EFL College Teachers and Students Perceptions of Using Blended Learning Contexts in Iraqi Learning Environment

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Abstract

Blended learning is defined as the combination of both online learning and the traditional face –to face learning .The current study aims at investigating EFL college teachers and students perceptions towards many dimensions of blended learning environment . It also aims at investigating what perceptions towards the aspects or factors of blended learning that college students viewed as the most important . To achieve these aims , the researcher has used two instruments , a structured interview which consists of five questions that are exposed to thirty college instructors and an adopted scaled questionnaire which contains thirty four items exposed to sixty college students from college of education(Ibn Rushd) for identifying their attitudes

towards blended learning contexts . After treating the results statistically, they show that both college teachers and students have positive perceptions towards using blended learning contexts .They also indicate that flexibility of learning and classroom learning are the most important factors of blended learning that perceived the more positive perceptions by college students.The results of the study also show that female college students have more positive perceptions than male students   on the blended learning contexts .

تصورات طلبة وتدريسي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة اجنبية في الجامعة لاستخدام سياقات التعلم المدمج في البيئة التعليمية العراقية

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المستخلص

التعلم المدمج هو عبارة عن الجمع بين التعلم الالكتروني والتعلم التقليدي (وجها لوجه). تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى استقصاء تصورات الطلبة وتدريسي الجامعة للغة الإنكليزية لغة اجنبية حول استخدام سياقات التعلم المدمج في البيئة التعليمية العراقية .وتهدف الدراسة أيضا الى معرفة أي من جوانب او عناصر التعلم المدمج تلقى اكثر تصورات إيجابية من قبل طلبة الجامعة.ولتحقيق اهداف الدراسة , اعدت الباحثة مقابلة منظمة مكونة من خمسة أسئلة موجهة الى ثلاثين تدريسيا في الجامعة واستبانة متبناة مكونة من اربع وثلاثون فقرة موجهة لستين طالبا جامعيا لمعرفة تصوراتهم حول سياقات التعلم المدمج ومعرفة أي من جوانب التعلم المدمج تلقى اكثر تصورا إيجابيا من قبل الطلبة .اظهرت النتائج بعد معالجتهااحصائيا ان كلا من الطلبة وتدريسي الجامعة لديهم تصورات إيجابية حول استخدام سياقات التعلم المدمج في البيئة التعليمية العراقية وان مرونة التعلم والتعلم الصفي هي الجوانب التي لاقت التصورات الأكثر إيجابية من قبل طلبة الجامعة وأشارت نتائج الدراسة أيضا ان الطلبة (الاناث) لديهم تصورات اكثر إيجابية من الطلبة (الذكور) حول سياقات التعلم المدمج .

Introduction

The evolution of technology has seen a tremendous improvement of the existing educational setting in recent years. The widespread usage of mobile technologies such as cellphones (smartphones), computes, and tablets has transformed traditional academic environments into virtual learning environments. Technology is extremely important for both communication and education, and they are both required and utilized in EFL classrooms. Because of its nature of accessibility and mobility, they are commonly used by most pupils. They brought together all of the best aspects of modern education, computer networking, mobile communication, and multimedia technologies. According to Wagner (2005), mobile learning, as one application of blended and virtual learning, facilitates accessible learning experiences and collaborative learning for both students and teachers, and it can take place anywhere and at any time outside of the classroom.

The term virtual learning environment refers to a learning process that is entirely reliant on the use of a computer-based environment or/and online resources. Curriculum mapping, electronic communication between students and teachers, and a defined method of evaluation, in addition to online student portfolios, are all required for this procedure (Al-Obaydi, 2020). On the other hand, Harmer (2012, P. 286) defines it as "an online site which students use to learn and interact". Scrivener (2011, P.343) demonstrates some aspects of virtual learning such as sending and reading messages, attaching and downloading documents, videos, and other media, posting effortlessly, swiftly marking posts, using automatic drills and exercises, and adding blogs and wikis are just a few of the characteristics of a virtual learning environment.

