A STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS IN BLENDED INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING IN AN ENGLISH PREPARATORY SCHOOL

Research article

Turan Paker [ID]

Pamukkale University

tpaker@gmail.com

Correspondence (tpaker@gmail.com)

Ersin Balcı [ID]

Katip Çelebi University

balci.ersin@yahoo.com

Prof. Dr. Turan Paker works in the Department of Foreign Language Education, Faculty of Education, Pamukkale University, Denizli, Turkey. He has published many articles in international journals and book chapters in national and international books. His research interests are pre- and in-service teacher education, teaching practice, TEFL, intercultural communication, and assessment in ELT.

Inst. Ersin Balcı works in the School of Foreign Languages, Katip Çelebi University, İzmir. He teaches four language skills. He has his MA from Pamukkale University and is a PhD student in Dokuz Eylül University, Institute of Educational Sciences.

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Turan Paker

Pamukkale University

tpaker@mail.com

Ersin Balcı

Katip Çelebi University

balci.ersin@yahoo.com

Abstract

The aim of the study is to investigate the experiences of the students and instructors on blended language instruction and learning applied in an English Preparatory School in a state university. For this purpose, we have a mixed method, the explanatory sequential research design study. The participants were 400 students and 100 instructors. For data collection, both qualitative and quantitative research tools were used, and the data were collected through two questionnaires, one for students and the other for instructors to get the views of students and instructors with regards to blended learning. Additionally, for in-depth investigation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and instructors. Our findings revealed that students had both positive and negative views towards the blended instruction/learning; some students reported that they were content with the idea but not the practice. On the other hand, the majority of instructors expressed positive opinions regarding the idea and the implementation of the blended instruction. While blended learning has the potential to reshape whole language teaching of the future, grounding this way of teaching onto contemporary pedagogical principles is critically important.

Keywords: blended learning, English preparatory program, preparatory students, instructors

1. Introduction

The search for optimal basis for language learning and teaching has always been a prior concern in English language teaching (ELT) context. For decades, developing better approaches and techniques has been the principal mission of applied linguists and researchers in this field. Richards & Rodgers (2001) point out that in the twentieth century, language teaching was characterized by frequent change and innovation. When it comes to contemporary pedagogy in ELT, there are considerably favourable tenets namely personalisation, authenticity, autonomy and differentiation which should not be separated from language teaching in any particular context. Hence, a teacher can face with students who have their individual learning preferences, different backgrounds, different priorities and reasons for learning a language in a language classroom. In such a case, creating appropriate tasks and conditions for learning becomes real challenge for teachers. In attempting to achieve an optimal learning environment, teachers have a number of resources and tools available. Blending right

sources and tools with right students and in the right time is the challenge of a language teacher. According to Marsh (2012), in order to implement blended learning effectively, it is essential that one should make the most of the learning opportunities and tools available for the purpose of achieving the optimal learning environment. Considering technological developments in the 21st century, it is evident that pedagogical innovations go towards that direction. Nowadays, new students start universities as technologically competent as they are "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). Thus, many institutions are required to cater for the needs of new generations by embracing the new technologies.

When the integration of technology into instruction is necessary, educators, without doubt, tend to possess this innovation immediately. However, it has never been as simple as that. In such cases, appropriate blend, teacher and student trainings, assessment, and technological literacy have become initial concerns of institutions to run blended instruction smoothly. The integration of technology in foreign language instruction has become the prior action plan for better education in many institutions. According to Oh & Park, (2009), blended instruction has become a common delivery format in most universities, however, in order to evaluate blended instruction, appropriate procedures or instruments were minimal in most universities. The picture is not much different in Turkish higher education context. Mostly with the tools generated by publishers, many institutions have started integrating their instruction with technology. With the help of network-mediated educational software, institutions have also extended their scope via distance learning. Numerous surveys and research have been conducted recently in this respect. In particular, Bilgin, (2013) carried out an experimental study, of which results revealed that the experiment class outperformed control class. Moreover, the results of the students' questionnaire indicated that nearly all of the students considered online tool as useful. In addition, Ugur, Akkoyunlu & Kurbanoglu (2011) conducted a study with 31 graduate students to examine their views on the blended learning instruction and its use in relation to the students' individual learning styles. The results showed that students had a highly positive opinion on the blended learning instruction. The two studies mentioned above basically illustrate the reflection of blended learning in Turkish higher education. However, the studies were not in the context of ELT. In order to get a much clearer picture of the case in an EFL context, this study was conducted. Hence, this study has attempted to find out the experiences and attitudes of students and instructors to one-academic year blended learning English course and its effectiveness.

1.1. Literature Review

Recent learning theories and contemporary methodologies have always put learners in the center of teaching-learning environment. In that, teachers are required to create zones where they do the teaching and facilitates learning at the same time. In this respect, blended learning is considered as a tool to enrich learning opportunities. Osguthorpe & Graham (2003) identified six reasons why institutions should adopt blended learning: (1) pedagogical richness, (2) access to knowledge, (3) social interaction, (4) personal agency, (5) cost effectiveness, and (6) ease of revision. The strength of blended learning lies in its flexibility and its pedagogical effectiveness. Since it fosters mutual interaction and enhances active learning opportunities (Aycock, Garnham, & Kaleta, 2002; Riffell & Sibley, 2003; Waddoups & Howell, 2002; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Akkoyunlu, & Soylu, (2008a). Supporting this idea, Collopy & Arnold (2009) pointed out that "this flexibility provides students the personalized time they need to read, think, process and respond" (p.86). With respect to its connection to 21th century skills, blended English instruction has positive effect on students' critical thinking skills (Yang, et al., 2013, Garrison & Kanuka, 2004.) Similarly, King (2002) reported that online discussions prompted "critical thinking, dynamic interactive dialogue, and substantial peer-to-peer

interaction… depth of insight and response, that is, many times not possible in the face-to-face classroom because of time constraints" (p. 237).

