a teleconference feature.
2. Traditional courses with a continuing e-mail connection or ongoing dialogue with the participants.
3. Traditional seminars with live television broadcasts to more than one site
4. Or any other similar combination of technology and traditional educational programming.

As for the blended component to ensure rewarding results, the Encyclopaedia of Educational Technology (undated) states that it should be designed in accordance with the intended learning outcomes. Moreover, the teacher should decide whether the practice of the instructional skill should be done online or in-class. Teachers should also take into account that online various delivery methods are beneficial for the learners achievement level. E-learning could provide a pre-activity environment preceding the in-class activity.

Therefore, it is concluded that few research papers in the Arab world touched upon the effectiveness of applying Blended learning into the teaching of English.

Methodology

The study used the experimental approach to display the experience that has been done, analyze the collected data, and verify the result of using blended learning in teaching English as a foreign language in high education in Palestine.

Course Selection

The course selected for applying this method in teaching English as a foreign language was the general English course (10103) taken by all students at An-Najah National university regardless of their different specializations. New concepts and structures are taught during face- to face lectures and accompanying assignments were based on the new material. To master the new material, it was important to complete the activities online. Students are expected to take advantage of the new method in learning English if adopted.

Sample Selection

The instructor (the researcher in this case) selected the two sections that she was teaching in the second semester during the academic year 2008-2009 at An-Najah National University. She applied the new method to one section as an experimental group and used the traditional face-to-face lectures for the other section as a controlled group. The number of the students who participated in the study was 60 students in two sections. 30 students of the sample studied the selected course with blended learning activities. Because the selected sample is not a big one and consisted of students with many different specializations, the researcher distributed the students into two categories of specialization sciences and humanities.

The following table gives more information about the sample used for the study purposes:

Table (1)

The Distribution of the Selected Sample Due to Specialization

	No.	Percentage
sciences	37	61.7%
humanities	23	38.3%
Total	60	100.0 %

As seen in table (1), the sample consisted of 37 students studying different science specializations, and 23 students specializing in humanities.

It is noteworthy that the researcher distributed the sample(for research purposes) due to gender into males and females as follows:

Table (2)

The Distribution of the Selected Sample Due to Gender

	No.	Percentage
Male	21	35.0%
Female	39	65.0%
Total	60	100.0 %

As seen in table (2), the sample collected 21 males, and 39 females.

In-class Instruction to both groups:

The experimental and control groups were exposed to the same traditional in-class instruction. The topics covered in class were the same topics given online for the experimental group. The course was taught in 2008-2009 for four months. Students in both groups did all the writing exercises either in class or at home. While doing the exercises, the author monitored students' work and provided individual help.

As for assessment, students in both groups were instructed to write as many persuasive paragraphs as possible in accordance with a rubric for writing provided at the beginning of the semester. Tests were graded, returned to the students with comments on strengths and weaknesses. Words of encouragement were given. The slightest improvement was noted and commended. Answers were discussed in class and online.

4. Methods of Blended Learning Instructions:

During the course and in addition to face-to-face classes, students were provided with materials and assignments through the OCC web site. Students were responsible for participating in the assigned on-line learning activities throughout the semester. Discussion groups were formed and as members the students participated in the online discussions and assignments with others. Some assignments were group intensive while others were individual.

Online treatment (OCC learning management system);

In addition to the traditional in-class instruction, the experimental group used an online course container called the OCC (online course container). This site is available to all the students who simply enrolled in the course. It was easy to use. All the material given on the OCC is related to writing paragraphs related to the ILOs (intended learning outcomes) of the course. The experimental group used the Internet from home or university.

The blended course components were described and instructions on how to use certain course components were given to students at the beginning of the semester. Online instruction was posted to the OCC discussion forums on a weekly basis throughout the semester.

Every week, the students were asked to post their comments on a paragraph written by one of the students. **Their first writing task** was an error analysis. The teacher uploaded a paragraph written by one of the students and each student has to comment on one of the errors and provide the correction. Moreover, the student should read the posts provided by the other students before participating. By this way, students unintentional learn. The deadline for the task was 2 weeks. **The second task** was writing a paragraph on a topics related to obsession with smoking and the visual aid was provided. The researcher uploaded a photo of two smokers and this aided the students in writing so many details about the bad effects of smoking. The third task was commenting on and providing opinion regarding two uploaded videos about gender differences. The students should also answer questions related to the videos by using vocabulary items related to their course materials. All the content of the three tasks was related to the ILOs of the course and in accordance with the textbook material.

Throughout the semester, the researcher served as a facilitator. She responded to individual students' needs, comments and requests for certain sites. The author sent public and private messages to encourage the students to interact and communicate. She had to look for relevant websites and post them in the OCC (Online Course Container). She had to post questions, discussion topics and write model responses every week. The author did not correct spelling and grammatical mistakes. She would point out the type of errors they made especially in the grammar threads and ask the students to double-check their posts. The students who agreed and welcomed the idea of participating in the blended component were included in the study. the students were given other online tasks related to the ILOs of the course but were not graded.