Blended learning, often known as "hybrid learning," combines traditional face-to-face learning with the use of technology or online resources in the classroom at the same time. According to Zhang and Zhu (2017, p. 673) blended learning is to "incorporate and integrate the strength of face-to-face and online learning in a synergistic manner to create a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose". Al-Obaydi (2021) clarified that "one of the main benefits of blended learning is the right construction of learners' personalities by being self-directed learners. They are no more dependent learners which in turn affect the humanistic approach to education".

Traditional teaching, often known as face-to-face instruction, occurs when a teacher and student in the educational institution meet in a classroom setting to teach and learn at the same time. All performances and exhibits of a work are permitted in this setting. Face-to-face interaction between the student and the educator, as well as the students themselves, is a significant asset of the traditional classroom. The teacher, as well as the other students, provides encouragement to the students. When a discussion occurs in the learning setting, the teacher frequently guides and promotes the conversation's emphasis so that it can be completed in a short period of time. Face-to-face teaching is a very successful method of acquiring knowledge and skills since it frequently incorporates a variety of learning methods such as writing, reading, conversation, presentations, projects, group work, film clips, demonstration, and practice.

Online classrooms are just as crucial in online learning as actual attendance in face-to-face learning. Students have the knowledge and expertise to effectively learn online and attend virtual classes on a regular basis. As a result, the researcher intends to conduct this study in order to understand the teachers'

and students perspectives on the use of the blended learning contexts in Iraqi learning environment . There are a plethora of studies in the literature on instructors' and students' attitudes about these learning environments in general and virtual classrooms in particular, particularly those studies on teachers' and students' attitudes toward technology in learning. However, there are few studies in Iraq to empirically examine the college teachers' and students perceptions of blended learning contexts. So, based on what is stated by Al-Obaydi(2020) that "the process of teaching via blended learning environment is not an easy task unless it is based on the real analysis that leads to satisfaction of both teachers and learners", and as most of the educational institutions move nowadays toward the use of blended learning as the main learning and teaching approach especially at universities , it is essential to investigate college teachers and students perceptions concerning the main aspects of blended learning in order to successfully be engaged in the various dimensions of this new trend of teaching English language . Depending on the discussion above, this study attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Do Iraqi EFL college teachers agree on the use of blended learning contexts as a main learning and teaching environment?

2. Do Iraqi EFL college students have positive perceptions towards the use of blended learning aspects as a main learning and teaching environment?

3-What perceptions to the blended learning factors or aspects are realized by Iraqi EFL students as the most important?

3. Are there any differences in Iraqi EFL college students perceptions of blended learning aspects based on a sex (male and female) ?

Literature Review

The term "electronic learning," which includes terms like "internet," "intranet," "virtual classroom," and "computer-based learning," refers to the practice of using electronic applications and software to enhance and improve learning. Universities nowadays are well equipped with all forms of technology to aid in the teaching and learning process. According to Al-Zaidiyeen, Mei and Fook (2010) Information and Communication Technologies have proven to be active and successful instructional instruments. They add that "it has extended and transformed the way students learn and teachers teach" (p. 211). Alahamdi and Alraddadi (2020) add that "the development of e-learning has expanded to a great extent to include a variety of online learning approaches such as virtual classes, video conferencing and blended learning" (p.57).

Nevas (2010) studied the students' performance and participation in blended learning, which combines face-to-face and online classes. The findings demonstrated that students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes communicated effectively in a variety of activities. On the other hand, Hariri and Bahanshal (2015) mentioned that in Saudi Arabia, researchers looked into L2 interaction through e-learning and blended learning in EFL classrooms, and discovered a link between students' English competency and the use of e-learning in addition to face-to-face lessons.

Bena and James (2001) determine some benefits to use the different types of technology in learning. They claim that technology improves pupils' abilities and inspires them to do their assignments with zeal. It also prepares pupils for work in a technologically advanced society. It also aids pupils in managing and utilizing information, allowing them to become more productive and responsible.