In terms of language skills, Garrison & Kanuka (2004) state that "a concomitant property of learning with internet communication technology is that it has a significant educational implication resulting from the emphasis on written communication" (p. 97). Additionally, blended learning has positive effect on students' performances, increases students' participation in class and their motivation (López-Pérez et al., 2012; Liu, 2013; Hughes, 2007). For many, on the other hand, blended learning could be just an integration of online platform where you can keep multimedia materials to use in language class. From that standpoint, Delialioglu & Yıldırım (2008) simply summarize its effectiveness that thanks to a carefully designed and well implemented online instruction, students can have an access to more information faster, and they can have an opportunity to use multimedia environments to understand the content and improve their learning skills.

Is technology a magical tool to facilitate learning or is it a modern zone where we will place the education? This is one of the biggest confusion that teachers and course designers can be faced with. In this sense, McCarthy (2016) suggests that decision on the design of blended learning should be "pedagogy-led rather than technology-led" (p.3). Similarly, Moskal et al. (2013) argue that successful blended instruction has to correspond with the institutional, faculty and student goals. Additionally, Moskal et al. (2013) emphasize that there is no "one-size-fits-all approach" (p.16) which lead to success, however, it is achieved through continuous effort over a span of several years. Therefore, blended instruction should line up with all variations in learning, most importantly with SLA practices.

To investigate the application of the blended learning in an EFL context from the point of learners and instructors, this study sought to find out answers to the following research questions:

(1) What are the learners' experiences and attitudes towards blended learning instruction?
    a. In what ways do the students think blended instruction and learning helped them improve their various language competencies, skills?
    b. What are the advantages and drawbacks in the application of blended instruction and learning?
(2) Is there a difference regarding attitudes of genders in blended learning instruction?
(3) What are the instructors' experiences and attitudes towards blended learning instruction and learning?

2. Methodology

The study was conducted through a mixed method, the explanatory sequential research design (Cresswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). The data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

2.1. The Context of the Research

The context for this study is an intensive English program in the school of foreign languages in a state university in Turkey. The school provides intensive language classes to students who have registered to a department in the university where the medium of instruction is English. Provided that the students do not meet the English language proficiency requirements, they take one-year compulsory English preparatory class in various language levels; A1, A2, B1 and B1+ (CEFR, 2019). Hence, this study was conducted in foreign language teaching and higher education context as the blended learning instruction was practiced for the first time in this institution. English preparatory class is a typical EFL (English as a foreign language) context and has representative function for other universities in the country.

The school of foreign languages used a series textbook for its main course. Additionally, the institution blended their instruction with online components of the publisher. Students used their printed textbooks in class and signed in the online platform outside the classroom for practice and revision purposes. Students' performance in online platform was checked by class teachers and used as an added value for their final grades. Once students signed up for the online workbook, they were able to start the exercises right away. The instructors were required to sign up for the system to check their students' progress and provide feedback to them.

The online platform of was based on recursive practice of language skills except speaking. In listening, video and reading sections, students were able to do the exercises contextualised with some images and videos. However, the tasks in these sections were limited with recognition type of activities such as matching, true/false, multiple choice and gap-filling. Moreover, all activities were given in the same repetitive style in each unit repetitively. Besides, all activities were based on 'finding the correct option' and allowed almost no interaction among teachers and students. In writing sections, just like in-class training, students were able to submit their written work online and got feedback. For the lower levels, platform comprised activities which required students to write simple words and sentences in the given blanks. In upper levels, students were given more complex tasks in which students produced a structured text and submitted to their teachers. Teachers were only able to see these written works when they logged in. However, no instant notification was given to teachers and students. Additionally, teachers were not able to give detailed code-based feedback. System allowed them to give only verbal feedback and a score. As for the grammar and vocabulary section, students were able to practice newly learnt subjects and words with multiple choice, true/false, matching and gap-filling activities. These activities were very much similar to the ones that students did with the paper-based worksheets in class.

2.2. The Participants

The participants of the study consisted of students attending English preparatory class and their instructors. As student participants, there were 400 students whose age span ranged from 18 to 22. All the participants were randomly chosen from four levels (A1, A2, B1, B1+) and equally. Additionally, 100 instructors who taught English to the students throughout the academic year contributed to the study. The instructors had various teaching experience from 3 to 15 years and above, and some of them had MA degrees in ELT. The online system was introduced to the instructors for the purpose of orientation before the fall term began.