Online Learning Activities

1. Students were asked to download online videos, comment, summarize write their opinion about issues related to information in their textbook.
2. Webpage reference e.g., (www.scieniticamarican.com) for related topics.
3. Prepare presentations using power-point/ LCD.
4. Error analysis (paragraphs) and discussions.
5. Express their opinion by commenting on photos or videos.

Methods of Assessment (Criteria of Evaluating Assignment)

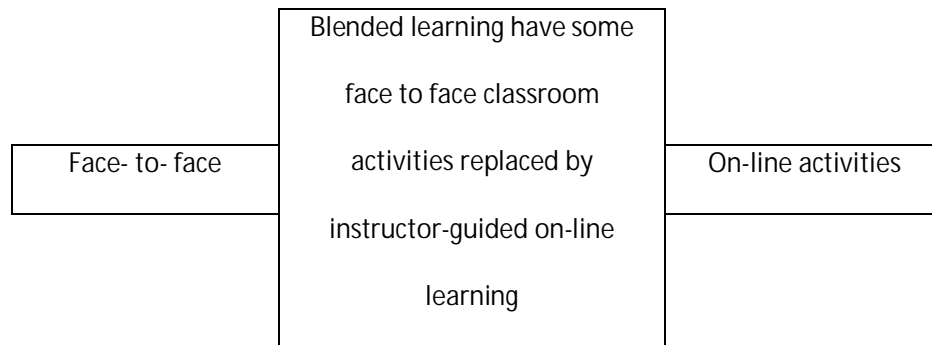
Online assignments were e-mailed for students weekly. The instructor corrected only parts of students' work in accordance with an overall scale. Three tasks were graded and upon completing each task, the students were given a grade of 10 points. Students who completed the three main tasks, received a total grade of 30 points which was transformed to 10%. Because of the institution regulations for such a general unified course, the instructor allocated only 10% of the total mark for online activities, 40% for the first and the second exam, and 50% for the final exam.

What does Blended Learning Mean in This Course?

In addition to face- to- face lectures, this course adopted a blended format incorporating teaching and learning activities which use information communications technologies such as the internet e-mailing, discussion forums, etc. In the current study, blended learning means combining the face-to-face instruction with the online supplementary activities as an employment of the asynchronous approach to blending courses so as to improve the performance of students (Clouse and Evans, 2003). The following diagram clarifies the point:

In classroom

outside school



Why Blended Learning?

The main goal of this kind of learning is to:

1. promote self-directed learning and expand students' exposure to the language by providing students with an effective combination of in-class teaching and online learning.
2. Use the lecture hours more efficiently to focus on the material that is more effectively presented in a face to face format.
3. Provide students with more flexibility by allowing them to do more of their work from home and to complete online learning activities at times that best suit their weekly schedule and learning preferences.

Challenges That Students Face in a Blended Learning Course

1. Students must have basic knowledge about computer technology.
2. Students in the course were asked to complete assignments and do activities in groups, which required being open, flexible, respectful of others and accepting diversity.

3. Learning on-line is not a matter of wasting time or optional. But rather, it is a must. Students were expected to take the responsibility to actively use the online learning materials and to manage time so that they could complete online activities between the face to face sessions.
4. The grading method of allocating only 10% of the total mark was considered as demotivating for some of the students to complete some tasks.
5. In group work, some students put their load on the shoulders of others.
6. Plagiarism was a challenge and students' pre-tests were uploaded so as to refer to their modes of writing to evaluate whether plagiarism is combated. Students were told that the teacher knows her students' styles of writing. It was so clear to identify the sentences written by her own students.

6. Test Validity and Reliability

As for the validity of the final exam, five instructors participated in writing the exam questions and agreed on its validity since it measured the skills of reading and writing. The questions of the test were comparable to those used on the pretest of writing. One of the authors was the instructor of the experimental and control groups and the scorer of the pre-test and final exam essays. The reliability co-efficient of the final exam was (.75)

Tools of the Study

To evaluate the effectiveness of the blended learning in supporting the teaching and learning processes, the researcher developed an achievement exam (a pre-test) to investigate students' level in the two groups at the beginning of the course, and to indicate that any significant differences at the end of the course in favor of the experimental group are due to

adopting blended learning. Another tool was the unified final exam which was developed by Language Center at the university.

Research Questions

The study aimed at answering the following questions:

1. Is the blended learning technique effective in improving learning English at An Najah National University in Palestine?
2. Are there any significant differences in students' achievements due to specialization?
3. Are there any significant differences in students' achievements due to gender?