Toth and Davin (2016) stated that "highly effective pedagogy requires viewing language and language learning as both cognitive and social phenomena, and […] teachers who seek to truly understand their responsibilities do not have the luxury of choosing one perspective over the other" (p. 149). When this perspective is taken into account, as well as the more virtual nature of today's students' social life, teaching methods should be adjusted to ensure efficacy. The communication environments of our students have changed dramatically, and as a result, teaching methods must adapt "the diversity of environments that support teaching and learning" (Collins & Munoz, 2016, p.139). David and Grosu-Rădulescu (2016) mentioned that second language acquisition motivation appears to still rely on face-to-face interaction mediated by teachers, as studies have revealed.

Face-to-face language teaching is an educational method in which a group of students is taught course content and learning material in the classroom . This allows a learner and an instructor to engage in real time. It is the most common method of educational instruction. Additionally, learners gain from increased interaction with their classmates. The traditional classroom, often known as face-to-face instruction, is a setting in which the instructor and students of a nonprofit educational institution meet in a space dedicated to instruction and where teaching and learning occur simultaneously. Students there are aware of their progress in face-to-face learning at the class's designated meeting date and time. Face-to-face learning ensures a greater grasp and retention of lesson content, as well as the opportunity for class participants to bond. It is primarily a teacher-centered educational system that varies greatly between countries. Many modern educational systems have transitioned away from conventional face-to-face types of educational

instruction in favor of meeting the requirements of individual pupils.

Many research papers deal with using blended, virtual, and traditional classes. Al- Obaydi (2020) in a recent study showed that Iraqi teachers prefer using blended learning more than the other available two environments of learning, virtual and traditional face to face leaning. Alahamdi and Alraddadi (2020) revealed that the students were enthusiastic about using blended classes to study a foreign language. In this context, Cakiroglu (2014) said that incorporating the internet and its applications into the educational process aided in the growth of communication between students and teachers, as well as the sharing of knowledge resources. Fine and Bucceri (2004)described blended learning as an efficient integration of technologies, multiple learning techniques ,and delivery methods to meet knowledge sharing , specific communication and the learners informational needs .

Methodology
Participants

The sample of this study contains 30 college teachers of the English language and 60 students (fourth stage) from English department of college of Education for humanities   (Ibn Rushd) in Baghdad University .

The instruments

The researcher has used two instruments to attain the objectives of the study , a guided interview that consists of five questions to illustrate the college teachers opinions regarding blended learning contexts through the academic year 2021 - 2022. It should be noted that the researcher has recorded all the interviews that has been done with the college teachers so as to facilitate the task of gathering and analyzing the data . This

interview contains five questions with various multiple choice items for each and they relate to different aspects and dimensions of blended learning contexts .This instrument was constructed by the researcher and was exposed to members of experts to estimate its face validity .The time of the interview was an hour and approximately most of the interviewees finish in this exact time .

To achieve the second aim of this study which is investigating college students perceptions concerning blended learning contexts , the researcher has adopted Tang and Chaw (2013) a scaled questionnaire which consists of (34) items for measuring college students perceptions or attitudes towards six various aspects of blended learning as follows : flexibility of learning (4 items) , study management (6 items) , online interaction (7 items), classroom learning (5 items) technology (4 items) and online learning (8 items) .

Learning flexibility includes items on learning material and the freedom to decide when and where to study and at what pace . Study management reflects issues of how motivated the students are for organizing their time when they study on –line. Online interaction focuses on the students ability of using web technologies for collaborating with the other students in assignments and interacting with the teacher . Classroom learning emphasizes the students preferences of face to face interaction with the other students and the teacher . Technology reflects the students familiarity of digital technologies . Online learning refers to how comfortable the students feel about self - directed learning .

It is worth mentioning that the students are asked to show their perceptions to the 34 items of the adapted questionnaire on a likert scale of five points ranging from (strongly disagree , disagree ,neutral , agree to strongly agree) .

Results and Discussion .