2.3. The Data collection tools

2.3.1. Questionnaires

In order to examine the participants' views regarding blended learning instruction, two questionnaires (one for students and the other for instructors) were used at the end of academic year. These questionnaires, adapted from Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008b), were originally designed to understand the perceptions of students and instructors in blended learning instruction. The original blended learning scale consisted of 50 items under two categories. The first category, which included 35 items, was based on the learners' views on the implementation of blended leaning within sub-categories as; (a) ease of use for web environment, (b) online environment, (c) content, (d) face-to-face sessions, (e) assessment concerning content. The second category including 15 items was based on learner's views on blended learning in general. All items in the original questionnaire were developed as ten-point Likert type format. The questionnaires were slightly modified to fit blended learning format of the institution and for the purpose of the study. The students' questionnaire had 52 five-point-items (I strongly disagree / I disagree /I partially agree/ I agree/ I strongly agree) that focused on the perceptions of blended learning and its implementation process under 4

categories as; (a) online platform, (b) face-to-face sessions, (c) assessment, (d) learners' views on blended learning in general. Besides, the questionnaire developed for instructors had 13 five-point- items (I strongly disagree/ I disagree /I partially agree/ I agree/ I strongly agree) that only focused on instructors' views on blended learning. In order to establish its content validity, the final form of the questionnaires was examined by experts in the field and some minor adjustments were done considering experts' views. The reliability of the final forms of the questionnaires were calculated by using Cronbach alpha and was found as .90 for students and .89 for instructors which are satisfactory reliability levels. The students completed the questionnaire during their class hours. The instructors were given a week to complete and submit it. The participants were asked to rate each item on a scale ranging from 'strongly disagree (1)' to 'strongly agree (5).'

2.3.2. Interviews

In order to triangulate the findings of surveys and for further in-debt analysis of participants' views, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and instructors in the final week of the term, regarding their views about the blended learning environment in their institution. Initially, the researchers wrote a number of interview questions based on related literature and expert consultations. After some adjustments, 8 interview questions for students and 10 questions for instructors were chosen. Research questions were prepared in English. However, for the sake of the reliability of the survey, all interviews were conducted in participants' native language and were audio recorded.

2.4. The Data Analysis

The data collected were computed and descriptive analysis was presented. In addition, in order to find out whether there was a gender difference in blended learning the independent t-test was applied. Each research question was discussed separately in the light of the findings gathered from representative questionnaire items. The scores obtained from both questionnaires were ranked as follows: "1.00-1.80: Strongly Disagree", "1.81-2.60: Disagree", "2.61-3.40: Partially Agree", "3.41-4.20: Agree", "4.21-5.00: Strongly Agree." Each research question was discussed separately in the light of the findings gathered from representative items. On the other hand, interview recordings were transcribed by two researchers and coded into several categories separately, and emerging themes were agreed in terms of content analysis.

3. Results and discussion

3.1.1. The students' views on blended learning instruction

Our data indicated that students partially agreed with the use of blended instruction (M= 3.02; SD= .55) in general. When we analyse the results of the questionnaire in terms of subcategories as (a) online platform, (b) face-to-face Instruction, (c) assessment, (d) general views on blended learning, we can see their views on these subcategories in detail (see Table 2).

Table 1. Students' views on blended learning

Items on	$\bar{x}$	SD
Face-to-Face Instruction	3.91	.70
Assessment	3.01	.71
Online Platform	2.68	.76
General Views	2.42	.81

N=400

Majority of the students still favoured having face to face instruction in the classroom (M=3.91; SD=.70). They partially agreed that assessment activities and tasks were useful to some extent as a blended instruction (M=3.01; SD =.71). On the other hand, they were not completely happy with the online platform (M=2.68; SD =.76), and therefore, their rating was low (M=2.42; SD =.81), which justifies that the online tool used seems to be regarded as ineffective. This was also indicated in the following interview extracts with students. In fact, most students were happy with the idea but they found some problems in practice. For example, students 2 and 5 stated as follows:

- I think the idea is fine but the implication is rubbish. Especially, I really want to talk about how inadequate the system is in term of technical features. I still – we have almost finished the first term- couldn't enrol in online class. Online platform doesn't help me practice, it gives me trouble. (S2)
- I think blended learning is good as an idea but in terms of implication, it is not sufficient I think. On the other hand, I think it also has complementary function. You can revise the things you missed in class. (S5)

Similarly, student 12 expressed dissatisfaction about practice and mentioned the pitfalls of the tool.
- Blended learning is theoretically fine. We are used to face-to-face instruction but in practice it has many pitfalls. I think, as it is used for the first time in the institution, it is not very well developed. It is not very appealing for students because it is not interactive and after a certain time, we can be fed up with and get bored of filling the gaps on the screen. (S12)

The design of the online tool was not favourable for some students. For example, students 1 and 15 stated:

- I think blended learning format could be more effective. In this way, we (are) kind of get bored and it seems like a burden to us. (S1)

- I enjoyed this language program here very much, specifically our discussion based lessons. But, the only thing I don't like is the online activities. They are more like boring homework which I find useless. (S15)

Student 13 expressed his desire to have more paper based exercises instead of online practice as follows:

- If there was no online platform and we had more paper based exercises instead, it would be easy for us to develop our proficiency. Online platform was a waste of time at all". (S13)

On the other hand, student 14 explained the causes of the problems reasonably as shown in the following extract:
- In general, it is ok, but there are things to be developed. It is a new model in this institution, maybe, that's why, there are some problems with it. (S14)

Although the majority of the previous studies on blended language learning shows that there is a consensus on the positive effect of blended learning, our findings are not in correlation with previous ones (Al-Jarf, 2005; Hui, Hu, Clark, Tam & Milton, 2007; Borau, Ullrich, Feng & Shen, 2009; Comas-Quinn, Mar Domingo & Valentine, 2009; Jia, Chen, Ding & Ruan, 2012; Bueno-Alastuey & López Pérez, 2014; Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl, 2010; Kırkgöz, 2011; Caner, 2009; Baturay, Daloğlu & Yıldırım, 2010; Bilgin, 2013). The contrast between this study and previous ones may be explained in various ways, and it would be unfair to say that

students were not content with blended learning at all. As it was the first time for the majority of students to have an integrated online study into their education, their unfamiliarity with this new form of learning may have affected their success or motivation negatively. In addition, despite the intense contact of this generation with technology and their surprising expertise, technical issues and system related errors may have caused this dissatisfaction. Considering the neutral overall attitudes of students towards blended learning and positive interview extracts, blended instruction seems to be regarded as a useful way rather than frivolous efforts, yet it needs some adjustment and revision.