To answer the questions of the research, the students sat for a pre –test in both groups to ensure equivalence between the two groups; the experimental and the controlled. The results of the pre-test for the two groups are presented in table (3) as follows:

Table (3)
The Differences in Students' Pre-test Scores Between the Experimental and the Controlled Groups

Test	Means		S. D.		df	t	Sig
	Ctrl. G.	Exp. G.	Ctrl. G.	Exp. G.			
Pre-test	5.90	5.33	1.52	1.30	58	1.56	0.125

The results presented in table (3) show that there are no significant differences in students' achievements between the two groups since t-value was 1.56 at the significance level 0.125 . This result ensured the equivalence of students' level in mastering English in the two groups.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using the SPSS program to calculate the means, standard deviation, the percentages for the achievement scores for each group. The t-test was

also used to investigate the significance between students' scores in the pre-test and the post – test.

Results of the Study:

To investigate the effectiveness of adopting blended learning in teaching English as a foreign language at the university and to answer the first question, the researcher calculated the differences in students' achievement scores between the two groups. The results of the analysis are presented in table (4) as follows:

Table (4)
The Differences in Students Scores in the Final Exam Between the Experimental and the Control Groups in the Final Exam.

Test	Means		S. D.		df	t	Sig
	Ctrl. G.	Exp. G.	Ctrl. G.	Exp. G.			
Final exam	73.47%	82.40%	13.03	12.12	58	2.75	0.008*

The means of students' achievements scored 73.47% in the controlled group, but scored 82.40% for students in the experimental group. The results indicated that this difference was significant between the two groups in the final exam in favor of the experimental group which was significant at .008. This goes in line with the findings of Sankaran and Bui (2001) who found that students' performance improved due to Blended learning strategies and not the MLS system itself. However, some studies on Blended learning taking into consideration students found that there is no significant difference in the achievement level of both face-to-face students and those enrolling in a blended learning environment (Friday, et al, 2006). The results may differ in accordance with the sample and the students motivation to take advantage of the available IT tools on the Blended component (Sankaran and Bui 2001).

Table (5)
The Differences in Students Scores Between the Experimental

and the Controlled Groups in the Final Exam Due to Students' specialization

Test	Means		S. D.		df	t	Sig
	scientific	humanities	scientific	humanities			
Final exam	86.38%	73.11%	10.06	11.86	28	3.14	0.004*

The results indicated that there were significant differences between the calculated scores for the experimental group in the final exam due to specialization in favor of the scientific specializations. The achievement means of students majoring in different sciences scored 86.38% , but the achievement means of students in humanities scored 73.11 . The difference was significant at .004. Actually, students specializing in science at An-Najah National University are required to use IT tools every semester in almost all their courses, so it is no wonder that using the OCC made studying easier and more rewarding. Also, most courses are taught in English.

Table (6)
The Differences in Students Scores Between the Experimental and the Controlled Groups in the Final Exam Due to Gender

Test	Means		S. D.		df	t	Sig
	male	Female	male	female			
Final test	76.67%	84.86%	14.40	10.44	28	1.76	0.09*

The results in table (6) indicated that males ' achievement means scored 76.67% while female' achievement means scored 84.86% . The difference was significant in the final exam due to gender in favor of females at the level .009. It is a fact that at An-Najah University females perform better when it comes to grades and what adds to this is that the female percentage of students enrolling in the honor faculty is over 60% of the overall

population. In reference to their online participation, the researcher noticed that the females participated more than the males, and this led to their overall high performance (Arbaugh, 2000).

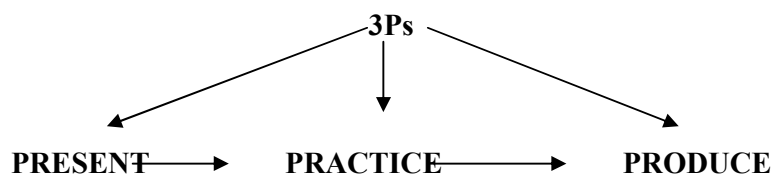
General Learning Outcomes:

At the end of the course, the students in the experimental group were:

1. Communicating clearly and correctly using written, spoken, visual media appropriate to the activity and students' needs.
2. Demonstrating interpersonal skills by listening effectively, and supporting rapport between students.
3. Learning by doing' active learning'. Students use high levels of thinking : analysis, synthesis and evaluation rather than being passive, listening and digesting (memorizing) knowledge and comprehension.
4. Emphasizing group effectiveness skills that will support the notion of a collaborating culture using technology by:

*Using technology to participate in group tasks and support group effectiveness

* Communicating effectively in a group setting by listening actively and giving and receiving feedback appropriately



At the end of the course, the instructor was able to:

1. Develop students' understanding and use of some related terms (by asking the students to make comments on the video related to the unit of The Environment).
2. Emphasize group effectiveness skills using technology.
3. Emphasize communication skills that encouraged students to share ideas and opinions.
4. Facilitate learning the foreign language easily in informal settings among the students in their free time.

Conclusion and recommendations:

Depending on the results, the researcher can make the following recommendations:

1. Working on supporting the notion of blended learning among both teachers and students.
2. Blended -learning techniques and strategies need training for teachers and students.
3. Improving the facilities and the technical infrastructure by providing higher internet speed, wireless internet, and stronger servers.

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