

Students' Attitudes towards Implementing Blended Learning in Teaching English in Higher Education Institutions: A Case of Al-Quds Open University

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of using blended learning to develop students' attitudes toward learning English, the potential of available technology to develop language skills, and learner autonomy in a university environment. In a world where ICT and the internet are readily available. The blended learning method is becoming increasingly popular in the pedagogical field. It combines independent-study with valuable face-to-face interaction with a teacher. This study highlights students' attitudes towards learning outcomes in a general English Language course taught in a blended learning environment in Al-Quds Open University (QUO). E-learning strategies were used in parallel with traditional teaching methods of the four language skills. The sample of the study consisted of 60 undergraduate students divided into a control group and an experimental group. The attitudes of students were compared between the control group and the experimental group to measure students' attitudes toward learning English, the potential of available technology to develop language skills and learner autonomy. The findings of the study show that students' attitudes towards the integration of blended learning had a positive effect in enhancing students' language skills as well as autonomous learning and learner motivation. Some recommendations were drawn to stakeholders, instructors, and students to enhance implementing blended learning aiming to enrich knowledge and develop language skills and proficiency.

Keywords: e- learning, blended learning, teaching English, attitudes, autonomous learning.

1. Introduction

Over the years, students' performance in English has been very dissatisfactory as the exposure to the language is limited and mainly restricted to formal settings inside classrooms (Dajani, 2014). English, as a subject or as a medium of instruction plays a very important role in Palestinian education. Schools start teaching English from early stages as it is the language of different sciences, the medium for pursuing higher education and a means for international communication. Therefore, curriculum developers, stakeholders, and educators are looking for means and tools to face the present challenges through innovative approaches and best practices to improve students' performance in English (Dajani & Mc Laughlin, 2009), and one of the approaches that stands out is blended learning (Muuk, 2014).

1.1 Definition of blended learning

The term 'blended learning' originated in the business world in connection with corporate training (Sharma and Barrett, 2007), then was employed in higher education (MacDonald, 2006) and, lastly, it appeared in language teaching and learning. Blended learning is an educational program (formal or non-formal) that combines online digital media with traditional classroom methods. It requires the physical presence of both teacher and student, with some element of student control over time, place, path, or pace. While students still physically attend schools with a teacher present, face-to-face classroom practices are combined with computer-mediated activities regarding content and delivery. Blended learning is also used in professional development and training settings.

Blended learning combines offline learning with online learning. Offline learning can include teacher-led whole-class instruction, one-on-one instruction, and collaborative group learning. Online learning can be individual or in a group, but it involves the use of online programs and resources to deliver the learning experience to students. Blended learning is meant not to replace the teacher in the classroom but rather to enhance the learning material and how it's being acquired and absorbed.

Within the teaching context, face-to-face classroom time is quite limited and the time required for effective collaborative work, between the teacher and the students, exceeds available classroom instructional hours. A blended design allows for a face-to-face induction period and ongoing instructor support, while providing flexible opportunities for learner reflection and online collaboration. In addition, blended learning allows students to have full access to all of the learning material (including lectures), to learn in smaller, shorter chunks and to learn at their own pace. Most students have unique learning styles and a blended learning approach is more likely to cater to those needs than a traditional classroom teaching experience.

1.2 Background

In Palestine, the English language is considered a compulsory learning subject in schools and Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). However, teaching English in Palestine faces great challenges and difficulties at all levels, in all domains. The results of current research (Barri, 2017; Dajani, 2014, Ramahi, 2015, Abou Jalal, 2015), and official papers (Palestinian National Authority, 2015; Bianchi & Abdel Razeq, 2016) argue that the educational curricula and the learning outcomes are dissatisfactory in relation with learning English as an academic language. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2015), and Rixon (2013), attribute the challenges to several reasons such as: poor and inappropriate content, traditional teaching methodologies, lack of professional educators in TEFL to integrate educational technology, and missing modern learning methodology. Abu Shehadeh and Dwaik, (2013), attributed the continuing dissatisfaction with the overall performance and proficiency of students in English to the quality of instruction affected by lack of access to technology and unappealing material and lack of motivation. In addition, EFL teachers' traditional teaching practices leave little room for keeping students' interest alive and their cognitive development stable and sustainable.