In contrast with the negative views, some students had positive views about blended learning and stated their positive opinions during the interviews. For example, students 3, 5 and 8 expressed their contentment about listening practice as follows:

- I am personally happy with blended learning but I think listening audios should be more difficult on the online platform because during the listening exam, what we listen to is much more difficult. But I am generally positive to this blended learning. (S3)

- At the beginning of the year, I almost have no listening skills but with the help of this online platform, I feel like I can understand more. I think it was definitely useful for my listening skill. But, online system has no contribution to my speaking skills. (S5)

- "Listening, all audios are uploaded to the system and I can listen to a topic many times with even scripts. By this way, I always understand. This develops my listening skill. Reading parts is also one of my favourites because they are very rich in terms of content and visual design. (S8)

As for the vocabulary development, students 3 and 11 found online tool useful and stated their satisfaction as follows:

- To be honest with you, I am content with the blended learning and online platform. It has some visual parts which helps me develop my vocabulary. In face-to-face instruction, we have opportunity to interact in English with our teachers. (S6)

- It is the first time I have tried such online platform for language learning, and I cannot say it is completely successful but it still has good sides. For example, it helped me to develop my vocabulary. (S11)

Student 8 also mentioned effectiveness of blended learning in terms of compensation as below:

- I am happy with this blended learning. Compared to my previous education, having online and face-to-face instruction complete each other". (S8)

All these quotations indicate that they found blended instruction useful to some extent, and they believed that it contributed to their learning English to some extent. It seems that students need more orientation and applications for the effective use of online tools. On the other hand, online program requires them to be autonomous as much as possible in their studies. However, our students begin the preparatory program after high school, and it seems that they are not autonomous enough to carry out activities and tasks regularly on their own in line with the face to face instruction. Palfreyman (2003) argues that being autonomous is a cultural phenomenon and mostly promoted in Western cultures. Implementation of such instruction may cause some difficulties in other cultures. According to Yumuk (2002), common way of teaching in Turkey is mainly based on memorisation and traditional teaching methods in which teachers are

regarded as the source and the students are the receiver of the knowledge. Therefore, pushing students into such learning environment which requires high level of autonomy may affect them negatively. As blended instruction has been used for the first time in the program, students and instructors may have had some adaptation problems.

The highest mean score in this survey (m=3.91) is for the 'face-to-face instruction.' Students' attitudes towards in-class learning can be considered as relatively positive. This result indicates the fact that students benefited and enjoyed from face-to-face classroom instruction more compared to online support. The following extracts from the interviews with students confirm that as follows:

- I think it (on line platform) is OK, but I prefer face-to-face instruction more because it is more effective and we can check our understanding and get feedback from our teachers immediately. (S3)

- I can say online system is not as successful as the face-to-face instruction. At least I feel that way. (S7)

- I am happy with the face-to-face instruction but online platform has some problems. I cannot say it is entirely useless but needs improvements. It could be better. This year, I cannot say it has very much positive effect on my English. (S10)

In this case, instructors should primarily be given the credit for this contentment. However, there are other issues which should be taken into account while considering this positive attitude. First, instructor's support in class and students' social interaction with the instructors and classmates may have made it easier for students to practice language. As they had gone through their previous education mostly in face-to-face settings, they may feel much closer and relaxed in this setting. On the other hand, individual online studies may have been a challenge for the students who have more interpersonal intelligent types and for the ones who are less autonomous. Hence, this increases the possibility to get lost in an individual online study and eventually be dropped off.

As for the final category, the mean score for the assessment was 3.05. Since this category had items for both online and face-to-face ways of learning, each item was analysed separately. Table 2 illustrates the mean scores for each item related to assessment in blended learning format.

Table 2. *Students' views on assessment in blended learning.*

Items	$\bar{x}$	SD
29. Mentoring about the tasks in face-to-face sessions help us a lot.	3.78	1.02
31. Quizzes and mid-term exams during the face to face sessions help me to understand what I have learned and reflect my progress.	3.43	1.13
28. Evaluation criteria in the online platform guide us in how and what to do in our tasks/exercises.	2.54	1.06
30. Evaluation criteria for the exercises in the online platform are clear and understandable.	2.46	1.10

N=400

Starting with the item 28. Evaluation criteria in the online platform guide us in how and what to do in our tasks/exercises (M=2.54, SD=1.06), we found that online tool in this blended format was not considered sufficient in terms of assessment. Similarly, when we look at the item 30. Evaluation criteria for the exercises in the online platform are clear and understandable

