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(The challenge of using blended learning in the teaching of English

as a foreign language)

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Abstract

Interest in promoting quality English language teaching in foreign countries has been a long-standing government priority. English is considered the most important universal language in education and professional work. However, English teaching is focused on professional teaching and language skills without much emphasis on aspects of English as a culture and not merely a language. The relation between exposure to English-speaking cultures, mainly western, and EFL's competencies is a topic in EFL academic research that requires more investigation, especially in the context of non-native speakers in Arab countries. In education, the present advancements in the technology field have resulted in renewed interests to blend conventional teaching and learning approaches with technologies that improve teaching and learning of language. This research aims to examine the works regarding blended education challenges as a technology-improved pedagogical instrument that combines face-to-face and e-learning instructional tasks to develop English skills, including its applications in coaching English as a new language. Besides, this work explores how blended learning enables students to become engaged and autonomous in knowledge development instead of acting as a passive observers. It is anticipated that the article shall contribute to improving the knowledge body which exists in the blending learning area, mainly as it applies to the experience acquisition issues in EFL. It can be argued that blended learning applications can support EFL learning and maximize opportunities for EFL students to study English at their convenience freely. Some challenges should be resolved or addressed, such as ensuring that the designs of blended learning methods put into consideration learning approaches of learners and the workload needed to be effective, the library facilities can deliver this kind of method, and e-learning materials are suitably supportive, and learners can easily access them.

Introduction

The quick global advancements in technology have expanded English use as the communication language on the internet (Mohammed, 2018). It is crucial to appreciate the prospects that modern technologies present for the students learning the English language even though such developments appear to monopolize individuals' time, whether they are being used for work, shopping, or leisure (Khoshaim, 2017). The applications of electronic educational technologies allow for modification of education courses and programs to capabilities, needs, and wants of students that positively affect their academic achievement and performance.

For example, EFL learners' English language competence levels remain unsatisfactory regardless of the substantial amounts of projects to develop a range of professional development programs, EFL curricula, and textbooks in Saudi Arabia (Alkubaidi, 2014). A significant challenge is that majority of conventional classrooms are educator-based. Therefore, learners are not used to questioning each other, arguing, or involving in open debates. Students rather just sit, listen and accept whatever their teachers are saying. Past studies such as Khoshaim (2017) and Alkubaidi (2014) have established the predominant educator-based methods have led to a lack of learner attention and involvement. For instance, some learners fall asleep, talk with one another during the lessons, and use their cell phones or laptops, making the lectures quite dull. Research by Albiladi & Alshareef (2019) established that in Saudi Arabia, most EFL school learners are anxious students since they are used to teacher-centered education. What these students do is memorize what their teachers are teaching them. The learners, as a result, seem reluctant to ask or even attempt to speak in English and t unresponsive to communicating in class discussions.

Also, a lack of motivation exists among EFL learners (Sockett, 2014). International students usually show no interest in class activities concerning the English language. Albiladi & Alshareef (2019) observed that foreign learners suffer from a lack of motivation and enthusiasm in EFL classrooms. Long class hours of English, up to four-five hours daily in some higher education institutions, for example, with the same classroom locations and teachers to concentrate on only language skills, can demotivate learners toward English as Foreign Language. Alhaisoni and Rahman (2013) also noted that there is a lack of motivation to assist students in developing their English skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and adjusting their attitudes toward English even though in Saudi Arabia is offered as a compulsory subject in the elementary level from the four years when students are aged ten years.

Online learning in general and blended learning, in specific as noted by Mohammed (2018), allow learners to practice their foreign languages, such as English, in stress-free settings that considerably lead to their proficiency and knowledge (Sitthitikul, 2011). The research findings might foster effective blended learning implementation by offering meaningful recommendations to resolve the challenges and when implementing blended learning in other educational contexts because blended learning applications are in their initial phases, majorly in the Asian educational systems (Al-Alwani, 2014). In this work, the phrase blended education is utilized as an educational method of describing the integrations of computer-mediated communications such as discussion boards, online chats, and virtual learning classes with face-to-face instructions, to assist learners in utilizing a variety of asynchronous activities (not taking place at the same time) and online synchronous events (taking place at the same time) which can facilitate communication, improve English language skills and trigger learning.