In a traditional classroom setting in Palestine, a teacher lectures while students listen, take notes and participate in class activities. Students are passive and they are willing to accept what the teacher says with teacher-centered curricula. Few opportunities for student integration are offered. In addition, teaching English through the medium of Arabic, the students' native language, is also a serious impediment to improving students' English skills (Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Many students at Al-Quds Open University (QOU) are nontraditional with students attempting to balance family, work, and university life. Attending lectures is often difficult for many of them and through reducing the number of face-to-face hours required, blended learning can help cater to the individual needs of the learner. QOU aims to provide access to an enriching education to all of its students regardless of their backgrounds. Blended learning requires both the time and a willingness to learn new things. Today at QOU, the infrastructure for internet networks has been developed and the Internet is being utilized along with traditional methods of teaching (face-to-face). By making courses available on the Web, students can access the material anywhere and at any time and review it as often as needed; it would give them a much needed flexibility. Many students have come to prefer these courses over the face-to-face counterparts as it reduces time and space commitment, and makes access easier and provides better opportunities for individual differences, (Dziuban, 2004).

2. Review of Literature

Technological development and the internet have changed people's lives on different scales including teaching and learning. Online learning is a new technological innovation that is increasingly used in education. The web has become one of the channels of learning that opens the door for people around the world to access education for free, or at lower costs, (Selinger, Sepulveda, and Buchan, 2013).

Today, the use of web to teach and learn is inevitable for both teachers and learners. Learners who were born in the last twenty years in first world countries are also known as 'digital natives' (Kivunja, 2014). Because of the integration of technology into their lives, digital natives are thought to be adept users of technology. Thus, online teaching needs to be incorporated by teachers pedagogically. In turn, learners need to get enough skills that will enable them to effectively take advantage of e-learning (Fresh Science News, 2015).

As one of the most common ways to teach nowadays, the blended learning method is reportedly more effective than purely face-to-face or purely online courses. More specifically, blended learning has become one of the most successful learning strategies in the acquiring of a second language.

In fact, it has been a major growth point in the English language teaching industry over the last ten years (Klímová,2015). Kyei-Blankson (2013), stated that there are a number of potential advantages to blended learning that are emerging (Adas & Bakir, 2013).; some of these revolve around accessibility, pedagogical effectiveness, and course interaction.

Pokrivčáková (2015), confirmed that every learner is unique, every teacher is unique, and every learner-teacher relationship is unique. In effect, blended learning can be a solution to a number of problems. However, one must always bear in mind the purpose of using this approach and the learner's needs. Blended learning can be a solution to and contributes to the compensation for the various deficiencies in the EFL settings such as: the low infrequent exposure to the target language community and the inadequate learning strategies.

A research study by Banditvilai (2016), was conducted to evaluate and assess the differences in students' performance in learning English between the controlled group with the traditional (face-to-face) teaching method, and the experimental group (with both face-to-face and e-learning components). The results of the study indicated that blended learning had a considerably more positive effect on students' performance in English, in favor of the experimental group. The significant increase in mean score in the experimental group highlighted the potential for an accelerated development of students' language skills through e-learning.

Another study done by Shih (2010) aimed to establish a blended teaching and learning model combining online and face to face instructional blogging for an English for specific purposes (ESP) course named English Public Speaking. The research methodology combined qualitative and quantitative approaches and included peer and instructor feedback, interviews, self-reflection, and a learning satisfaction survey. A total of 44 college seniors majoring in English participated in the study. The results of the study showed that this model could contribute to learning effectiveness and student satisfaction, if the blended model is implemented with sufficiently supportive equipment and course plans. Most importantly, peer and instructor's feedback and the blog characteristics like free access, ease of revision, and interesting material for learning were major factors that enhanced students' learning satisfaction by motivating them to learn effectively.

Similarly, Jia (2012) demonstrated that blended learning plays a valuable role in vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension, and showed that students favored a syllabus design with an intelligent course management system. The implication of this research is that the blended learning of English along with the individualized vocabulary acquisition and assessment system can improve the students' performance in vocabulary acquisition and in ordinary tests. It was suggested that this system can also be applied in other English classes.