(M=2.46, SD=1.10), it justifies the fact that there is an evident discontentment about the evaluative function of online tool. Turning the other side of the blend, regarding face-to-face instruction, the item 29. Mentoring about the tasks in face-to-face sessions help us a lot (M=3.78, SD=1.02) - had the highest mean score in terms of assessment. Likewise, the item 31. Quizzes and mid-term exams during the face to face sessions help me to understand what I have learned and reflect my progress (M=3.43, SD=1.13) - on the basis of face-to-face assessment had the second highest mean score. The following extracts from the interviews with students confirm that as follows:

- Writing is definitely one of the disadvantages. We get no feedback at all from our teacher. We get feedback in class from our teacher but I can say that online platform doesn't help me practice all skills. (S6)

- Textbook and its online component are very simple. If it was more challenging, it could prepare us for our academic life better. (S5)

On these grounds, we can argue that in this blended learning mode, online tool is not favoured by the students in terms of assessment. However, the consensus view seems to be that students reflect the progress better during face-to-face instruction and benefit from direct oral feedback more. That is to say, students are more in favour of verbal in-person feedback rather than some numerical results they get from a software program.

In summary, the available evidence seems to suggest that the students see blended learning in this program as an effective plan with some consequential pitfalls. For the sake of the curriculum and the success of the program, further remedial changes are required. On these grounds, we can argue that blending online software with face-to-face instruction may sound to be an effective plan, however, creating right blend, that is developing fine online platform which suits students' needs and goals is always a real challenge.

3.1.2. What are the innovations brought by blended learning to the students' motivation and attitude in their language learning process?

The items below seek to disclose whether blended learning has changed students' understanding of language learning process and their motivation levels. As can be seen in Table 3, the related items (49 – 32 – 51 – 41) had mean scores below 3 and only the negative written item (34) - My motivation is very low while I am studying in the online platform (M = 3.43, SD = 1.30) - had higher mean score. These results provide confirmatory evidence that this blend had no positive contribution to students' motivation and did not change students' attitudes radically. In other words, there seems to be a unified objection against the idea that the blend was set to develop more autonomous and blended learners. Based on these results, it can be stated that the findings are broadly consistent with the major trends of the survey presented in Table 3. Students' views on their motivation levels and attitudes in blended learning.

Table 3. *Students' views on their motivation levels and attitudes in blended learning.*

Items	$\bar{x}$	SD
34. My motivation is very low while I am studying in the online platform.	3.54	1.30
49. Being able to practice through PC or mobile devices provides huge practicality.	2.48	1.16
32. Learning through website makes me responsible for the course.	2.36	1.16
51. Teaching program with online practice shifted my whole understanding of language learning and sparked my interest.	2.30	1.14
41. Studying in the online platform helps me make plans.	2.26	1.09

N=400

Following extracts show that students' negative ratings about motivation in the questionnaire were in correlation with the interview extracts.

- As for the drawbacks, I can only say that some exercises are very boring. (S8)

- Online platform is not interactive and it becomes boring after a certain time. (S11)

- It is just a boring workbook that was put online platform. (S12)

3.1.3. In what ways do the students think blended learning helped them improve their various language competencies, skills?

Contrary to overall trend of the survey findings, the results obtained from the questionnaire items regarding the language skills development in blended learning was slightly higher. Student's responses to these items were very close to each other and just slightly below 3. Their opinions about the effectiveness of online platform in teaching skills could be put somewhere between 'low' and 'medium'. The interesting point to state in this figure is that the item 14, which questions the writing skill development, had lower mean score than the other skills (Table 4). However, as an example of similar study, Arslan & Sahin-Kızıl (2010) suggest that technology integrated writing classes (blogs were used in their study) have potential to provide more effective writing instruction. Similarly, Adas & Bakır (2013) report that integrating blended learning into traditional methods in developing writing abilities has significant benefits. All in all, the data yielded by this figure provide convincing evidence that students are moderate in their views on the development of language skills.

Table 4. *Students' views on the development of language skills in blended learning.*

Items	$\bar{x}$	SD
17. Grammar practice in the online platform helps me develop my competency.	2.91	1.15
15. I can extend my vocabulary with exercises in the online platform.	2.91	1.10
13. Online Platform provides plenty of opportunities to practice my listening and reading skills.	2.90	1.22
16. Grammar practice in the online platform helps me satisfy my needs in learning English.	2.90	1.15
14. I can easily do writing assignments and submit to my teacher through online platform.	2.47	1.24

N=400

In line with survey findings, the analysis of interviews with students demonstrated that there were both positive and negative statements which argued that online platform was useful for particular skills. In the following extracts students 4, 5, 8 and 14 stated that in blended learning, online tool contributed to their listening, reading and vocabulary development as follows:

- I think I extended my vocabulary knowledge with online activities because it makes us use the same word in different activities repeatedly. Also, it helps me to develop listening skill but no other skills specifically. (S4)

- At the beginning of the year, I almost have no listening skills but with the help of this online platform, I feel like I can understand more. I think it was definitely useful for my listening skill. Online system has no contribution to my speaking skills. (S5)

- Listening, all audios are uploaded to the system and I can listen many times with even scripts. By this way, I always understand. This develops my listening skill. Reading parts is also one of my favourites because they are very rich in terms of content and visual design. (S8)

- Online platform listening activities are very useful for me. (S14)

On the other hand, some students underlined the advantage of having blended way of instruction. Students 1 and 3 stated that both face-to-face and online instruction helped them develop different skills as shown below:

- It is insufficient in terms of grammar development. I enjoy its vocabulary activities though. In addition, speaking is our essential skill to develop and it can only be developed during face-to-face classes. Therefore, there must me more face-to-face instruction. (S1)

