

The Impact of Blended Learning on the Twelfth Grade Students' English Language Proficiency

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Abstract

The blended learning approach utilizes modern technologies and electronic media in teaching to create a technology-based environment. However, it is not an exclusive online environment because the teacher and the students have to be present in a traditional face-to-face classroom. It is widely believed that adopting a blended learning approach will enable learners to have quality educational opportunities and improve their performance. The incentive for conducting the research is to evaluate the effect of the blended learning approach on high school students' English proficiency. Specifically, the study aimed at answering the question: is there a significant difference in the Twelfth-Grade students' English language proficiency as measured by IELTS due to the model of delivery (Blended learning model and the traditional delivery model)? To achieve the study's goal, the researcher applied the experimental method and used IELTS to measure language proficiency. The study sample selected purposively consisted of 63 male twelfth-grade students in one of the private schools in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates (UAE). The study sample was assigned to two groups: the experimental group taught using blended learning consisted of 31 students, and the control group led by the traditional method consisted of 32 students. The results showed statistically significant differences at the level of ($\alpha < 0.01$) between the means of the results of the two groups on the post achievement test in favor of the experimental group. These results illustrated the impact of adopting the blended learning approach in an English Foreign Language (EFL) setting on students' achievement in standardized tests. However, the successful implementation of blended learning largely depends on how responsible and committed students are towards active learning.

Keywords: active learning, blended learning, e-Learning, English language proficiency, face-to-face instruction, learning styles, technology-rich learning environment

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Introduction

Developing English language proficiency among high school students is widely acknowledged as an essential requirement for joining higher education and requires the teacher's considerable efforts to build such ability in his/her students. English has been introduced as an obligatory school subject at first grade in all elementary schools in the UAE so that the English learning process extends from primary and secondary schooling systems through the tertiary level (Al Noursi, 2013). Therefore, English learning has become a de facto requirement in UAE schools and college curricula. Educational leadership has also been introducing initiatives to create improved learning environments conducive to effective learning English to meet all students' different needs. Native English-Speaking Teachers have been recruited and more technological tools have been introduced to create a rich learning environment that is expected to facilitate the acquisition of the English Language. Yet, many senior students at schools fail to acquire band five or higher on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which is a requirement for direct admission to the universities in the UAE.

Mastery of the English language as a medium of instruction in high school can be significantly achieved by adopting teaching strategies that appeal to various learning styles (Wong, 2015). Recent studies (Ahmedi, 2018; Ghavifekr, & Rosdy, 2015) have proven many benefits of different technology-based instructional materials for effective foreign language teaching and learning. Among such programs is blended learning, in which online digital media is combined with traditional approaches. Many studies that showed the blended learning method in teaching a foreign language had attracted the interest of language teachers all over the world (Comas-Quinn, 2011; MacDonald, 2008; Neumeier, 2005). In contrast to e-learning, which refers to using only electronic media to learn, blended learning supplements traditional face-to-face teaching and learning environments with different kinds of technology-based instruction (Sezen, 2015).

Reasons for adopting the Blending Learning (BL) strategy range from accommodating more students to improving the quality of courses. It provides opportunities for learners to take more charge of their learning by scaffolding their knowledge. It gives the student some control over their time, space, and learning path and pace. In other words, blended learning promotes active learning as students come to the classroom prepared and have sufficient background about the topic and lead to a more rigorous, challenging, engaging, and thought-provoking classroom. As discussed by Bakeer (2018), blended learning allows learners to visualize, listen, feel, and interact with the learning material. In short, it moves them from theory into practice. MacDonald (2008) also maintains that learners in the blended learning environment can gain a deeper understanding of all the abstractions they get through. They can learn according to their pace, which creates the opportunity for more individualized education. Good achievers can expand their learning and learn things that are not within the school syllabi (Gülten, 2016). However, slow achievers can repeat and revise notes and get feedback from their teachers to overcome the problems and challenges they face (Bailey & Martin, 2013). Schools around the UAE have already started implementing blended learning into their daily classroom activities. Positive feedback has also been reported and well documented in different levels, though it is becoming more prevalent in higher education.