Results of the first question .

The results of the first question are divided according to the questions of the interview:

1. **Do you agree that using blended learning can offer student-centered method to the processes of learning and teaching English language ?**

   (yes , partially agree ,No)

Answers of the teachers clarify that 83% of the sample agree that applying blended learning contexts can help in making student – centered classroom English language teaching .The sample of the study contains thirty college teachers and twenty five of them answered yes on this question , three of them said partially agree and two answered no.

2. **Do you think that using blended learning for English language teaching can enhance the learning experiences of the students ?**

   (most of the time , sometimes , never)

   Twenty two interviewees who represents 73 / of the sample answered (most of the time) , four teachers who represents 13 / of the participants said (sometimes)and the other 13 /   (four teachers) said never .

3. **Do you prefer using the variant techniques of assessment via blended leaning more than through face to face learning ?**

   (yes , partially agree , no)

   The result of this question indicates that twenty five out of thirty interviewee who represents 83 / of the sample answered yes , 13 / of the participant (four) said partially agree and only one interviewee(4 /) answered no on this question .

4 .Do you think that blended learning responds more appropriately to the learning styles of college students than would in face to face learning ?
(yes, I think so , No I don't think so)

Twenty six out of thirty interviewees who represents 87/ of the sample answered (yes , I think so) , four of them who represents 13 / of the participants said (No , I don't think so) .

5- Do you think that applying blended learning in Iraqi learning environment can yield better outcomes of learning English language ?
(yes , I think so , No I don't think so) .

The result shows that twenty seven interviewees who represents 90/ of the sample of the teachers answered (yes , I think so) and the other three who represents 10 / of the interviewees said (No , I don't think so) .

The results of the teachers responses on the questions of the interview indicate that most Iraqi college instructors have positive perceptions on the use of blended learning contexts as a main learning and teaching environment .This may be justified on the ground that they think that blended learning can give the best of both online and classroom learning by facilitating learning delivery by taking the advantages of both .Online learning provides some flexibility of learning which may not be found in a classroom learning , while Classroom environment offers the social interaction that is required for active learning.

Results of the second question

In order to answer the second question of this study , the students responses on the adopted questionnaire have been investigated by calculating the mean score value which reads 49. 09 and the standard deviation value which is 5. 008 . The researcher has applied the t-test formula of one sample and she found that the computed t- value 24.586 is higher than the tabulated t- value which is 2.000 at degree of freedom 58 and level of significance 0.05 . This result shows that EFL college students have positive perceptions or attitudes towards applying blended learning contexts in Iraqi learning environment .

Table 1- Results of the second question

Group	Sample	Mean	Standard deviation	Degree of freedom	t-value		Level of significance
					computed	Tabulated	0.05 Statistically significant
Male and female	60	49.09	5.008	58	24.86	2.000	

This finding shows that college students have positive perceptions of the use of blended learning contexts as a main learning and teaching environment .

Results of the third Question

To ascertain which perceptions or attitudes to the factors of blended learning are perceived or viewed by EFL students as the most essential , the researcher has used descriptive statistics as the means and the standard deviations for the purpose of the comparision . The results show that the students rated flexibility of learning (M=26.54) followed by classroom learning (

M=26.53) and technology (M=25.50) as the most important factors or aspects of blended learning .Online interaction was rated as the least important (M=24.99) .

Table -4- Perceptions towards factors or aspects of blended learning

Blended learning Factors	Number	Mean	SD
Flexibility of Learning	60	26.54	5.06
Classroom Learning	60	26.53	5.07
Technology	60	25.50	5.06
Online Learning	60	25.44	5.08
Online Environment	60	25.20	5.08
Online Interaction	60	24.99	5.10

Results of the fourth Question

To provide answer to the fourth question of this study , t-test formula of the two independent samples (female and male) is used by the researcher. The result indicates that the computed t-value is 6.626 is higher than the tabulated value 2 at the degree of freedom 58 and a level of significance 0.05 . This reflects that there are significant statistical differences between female and male college students perceptions of blended learning contexts and infavor of female students .