- In the face-to-face instruction, I think my grammar and writing skills developed most. In class, we don't do listening very effectively, it is better to listen online individually. (S3)

With regards to skill development, for students 2, 7, 9, 11 and 12, online platform was not as efficient as the face-to-face instruction. These students declared that they developed their speaking, writing skills and grammar better with face-to-face instruction. This was stated in the following extracts:

- Face-to-face instruction develops our speaking ability, and also our thinking ability because the topics in our textbooks are controversial and we always think critically and discuss in classes. Maybe they are academic but at least social issues. (S2)

- Face-to-face instruction develops our writing and speaking skills but I think online system has no positive effect on my skills. Not at all. (S7)

- Online platform has little or no effect on my skill development. Especially in face-to-face instruction, we develop our speaking and writing skills a lot. (S9)

- I developed my speaking and writing skills with face-to-face instruction especially with our native speaker teachers but online platform has no specific effect on any particular skill. (S11)

- We practice all skills during face-to-face instruction. Online instruction has no significant effect on my language skills. If it was developed better, I think, it still would be insufficient for speaking skill. For that, face-to-face in person interaction is necessary. (S12)

In summary, on the basis of the evidence stated above, it seems fair to suggest that there is a consensus in terms of the effectiveness of face-to-face instruction for skills development. However, when it comes to online platform, students' opinions differ considerably. Although some positive views arose for some specific skills, in particular, listening skill and vocabulary development and reading skill, the online platform had little impact on students' skill development of productive skills such as speaking and writing.

3.1.4. The advantages of blended learning in learning English

This research question tried to disclose the advantages of blended learning perceived by learners in foreign language learning. The following extracts from the interviews with students demonstrated that students expressed various advantages. Students 1 and 13 found online tool advantageous in terms of skills and vocabulary practice. This was stated in the following extracts as follows:

- I think it has advantages for vocabulary development. Seeing same words on internet repeatedly helps us to memorize these words. (S1)

- It is good to have all skills practice in one place (S13)

In addition, majority of the participants agreed on the idea that online platform was a useful tool for practicing and revising. Students 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11 and 15 stated their opinions with regards to that as below:

- Online platform is like a homework. Every time I go home I have something to do to practice my English. Also it helps me to memorize the newly learnt vocabulary. (S3)

- It has helped to prepare for exams. For example, I only did the online activities before last monthly exam and I did well in the exam. Online activities help in terms of revising, memorising. (S4)

- Sometimes I don't enjoy some classes and I don't attend. But I can study the subjects I missed on my own via online system. (S5)

- It helps me to revise the missing parts of the lesson. If I miss a lesson, I can easily study at home and compensate. Additionally, it gives me opportunities to do reading and listening exercises. (S8)

- Only advantage is that it gives us chance to revise. And also I find listening parts a bit useful. (S10)

- Revising the words that we learned in class with the online platform is, I think, the biggest advantage. (S11)

- I think it has one advantage, we don't need extra material to study at home. It has everything online in one place. Apart from that, there is no other significant advantage that I can talk about. (S15)

Student 6 stressed the connection between his intelligent type and online tool. This was stated in the following extract as follows:

> I think I have visual intelligence and the online platform helps me to memorize words and I can do in the exams easily. Also, I also feel like it helps listening because by listening again and again, I started understanding better in class listening activities. (S6)

In the questionnaire, students' ratings regarding blended learning was partial agreement and online part of instruction was not appreciated as much as face-to-face classes. Nevertheless, interview extracts showed that students were content with certain parts of this blended instruction, and this way of instruction in this program could be considered as advantageous to some extent. With regards to advantages of blended learning, Collopy & Arnold (2009) stated that it provides flexible learning for students to personalise their own studies. Similarly, the common point of some extracts above is that some students emphasise the importance of being able to work alone in their own pace and style.

3.1.5. The drawbacks of blended learning in learning English

From the interviews with students, it can be seen that there are certain issues students found rather futile and inadequate. One of the problematic aspects of the blended instruction for students was the boring and non-interactive format of the online tool. Students 1, 8, 11 and 12 stated their opinions with regards to that as follows:

- Its very time consuming and you have to spend very long hours to complete activities. (S1)

- As for the drawbacks, I can only say that some exercises are very boring. (S8)

- Online platform is not interactive and it becomes boring after a certain time. (S11)

- It is just a boring workbook that was put online platform. (S12)

System related faults could be considered one of the main drawbacks of blended leaning as students 2, 10 and 14 stated this in the following extracts:

- The system is boring and it has some bugs. Students can easily find the correct answers without even trying. So it demotivates students. (S2)

- It has software related bugs. Students get 100 point without writing a word. I think program developers should have checked that before and took and precautions. (S10)

- There are lots of software related bugs and technical problems. This is very annoying, sometimes just because of a single comma our answers are not accepted by the system. (S14)

On the other hand, as for the writing practice, student 6 found online tool inefficient.

- Writing is definitely one of the disadvantages. We get no feedback at all from our teacher. We get feedback in class from our teacher but I can say that online platform doesn't help me practice all skills. (S6)

In terms of implication, students 3, 5, 9 and 15 found blended learning problematic for different reasons. These are stated in the following extracts.