Blended learning has been defined differently (Sharpe et al. 2006). However, all definitions indicate that a blended learning environment/course combines face to face/offline instruction and

online learning forms. The blended-based technologies component consists of activities which may be individual or collaborative. According to Stern (2004), these activities may also be synchronous or asynchronous. Some examples include participating on a threaded discussion board, attending an online lesson, instant messaging, doing an electronic collaborative task, doing online assessments, writing on electronic walls, creating media-oriented files, simulation. In other words, any activity in which an individual must take an active role (Shannon & Kathryn, 2016).

For the purpose of this paper, blended learning is defined as the interweaving of face-to-face instruction with online technologies. That is to say; it 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.

This study is of significance for a set of reasons. It will present evidence on the effectiveness of implementing blended learning activities in the EFL classroom, which may encourage using the blended learning model in English language classes as a possible method of improving learners' proficiency. Providing a teaching method that could enhance students' motivation and autonomy and address individual needs is another potential value of the study. Furthermore, the results could give rise to a broader effective pedagogical deployment of technologies in language learning, which may again bring forth more in-depth reviews of the use of technology in the developing the four language skills. Besides, they can also inform technology-based language program designers and language learning software developers by catering to language learners' needs. Moreover, they can contribute to the current body of literature relevant to the use of technologies in language education.

However, the principal incentive for conducting the research study is probably related to the increased need for transforming the educational approach in a highly technologically rich environment. Besides, the study may constitute a call for other researchers to exploit this learning model in other areas of language learning. Finally, the blended learning model might be potentially more motivating and promising for today's learners

Literature Review

Most of the researchers who have studied the blended learning approach and its impact on improving English language proficiency for second language learners reported many positive effects. Al-Haq and Al-Sobh (2010) examined the effectiveness of a web-based writing instructional EFL program on Jordanian secondary students' performance. The study was carried out with 122 students in the eleventh scientific-grade studying in four comprehensive secondary schools, two male schools and two female ones that belong to Irbid Second Directorate of Education. The results disclosed that there were statistically significant differences in the students' achievement in the post-test in favor of the experimental group.

In a more recent study and in a different region, Burston, et al., (2011) reinvestigated the effectiveness of vocabulary learning via mobile phones and compared two groups of students at a Chinese university. While one group of students studied a vocabulary list via text messages, the other group of students worked on the same list through the paper material. Their findings revealed that students could learn short-term vocabulary more effectively via mobile phones than with paper

material. Similarly, Khazaei and Dastjerdi (2011) constructed a comparative study of the impact of traditional and blended teaching on EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. The study aimed to explore the application of SMS to the blended method of teaching L2 vocabulary. The results revealed that the students who received the learning content through the blended teaching approach had better test results than the group of students who received the learning content in the traditional way.

A line of research has also established a high correlation between using technology in the language classroom and higher language proficiency achievement. Dawley (2010) found that e-learning encouraged learners to seek information, evaluate it, share it collaboratively, and ultimately transform it into their knowledge. This conclusion is echoed in Tanveer (2011), who conducted the study "Integrating E-Learning in Classroom-based Language Teaching: Perceptions, Challenges, and Strategies."

Al-Masry (2012) studied the effectiveness of using the electronic blended learning in teaching a unit in English course at the cognitive levels (recognition, comprehension, and application) by second-year secondary female students in Makkah. The researcher used a quasi-experimental approach. The study sample was all 56 female students, divided into two groups: an experimental group of thirty-one students, and a control group of twenty five students. An achievement test was used to collect data. The results concluded that there were significant differences between the average test scores of the group of students using the electronic blended learning and the control group of students using the traditional method in post-application of the achievement test at the recognition, comprehension, and application in favor of the experimental group.