Miyazoe and Anderson (2010) applied a mixed-method approach to examine the effectiveness of three different online writing activities in formal university education with survey, interview, and text analysis used for triangulation. The survey revealed students' positive perceptions of the blended course design with online writings – wikis being the most favorable, followed by blogs and forums. Qualitative text analysis of forum and wiki writings showed progress in their ability to differentiate English writing styles. The interview script analysis clarified the different merits students perceived from each activity. The variations provided by the blended course design served well in meeting challenges and were fun for them.

3. Methodology

As a new approach in the educational planning for the general course English 2 at QOU, the blended learning methodology is defined as applying and implementing more than one method, strategy, technique or source to education. The aim of this study was to investigate the role of blended learning methodology on students' attitudes and satisfaction. Lectures and e-learning were combined and compared by assessing the students' attitude towards traditional and blended methods aiming at getting empirical evidence of the effectiveness of blended learning and its association with students motivation and satisfaction when learning English language.

3.1 The subjects of the study:

The subjects of the study , consisting of 60 , were randomly selected from the undergraduate students enrolled in the general course English 2 during the summer course of 2016-17, at QOU -Nablus Branch. This course focused on improving the students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in order to improve their learning and employability skills. The subjects were divided into two groups: (1) The Control Group (Group 1) consisted of 32 students. The traditional teaching method was used with face-to-face lectures, formal assignments and evaluation processes. (2) The Experimental Group (Group 2) consisted of 28 students.

The blended method was used with face-to-face lectures, live and recorded virtual classes, recorded lectures, discussion form, student forum, extra exercises and training, along with formal assignments and evaluation processes.

3.2 Instrumentation

To achieve the purposes of this research paper and evaluate the effectiveness of the use of e-learning to supplement classroom learning, the researcher prepared the following instruments:

a. Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to assess and compare students' learning attitudes in both groups. It consisted of two parts: the first part had 12 items and was given to both groups of students to assess and compare their attitude towards the teaching methods implemented in the English language course; part two had 16 items and was given to the experimental group to assess their attitude towards blended learning, and the potential of available technology to develop their language skills. The questionnaire was developed following a five-point Likert scale, which was interpreted as follows: Strongly agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The initial version of the questionnaire was reviewed and judged by two experts in the field. This was to ensure that the language used in the questions was understood by students and the questions conveyed the required information successfully. Their recommendations were taken into consideration in producing the final version used in the research. The questionnaire's reliability and validity were computed and achieved because Cronbach Alpha's Coefficient level was achieved above 0.71.

b. Interview

The researcher interviewed 5 students from group 2, who were selected randomly. Students were asked about their attitudes towards implementing blended learning in learning the English course. By conducting interviews, the researcher aimed to obtain further support on students' responses.

c. Instructional design

In this study, Group 1 (the control group) was taught using the traditional method, face to face instruction only. The students received lecturers, homework assignments, and regular exams. Group 2 (the experimental group) was taught using the same method of teaching as Group 1 but was also supplemented by e-learning and ICT practices. There was an orientation phase to introduce the e-learning program and provide an example of e-learning supplementary material to Group 2. In this study, the researcher adopted e-learning materials that were in accordance with the classroom lessons. The main objective of the e-learning program was to develop the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing to enhance students' performance. Both groups (controlled and experimental) received the same traditional face-to-face lectures, evaluated by the same assignments, and formal exams on their understanding of the content. However, the experimental group was given the e-learning components and had to respond and complete a questionnaire on blended learning.

d. E-learning lessons

The e-learning lessons included various learning activities related to the content of each unit. There were eight units in this course that consolidated, reinforced and expanded on the classroom lessons. Students were able to check their answers right away and were given the opportunity to either revisit the skill-building activities or increase the skills they have already attained, thus enhancing their language learning. The online lessons were developed by the researcher, while the exams and assignments were prepared by the English department to ensure that the content was similar to the classroom lessons. The traditional teaching method was supported with digital tools to increase learner integration (Interactive course). This included: instructional videos, online videos and TV episodes that students watched at home at their own pace, online activities with feedback, digital resources, virtual learning environment, and discussion, question & answer forums.