- As for disadvantages, I think online system is not developed for students' skills. As every student learns in different pace and way, it doesn't suit everyone." (S3)

- Textbook and its online component are very simple. If it was more challenging, it could prepare us for our academic life better." (S5)

- With online studies I cannot develop myself, I get lost with them." (S9)

- I think online studies are waste of time. Students do them just to get scores. I wouldn't do them if they weren't compulsory and didn't have additional value on my final grade." (S15)

In any blended learning setting, some negative remarks are always expected and welcomed. These remarks are regarded as valuable feedback for the program's success. The interview extracts above regarding the drawbacks of the online tool should be taken into consideration seriously to refine the blend accurately. In a similar research, Bilgin (2013) found that although blended instruction contributed to students' performance considerably, they expressed discontentment for the reasons such as compulsory use of online materials and lack of print materials. Moreover, interview results of the research also showed that students valued print materials over online sources. Therefore, no matter how good the blend is, it seems that students tend to stick to their old learning habits and reject the new techniques which are imposed on them.

3.1.6. Gender difference regarding the attitudes of genders in blended learning instruction

In the present study, there were 212 male and 188 female participants. As shown in Table 6, the analysis of independent t-tests revealed that the difference between genders was significant for the categories 'Online Platform' and 'Face-to-face Instruction' ($p > .032$ / $p > .005$). The findings showed that female participants had higher mean scores for the related categories. That is to say, female participants were more in favour of the implication of the 'Online platform' and 'Face-to-face Instruction'. However, in regards to the categories of 'Assessment' and 'General Views', the results of independent t-tests indicated no statistically significant differences between genders ($p < .524$ / $p < .594$).

Table 6. *Differences of students' views in respect to gender*

	Male (212)		Female (188)			
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	t	p
Online Platform	2.59	.76	2.76	.74	-2.15	.03
Face-to-Face Instruction	3.81	.72	4.01	.66	-2.79	.00
Assessment	3.03	.70	3.07	.72	-.63	.52
General Views	2.40	.80	2.44	.83	-.53	.59

N: 400

3.1.7. The instructors' views and attitudes towards blended learning instruction

The data gathered for this purpose suggest that the instructors compared to the students had more positive views of blended learning. The consensus view suggested that online platform in blended learning was a practical, innovative method for students to be more autonomous and to provide more input and individualized practice. Table 7 illustrates the mean scores for the instructors' responses to the items.

Table 7. *Instructors' views on blended learning*

Items	$\bar{x}$	SD
4. Students can study at their own pace with online platform.	4.07	.93
3. I believe that students can learn language effectively by integrating the materials in the class with the online platform.	4.02	1.08
1. Blended learning has positive impact on students.	3.94	.87
9. Being able to practice through PC or mobile devices provides huge practicality for students.	3.92	1.01
12. Blended learning helps learners develop receptive skills (Listening/Reading).	3.90	1.07
2. Blended learning makes students autonomous.	3.66	.93
7. Blended learning motivates students.	3.49	.96
11. Blended learning makes the course more communicative.	3.45	.92
8. Blended learning makes students responsible for the course.	3.27	1.08
13. Blended learning helps learners develop productive skills (Speaking/Writing).	3.19	.92
6. Modules in the online platform meet students' needs.	3.04	.87
5. Learning the contents through the online activities is easier for students than face-to-face instruction.	2.62	.98
10. I believe that students can learn English only through the printed materials.	2.11	.70
Average	3.61	.68

N=100

Although the overall mean score (M= 3.61, SD= .685) seemed to suggest that there was positive attitude towards blended learning, some outstanding items were worth pointing out. First of all, items 3 (M= 4.02, SD= 1.08), and 10 (M= 2.11, SD= .700) indicated that instructors considered online studies as a useful tool. However, the rating for the item 5 (M= 2.62, SD=

.982) showed that instructors considered face-to-face instruction as a primary medium and online studies as complementary. As for the views of instructors on the effectiveness of blended learning in teaching skills, items 12 (M= 3.90, SD= 1.07), and 13 (M= 3.19, SD= .928) indicated that blended instruction was efficient for receptive skills but not for productive skills that much.

Similarly, the instructors indicated during the interviews that they were mostly happy with the idea of blended learning, and believed that blended learning had positive effect on students' learning. The following extracts from the interviews with instructors reflected their ideas related to their perception of blended learning. With regards to language exposure, which is considered one of the most important tenets of language learning. One instructor stressed the positive effect of blended learning for the amount of exposure as shown in the following extract:

- In language learning, we always try to raise the amount of the exposure in terms of foreign language. I think the online platform, which students could access even with their mobile phones, makes them spend more time with English. I like it. (I8)

The following extracts show that instructors were content with the implementation of blended learning as it provided practice opportunities for listening skill, grammar and vocabulary.

- As our students are never willing to read outside the classroom, they generally fail to extend their vocabulary. But what I observed this year is, just because they practice the words they learnt in online platform, their written productions were better in terms of lexical richness. (I4)

- Our blended system at schools has many advantages. First, it gives grammatical and lexical practice to students. And, I find listening exercises very useful for them. (I2)

- We are living in a country where English is not spoken as a mother tongue. Therefore, students have less listening and speaking practice." "CDs cannot be their everyday regular study practice. But in this online platform, they can listen graded audios anytime. So this is very good. Also, the online activities are correlated with the textbook. Students can follow the course regularly on the platform. This makes them more organised and they don't fall behind the course. I wish we had had such opportunities when learning English. (I7)

- Vocabulary is the major problem of foreign language learners. One of the biggest advantages of this online platform is that it gives students various – mostly fun – vocabulary exercises. For example; puzzles, matching etc. (I8)