In a more recent study, Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) studied the impact of the blended learning approach in developing the EFL learner's reading skills in Iran. They used the quasi experimental design where the sixty participants were randomly assigned to two groups: experimental and control. The two groups were tested before and after the treatment to determine the learners' reading proficiency level. The researchers concluded that using blended learning in reading lessons has a significant influence on developing learners' reading skills. They also asserted that blended learning facilitates students' learning and recommended the implementation of blended learning in English reading classes.

However, not all studies investigating the benefits of blended learning activities reported that it impacts academic achievements. Alshwiah (2009) discussed the effects of a proposed blended learning strategy and analyzed students' attitudes toward the English language at Arabian Gulf University. The sample was divided into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. Findings indicated no significant difference between the two groups regarding achievement or attitude towards the English Language. Similarly, Miyazoe and Anderson (2010) examined the usefulness of different online activities in an EFL setting in a university in Tokyo. The forums, blogs, and wikis proved to be more beneficial in language education, particularly in improving writing styles, although the results did not show significant differences in learning outcomes.

Harker and Koutsantoni (2005) focused on the blended learning effectiveness of an English for academic purposes (EAP) program designed for students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Comparisons on student retention, achievement levels and satisfaction with the program between the two groups of students suggested that performance and satisfaction levels were similar in the two groups; however, the blended learning model is significantly superior only in students' retention.

On the whole, research shows that using blended learning can be useful to develop the learners' language competencies in the EFL/ESL contexts. The reviewed studies imply that language teachers could utilize blended learning as a teaching model to develop their learners' language proficiency.

Methodology

The true-experimental method was used in the current study in collecting and analyzing data. The duration of the experiment extended for two terms of the academic year 2018 to 2019 with a total number of sixteen weeks of blended learning model encompassing the whole first term and the first half of the second term. The method of teaching is the leading independent variable of the study. It can be classified into: (A) the "traditional" model of delivery, and (B) the blended learning model of delivery. The term "traditional" refers to a student-centered and teacher-driven class with all instruction happening in the face-to-face mode inside the classroom. However, participants of the study use their personal computers (iPad) during their studies and for their assignments. The participants' performance, measured by the IELTS test overall band, is the dependent variable.

Participants

The population of the study included twelfth-grade students from a private school in Al Ain, in the UAE. The study sample consisted of sixty-three male students, and it was selected purposively because of its relevance to the researcher regarding the procedures used. The study sample was divided into an experimental group that included 31 students, and a control group with 32 students from the 12th grade. The control group received "traditional" instruction in class, while the experimental group adopted the blended learning model.

All participants in the study are Arabic-speaking Emirati students who have been studying in this school for more than four years. When students reach grade twelve, they are expected to exit school with an overall IELTS Band Score of 6-6.5. However, students begin their IELTS preparation course in Grade Eleven.

Research Question

The present study proposes investigating the effect of adopting a blended learning model of delivery on the achievement of twelfth-grade students in one of the private high schools in Abu Dhabi Emirate as measured by IELTS. More specifically, the study aims at answering the following research question:

Is there a significant difference in the Twelfth-Grade students' English language proficiency as measured by IELTS due to the delivery model (Blended learning model and the traditional delivery model)?

Research Instruments

To evaluate the effectiveness of the use of a blended learning model of delivery as opposed to the only face to face mode of delivery, the following research instruments were used:

1. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) was used to measure students' achievement in the English language throughout the four language skills. IELTS is the world's most popular English language proficiency test for higher education and global migration. There is a common consensus among educators that the test is a good yardstick for measuring students' abilities in English, with conclusions being drawn about the effectiveness of IELTS being used on a global scale. It uses a nine-band scale to identify levels of proficiency, from non-user (band score 1) to expert (band score 9). IELTS has rigorous test design, development and validation processes. These processes ensure that every version of the test is of a comparable level of difficulty and that every test worldwide provides valid and consistent results.

2. The supplementary e-learning activities include various learning activities related to the content of each unit. There are six units in this study that consolidate, reinforce, and expand on the classroom lessons, and students can check their answers automatically. These activities provide students opportunities to either revisit skill-building activities or increase the skills they have already attained, thus enhancing their language learning. These online lessons were developed by the researcher for students preparing for their IELTS. During the development of the activities, the units were tested by the English language teachers at the school and other schools adopting the same textbook to confirm that they covered similar content to the classroom lessons.