Table- 5 Results of the fourth Question

Group	sample	Mean	Standard deviation	Degree of freedom	t-value		Level of significance
Male	30	25.60	3.135	58	Computed	tabulated	0.05 statistically significant
Female	30	20.19	3.155		6.626	2	

Discussion and Conclusions

   The findings of this study reveal that Iraqi college English language teachers have positive perceptions towards the use of blended learning contexts as a main learning and teaching environment   . They are also satisfied with the surprising outcomes of applying this new trend or approach of learning in Iraqi learning and teaching environment .The justification of gaining this result is due to the fact that this type of learning has become   universal   nowadays   and   technology   become indispensable part of teachers life , so most of the learning environment especially at the college level seek for making technology an important part in the educational process . In addition , blended learning manifests a perfect fusion of online and classroom learning for providing an environment that is conductive for todays learners . In this respect , this study is congruent with Al-Obaydi (2021) study who found that most teachers prefer using blended learning environment to the other learning and teaching contexts as the traditional face to face learning and the virtual learning environment .

   The data also show that EFL college students have positive attitudes towards the use of blended learning contexts as a major learning environment . One possible explanation of this result can be that as the students are exposed to the strategies of the blended learning , they comfort with the web- based technologies and their ability to learn and communicate online effectively .Indeed studies as Hauser etal (2012) and Vance (2012) have referred to the students positive attitudes towards blended learning environment.

The findings also reveal that college students regard learning flexibility ,learning classroom and technology as the most important aspects or factors of blended learning .The main justification of this result is the fact that most college students

benefit from the flexibility in place and time as well as accessibility and cost -effectiveness in the blended learning environment that help them in fostering greater autonomy over their learning advancement and taking greater responsibilities for their studies . So , this study is in line with Smyth et al (2012) study and Birbal et al (2018) who assert the same result . The data also reveals that female college students have more positive attitudes concerning the use of blended learning environment as they may have a higher computer self –efficacy and they always seek for change and innovation in all life fields especially in the language learning and instruction field .On the other side , the current study is not in line with Yau and Cheng (2012) study who concludes that male students have more positive perception for using technology for blended learning than female students .

The results of the current study comes to prove that blended learning , by its diverse nature that is based on the combination of face to face teaching and technology , can overcome the obstacles posed by the traditional teaching and provide the college students with different opportunities that help them to be independent and autonomous learners .It can also enhance the confidence of students due to its flexibility in learning and presenting the material and meeting learners specific needs and interest . Therefore , it is essential for every college teachers and students to be engaged successfully in blended learning environment for the sake of enhancing teaching and learning English language .

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Appendix -1-

Questions of the Interview

1-Do you agree that using blended learning can offer student- centered method to the processes of learning and teaching English language ?

 (**yes , partially agree , no**)

2-Do you think that using blended learning for English language teaching can enhance the learning experiences of the students ?

(most of the time , sometimes , never)

3-Do you prefer using the variant techniques of assessment via blended leaning more than through face to face learning ?

(yes , partially agree   , no)

4 .Do you think that blended learning responds more appropriately to the   learning styles of college students than would in face to face learning ?

(yes , I think so , no , I don't think so)

5- Do you think that applying blended learning in Iraqi learning environment can yield   better outcomes of learning English language ?

(yes , I think so , no I don't think so)

Appendix –B-
Names of the Jury Member
1-Prof.Dr .Shaymaa Al- Bakri   University of Baghdad
College of Education
2-Prof . Dr. Salam Al- Timimi   University of Baghdad
College of Education
3-Prof .Dr. Fatin Al- Rifaiy   University of Baghdad
College of Education
3-Prof .Dr.Naqam Al-Samaray   University of Tikrit
College of Education
4-Prof .Dr.Fatima Al-Mousawi   University of Mysaan
College of Basic Education
5-Assist .Prof Liqaa Al -Obaydi   University of Diyala
College of Education