3.3 Research Questions

This study attempted to answer three research questions:

1. How do learners in the experimental group perceive the potential achievements of the blended learning in the English course?
2. Does the blended learning method have a positive impact on learners' attitude towards learning the English Language?
3. Does a blended learning course in English develop learners' language skills better than face-to-face teaching from the learners' perspectives?

4. Results of the study

The researcher used the designed instruments to collect the required data, and analyze it to answer the research questions. The results are presented as follows:

4.1 Results of the questionnaire:

The collected data was computed and analyzed using SPSS program. Means, standard deviation, and t-test were calculated to answer the research questions as follows:

4.1.1 The Potential Achievements of the Blended Learning

How do learners in the experimental group perceive the potential achievements of the blended learning in the English course? To answer this question, the researcher asked the students in the experimental group to respond to a questionnaire consisting of 16 items. The collected data was analyzed and the results are presented in the following table:

Table 1 The Potential Achievements of the Blended Learning

Item	Questions	Mean	SD
1	The e-learning lessons help the students understand the subject better.	4.30	0.52
2	The lessons in the e-learning program provide an interesting and motivating learning environment	4.52	0.54
3	The teacher should use this program to support face-to-face teaching approach with authentic materials	4.49	0.52
4	The e-learning program motivates students to develop independent learning skills	4.42	0.53
5	The students' learning experience is enhanced by this e-learning program.	4.50	0.54
6	The e-learning program develops the students' language skills.	4.51	0.50
7	The e-learning program develops students' integration and participation.	4.40	0.47
8	The e-learning program provides effective and frequent feedback.	3.80	0.41
9	The e-learning program enhances communication through social networking.	4.30	0.44
10	The e-learning program helps students find their learning materials anytime and anywhere.	4.23	0.53
11	E-learning offers opportunities to repeat and do activities as needed and access material whenever convenient.	4.65	0.47
12	Students can find the information they need easily and save time, especially if they work in groups.	4.47	0.53
13	E-learning creates a student-centered learning environment. Students can find the information themselves.	4.51	0.51
14	E-learning supports collaboration between students.	4.55	0.52
15	E-learning with activities and practice develops students' autonomous and self-confidence.	4.53	0.51
16	Learners should be trained on how to use e-learning systems before they start courses.	4.75	.81
The Overall Satisfaction		.439	0.47

As seen in Table (1) students perceive blended learning can help them take responsibility for their own learning by making them autonomous and confident with the mean score= 4.53. and that they were motivated to learn English with mean score=4.52. The mean score of that e-learning program develops students' language skills= 4.51, and students believed this e-learning program develops their integration and participation with the mean score =4.40. The mean score for students' attitudes towards the e-learning program to motivate them to develop independent learning skills equals=4.42. The results also indicated that the mean score of students' attitudes towards e-learning with activities and practice to develop students' self-confidence=4.53. and believed that e-learning program enhances communication through social networking with the mean score = 4. 30

4.1.2 The impact of the blended learning method on learners' attitudes towards learning the general course English Language 2.

Does the blended learning method have a positive impact on learners' attitudes towards learning the English Language course? To answer this question, the researcher used the first part of the questionnaire, and asked students in both groups to respond to its items after the treatment of the research.

TABLE 2 Differences in Students' Attitudes Towards Learning the English Course

Methodology	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig*
Traditional Learning	2.96	.32	-3.42	0.01*
Blended Learning	4.39	.41		

The results of the questionnaire showed the mean of the students' overall satisfaction with the traditional face-to-face lectures in the control group was 2.96, but the mean of the students' overall satisfaction with the blended learning in the experimental group was 4.39. The difference between students' attitudes was significant in favor of the experimental group. This result indicated that learners were highly satisfied with the blended learning methodology, since it enhanced the teaching and learning experience and students' integration.