Procedures of the Study

The study was conducted over an academic year in one of the secondary schools in Al Ain city, UAE. At the beginning of the first term, students sat for an IELTS to assess their current level of language proficiency, and the collected results were considered as the pre-test. The experimental group studied the six units through blended learning strategies while the control group learned the same units through the face-to-face traditional teaching method. Students in the experimental group were provided with an orientation on how to participate in the blended learning activities. This orientation covered topics such as using the Learning Management System (LMS) to access their electronic workbook, the class blog, the drop boxes for activities, and other features of the LMS. They were also introduced to the webcams, voice recorders, and virtual learning environments that they would be using for some collaborative activities. Online assessment tools such as Quiz let, Kahoot, and Quizziz applications were also introduced to the experimental group, who were asked to sign up for each program. The teacher created classes on these assessment programs for tracking students' progress online.

The e-learning activities and tools that the experimental group used aimed at encouraging students to practice new language items in their own time. In addition to the textbook, supplementary materials like videos, relevant websites, applications to use, discussion board, electronic wall (Padlet), mind mapping (Pop let), google.doc for doing collaborative tasks and unit theme projects were introduced during the first unit, first four weeks. In-class sessions, on the other hand, the teacher focused on communicative activities through pair and group work, creating a collaborative atmosphere.

Students in the experimental group were informed about the expectations concerning the blended portion of their course, including the requirement that they must complete all activities weekly. The amount of time spent on blended learning activities would depend on an individual student's motivation to complete assignments. In both groups, teachers meet their students for three ninety-minute blocks a week.

By the mid of the second term, a post-test (IELTS) was administered by the British Council to both groups. Results were collected and analyzed. To calculate the test scores, an independent t-test was used to analyze the findings, and the significance level was set at 0.01 ($p < .001$) in the study.

Results

In order to find out whether the two groups of Twelfth Grade students differ in terms of their language proficiency before starting the intervention, the IELTS test was given as a pre-test. Descriptive statistics and the independent sample t-test were conducted. As displayed in Table 1, students who were taught using the blended learning approach had a similar level of language proficiency ($M=4.36$, $SD=0.94$) to that of the group taught through face to face traditional teaching approach ($M=4.65$, $SD=0.86$).

Table 1. *Independent Sample t-test for Pre-test of Students' Achievement*

Variable	No	Mean	df	T-Value	p
Experimental group	31	4.36	61	1.26255.	0.21156
Control group	32	4.65			

In order to determine the effects of a blended learning model delivery on Twelfth Grade male students' language proficiency, descriptive statistics and the independent samples t-test were conducted on course grades of two groups after the intervention. As indicated in table 2, the mean scores for language proficiency after the program were 5.97 ($SD=0.76$) in the blended group and 5.29 ($SD=0.69$) in the face to face group ($t = -3.69639$, $p = 0.00047$).

Table 2. *Independent Sample t-test for Post-test of Students' Achievement*

Variable	No	Mean	Df	T-Value	p
Experimental group	31	5.97	61	-3.69639	.00047.
Control group	32	5.29			

It was found that there was a significant difference in the students' language proficiency between the blended group and the face to face group. This indicated that the treatment increased blended learning group scores, which means that the experimental group learners improved their language proficiency through blended instruction and activities.

Discussion

The statistical analysis revealed that there was a significant difference between the average test scores of the group of students using the blended learning and the control group of students using the traditional method in the post-test in favor of the experimental group. This finding is in line with the results of many studies such as Burston et al. (2011) and Khazaei and Dastjerdi (2011). Several interrelated factors may have led to this result. First, in the controlled group, the instructor follows the textbook from page to page, activity to activity. There are guided input and output activities, focusing on the different language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in that particular section. In the experimental group, students used multimedia and authentic realia for some of their activities; therefore, providing more opportunities for learning and engagement. A second possible explanation is related to social learning collaborative activities such as discussion boards and blog activities. The students in the control group turned in their paper-based assignments like writing tasks at the end of the period and received credit. On the other hand, the blended learning group did their blogs online. Students received comments on their blogs could continue an individual interaction with the instructor and other students. Finally, although both groups had their iPads and could access the internet, students in the experimental groups could access a wider variety of learning resources and multimedia that support the teacher and his students throughout the different stages of each lesson. Experimental group students got access to real-life resources that provided them with authentic information and facts leading to a deep understanding of the already handled topics and an active sharing of information by students in the class.