- In this century, I think every institution should integrate technology into their teaching. (I3)

Similarly, instructor (I10) put forward the positive contribution of online platform to students' motivation as stated below:

- I think blended learning and this Macmillan Online workbook make learners more motivated for the course. Today, it is really difficult to keep students motivated during class hours all the time. I think, online activities compensate this situation. Also, I think students benefited a lot from online vocabulary activities. (I10)

As for the practicality, two instructors (I2 and I9) expressed their opinions about how blended instruction made learning easier for students as follows:

- It is a platform worth trying. It has more advantages than disadvantages. It allows teachers to monitor their students' progress more closely than traditional methods. This way of learning is also very practical, and students can assess it anytime and anywhere. (…) I think blended learning boosted my students interest and engagement. (I9)

- I think technology always makes learning easy. Today with this practicality, one can learn a language in a very short time. (I2)

Turning the other side of the argument, some instructors (I2, I4, I5, I10), – although they were happy with the idea of blended learning - expressed some problems and pitfalls about the implication of the blended instruction. The following extracts reflect instructors' opinions with regards to drawbacks of the blended instruction.

- Registration process was so long and painful. I think this demotivated the students at the beginning of the course. It should be simpler. Not everybody is expert in technology. (I2)

- I liked the idea and also the Macmillan Online Workbook. But it shouldn't have been compulsory for students because they just do it for grade not for self-development. (I5)

- The online platform is good but not enough. We shouldn't stop doing in-class grammar exercises. They learn better when we explain some points. As for listening, online platform is a must. (I10)

- I couldn't create my online class for a long time. There should be more technical help for some teachers. The online activities are good but the students always tell that they get bored. And online platform has nothing for speaking skill. (I5)

- The online platform is much simpler than I expected. It is full of some gap filling and matching exercises. I think it should be more interactive and more creative. (I4)

In summary, these results provide some evidence that in this one-year blended language program, instructors were mostly content with both the idea and the implementation of blended format, and they held the view that student benefited from this way of learning considerably. However, according to some instructors, there are some important points that should be developed; technical difficulties, compulsory implication and null design of the platform are the major drawbacks. Additionally, the disparity between students and instructors is understandable as there may not be correspondence between what instructors wanted and what students actually needed. Supporting this issue, Moskal et al. (2013) point out that success of blended instruction depends heavily in accordance between institutional and student goals.

4. Conclusion and Implications

The findings of the study provided detailed information about how teachers and students experienced teaching and learning in a blended learning environment. The data yielded by this study provided some strong evidence that students had some positive views as well as negative

towards blended learning English course. On the other hand, instructors expressed relatively positive opinions about the idea and the implementation of the blended instruction.

With regards to students' attitudes towards blended learning, the analysis of the questionnaires revealed that majority of the students found face-to-face instruction more effective than online studies. This could be explained with the students' readiness level for a blended instruction and adaptation. For students having only traditional face-to-face instruction in their previous education, they may not adjust themselves into new teaching model. To get better results, a new way of instruction should be piloted with small groups. Furthermore, interview scripts showed that students were in favour of the idea of blended learning but not satisfied with this implementation. In such cases, amendment of the online tool should be the first action plan since it plays the major role in the success of blended instruction. As for language skills, there was a consensus that online platform was an effective tool to practice listening and vocabulary. In this sense, questionnaire ratings and interview scripts are very much in line with each other.

Overall, revising opportunity, vocabulary/listening practice via online tool and its flexibility were considered as advantages. On the other hand, boring exercises, software related failures and non-interactive format of online platform were featured drawbacks of the blended learning. The analysis of the survey provides ample evidence that students were not very much motivated with the blended learning. Additionally, the analysis of the interviews indicated that some students (40%) considered online studies as a burden. Motivation level of students in blended instruction is strongly connected with students' overall language learning desire. Besides, institutional policies such as putting deadline for online studies and making them compulsory may have been negative factors for students' low motivation level.

In contrast with the views of the students, instructors had more positive attitudes towards blended learning. They pointed out that it was good and effective method for language learning. They also emphasized positive contribution of blended learning to vocabulary and listening skill development. However, some instructors expressed dissatisfaction related to the technical aspects of the online set up.

As for material design, the outstanding point is that for online platforms, interactive studies instead of some null workbook type of exercises are more favourable for students. Moreover, registration process and user friendly applications and continues maintenance and support are major factors for students' enthusiasm and success.

The results of the study were expected to give insights into blended learning with respect to foreign language learning. However, there were, admittedly, unavoidable limitations which made it difficult to generalise for other contexts. At first, the study was limited to two semesters of implementation process for blended foreign language learning in a preparatory program. It might give different results if it was implemented in a longer period of time. Second, the study was limited to the EFL context, and it might give different results if it was conducted in different contexts with more communicative online platforms and better orientation of both students and instructors.

Based on the results of this study, it is possible to suggest some recommendations for future research. First of all, although the findings of this study have representative function for similar EFL settings, this study should be replicated in different EFL settings. In addition, online components and the form of blended learning have numerous variations. Therefore, the perception of blended learning could be different in other settings because of the tool and participants. Another area that deserves attention in future research is the comparison of the perceptions of participants from different backgrounds, e.g. educational background of students such as rural-urban, level of language competence or various age groups. In addition, curriculum designers, program developers and administrative actors in an institution could be included in similar research.

5. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

6. Ethics Committee Approval

The authors confirm that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country.

7. Financial Disclosure:

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