4.1.3. The blended learning course and the development of learners' language skills

Does a blended learning course in English develop learners' language skills better than face-to-face teaching from the learners' perspectives? To determine the effectiveness of implementing a blended learning course on developing learners' language skills from students' perspective, the differences between students' responses to the attitudinal questionnaire were calculated, and the results are presented in the following table:

TABLE 3 Differences between Students' Attitudes towards the Development of Learners' Language Skills

Methodology	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig*
Traditional Learning	2.12	.37	-3.63	0.00*
Blended Learning	4.23	.43		

As seen in Table (3), students in the experimental group had favorable attitude towards enhancing their language skills through e-learning. Most students believed that this program should be a supplement to in-class teaching in English courses (blended learning). The results of students' attitude towards learning English, in the experimental group had a higher mean score than the control group (2.12 and 4.23, respectively) and the results of the t-test indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups ($t = -3.58$, at $\alpha < 0.05$). The significant increase in mean score in the experimental group highlighted the potential for accelerated development of students' positive attitudes towards learning language skills through blended-learning.

4.2 Comments on the Interview

Concerning the results of the interview, there were high levels of satisfaction with blended learning, and significant self-reported improvements in the use of English skills, and group work self-efficacy. Learning and intention to transfer learning to the university setting were both positively predicted by students' perceived use of English language skills, course satisfaction, and attitude toward group work.

This methodology could facilitate the learning experience, enhance students' linguistic capacity, and enrich their knowledge and understanding in language use. In addition, the blended learning method permits students to watch recorded lessons and related videos at students' pace and as needed depending on individual differences without judgment or pressure. These findings demonstrate that students argued that blended learning increases their use of language skills, and that this is predicted by positive beliefs at this methodology and favorable reactions to the learning experience.

5. Discussion

Students in the control group showed inadequate satisfaction with the traditional face-to-face methodology and that they faced difficulties in understanding the new material, and stated that the time allocated for class presentations is not sufficient. Students in the experimental group perceive that e-learning can help them take responsibility for their own learning by making them autonomous and confident. Most students believed that this method should be a supplement to in-class teaching as a blended learning method. In addition, there was a favorable response relating to motivational aspects delivered through the use of technology to study anytime and anyplace. It motivated the students to study independently, and helped them better understand the material presented in face-to-face lectures because the supplementary lessons covered similar content. Moreover, students felt that this methodology could facilitate the learning experience, enhance their linguistic capacity, and enrich their knowledge and understanding in language use. In addition, it permits students to repeat lessons as needed depending on individual differences without judgment or pressure. It helped them develop their knowledge and usage of the English language. In general, students' satisfaction in the blended teaching method was greater than its counterpart in the traditional lecture method.

6. Conclusion

Blended learning is a valuable method that can be used to achieve teaching goals in a language course more successfully. It allows students to develop and practice their English language skills and access the course material outside of the classroom, whenever and wherever they want. In addition, it permits them to repeat lessons without judgment or pressure. The proven enhancement of student learning documented in this study validates this type of blended-learning. The addition of e-learning components to classroom teaching provides students with opportunities for autonomous learning and a decentralized transfer of knowledge. Results indicated that learners find that the blended learning approach can help them take responsibility for their own learning by making them autonomous and confident.

They were motivated to learn English and believed the blended learning method helped them develop their learning and communication skills.

7. Recommendations

Depending on the previous discussion on implementing blended learning in English classrooms, and the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

- It is recommended that stakeholders in higher education institutions adopt and implement blended learning strategies for all English courses, to improve students' four skills and overall performance.
- It is recommended that stakeholders encourage instructors to adopt blended learning strategies
- It is recommended that instructors encourage their students to attend virtual classes and participate in online activities.
- It is recommended that instructors take into consideration to plan activities that promote student-student, and student-teacher interaction, which extend classroom walls and expand students' knowledge.
- It is recommended that instructors enrich their virtual classes with pictures, images, video,... etc.
- It is recommended that stakeholders establish student forums for all English courses, to extend students' exposure to the language, and enrich the learnt materials with visual and audio-aids to enhance self-paced learning.
- It is recommended that instructors encourage their students to use English forum to share information, to do exercises, and encourage group work.

- It is recommended that the university provides students with online exercises on various English courses with immediate feedback to develop students' performance; language fluency and mastery.
- It is recommended that the materials be adapted are to fit students' individual differences, and suit local audience- cultural adaptation.

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