Blended learning has some points that make it significant and influential. It provides a more individualized learning experience as teachers can offer their students different tasks based on their abilities and learning styles. This matter can be difficult to be carried out in a traditional class. It also provides more personalized learning support, where students can be given notes and tips related to their particular tasks other than those that are generalized for the whole class. Students using blended learning activities in the current study received comments, suggestions, and responses on their blogs or discussion boards. On the other hand, the students in the traditional class did not receive any type of feedback but a grade on their tasks. Consequently, those students in the blended learning class possessed both integrative and instrumental motivation by receiving a comment back from their teacher or other classmates. They were able to communicate their ideas and thoughts, and at the same time, implicitly pick up language from different resources that would help them in the future. On the other hand, the students in the traditional classroom had the instrumental motivation of doing their class and homework tasks in order to get the "checkmark" and, therefore the credit for doing the job. However, there was no integrative motivation for doing the work. Blended learning instruction is also believed to increase learners' proficiency scores to a greater extent than those who only use face-to-face language instruction. This proficiency increase is likely caused by the augmented time spent studying by the group that participated in blended learning instruction.

It is also important to note that the results of the study are also consistent with the constructivist theories of learning. Students in the experimental group constructed their long-term knowledge by applying inductive learning strategies to improve their language skills in opposition to Chomsky's simplified notion of language learning as an unconscious process. Their knowledge occurred due

to critically analyzing critical concepts at their own pace in an individualized setting such as their homes. In this way, they improved their English language proficiency by consciously following taught strategies.

Probably, one of the most exciting outcomes of the study is that after 2015-16 blended learning was adopted for all students in the English department in the school. There have also been plans to train all teachers on the campus to enhance their knowledge and skills to use the blended learning approach.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that its participants demonstrate a significant improvement in their language proficiency as measured by IELTS due to the teaching method, and this achievement can be attributed to using blended learning instruction. Because blended learning supports and motivates independent and collaborative learning, increases student's involvement in education, supports and develops a variety of learning styles, provides a relaxing learning environment for the already learned outcomes, and provides flexible studying routine, it proved to be an impactful approach on students' performance in second language acquisition (SLA). Therefore, successful teaching methods are fundamental in developing the language proficiency of Emirati male students. The teaching method can either be a barrier or a learning opportunity, in this course, it appears to have a positive impact on students' learning of a second or foreign language.

In anchoring the findings of this study to the larger research literature, some of its limitations must be acknowledged, which may offer opportunities for further research. First, this study employs a true-experimental approach and so inevitably involves uncontrolled environmental variables that could influence the findings. Second, the subjects were all male Arabic-speaking Twelfth Grade Emirati students. Whether the same results would be obtained with students from other backgrounds majoring in other disciplines remains to be determined. Likewise, gender was another limitation that could have impacted the results of the study. Since the research was conducted on a group of male students, perhaps testing the instructional method on female students would have given varied findings. Moreover, because the study is restricted to a standardized test-the IELTS- the results could not be spread beyond the tools and rubrics of the IELTS.

About the Author:

Dr. Omar Al Noursi has been working as an EFL instructor for more than 20 years. Presently, he works for the IAT as a lead faculty and as an adjunct faculty at Abu Dhabi University. He has published refereed articles and presented papers in international conferences. Al Noursi is a member of reviewing teams for some specialized journals. Omar is a recipient of the GESS Award for Outstanding Contributions in Education, IAT External Participation Award, and Sheikh Hamdan Award for Distinguished Academic Performance.

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