Subject

Technologies in EFL Pedagogies

Pedagogies have long concentrated on communicative competence importance and constructivist principles in the field of EFL (Warschauer 2000). Therefore, the concentration has been on how technologies can encourage peer learning or minimize the distance between learners and educators (Forsman, 2010). This implies that technologies in English as a foreign language are much more concentrated on technologies as tools that give learners "access to curricula or teachers in a single physical setting" (Warschauer, 2000). This is primarily illustrated in CALL (computers-oriented language learning). (Mihai & Purmensky (2016) define computer-assisted language learning as designing in three phases since the 1970s. Bax (2003) connected every stage to predominant time pedagogy; such mainframe technologies were utilized in grammar-translation pedagogies for practice and drilling. In the 1980s and 1990s, personal computers were then created in tandems with communicative pedagogies paying attention to communication activities before discipline-based communications and integrative pedagogies were created alongside internet and multimedia capability to offer access to materials of authentic learning (Bax, 2003). Therefore, literature on teaching English to the speaker of other languages (TESOL) draw a close relationship between learning philosophies, medium, and pedagogies in a manner that is debatably more widely not present in the literature of higher learning.

It has been argued that TESOL has robust experimentation and innovation culture, maybe based on action study traditions, where new strategies are rapidly tried and then normalized such that "it is a question as to how effectively not whether" technologies are utilized EFL (Akkakoson, 2013, p. 423). The technologies utilized to help with reading and learning English in Thailand are the

best examples of this (Mihai & Purmensky, 2016). Technologies more effectively support "coordinated use of various approaches to negotiating the meanings of texts" to the level that learners taught applying CALL are less likely to embrace the passive, bottom-up, and unhelpful approaches overly concentrated on anonymous vocabularies that are often related to EFL reading strategies of Thai learners learning in the United States.

Also, innovations in teaching writing within EFL have utilized technologies to generate writings in different formats and multi-modal texts and find more authentic models, thus discreetly focusing learners on the need to consider audiences when writing (Gruszczynska, Merchant, & Pountney, 2013). At their most innovative, writing pedagogies in EFL have also incorporated broadening engagement agenda plans such as the learner-based Open textbook, peer learning, and self-directed learning that conceptualize writings as a portion of a more comprehensive digital literacy.

Trinder (2017) observed that learners have easy access to various technologies for research, communications with each other, and entertainment. Trinder (2017) added that the internet offers exposure to usage of the English language with facilities to download and stream TV series and movies in particular contexts and settings that have been previously impossible. With much of the interactions carried out using English as a communication medium, many individuals extensively use the internet, making the internet an essential technology in formal class activities (Toffoli & Sockett, 2015). Youths and teenagers, especially students, spend more time studying and using the English language through the internet than within the classroom confines. Recent research by Keislings (2018) established that it was not only education methods that required to be modified to house the applications of contemporary technologies as part of studying. The research explored the library service effectiveness for college learners. The scholar noted that the library should use

vital user examination programs to scale what they learn about their transforming clienteles to review and improve its services within budgets.

Blended Learning

The traditional education models for learning institutions before the eruption of Coronavirus have been classroom environments with educators providing instructions and learners listening and taking notes (Yang, 2012). One-on-one interactions among educators and learners have been critical in the education setting. Covid-19 eruption defied the traditional education models by providing unrestricted breaks in the education systems. COVID-19 eruption forced learning institutions to integrate online learning by incorporating ICT technologies. It is asserted that learners can study more via online education than via out-of-date lecture room approaches, maybe because they become more engaged in the education processes through interactivities (Banditvilai, 2016). Flexibility is one of the main features of online education.

The prevailing Coronavirus pandemic has compelled most education systems to integrate one-on-one learning and teaching alternatives (Al Zumor et al., 2013). Many education systems moved activities online to enable instructions to closures of learning institutions. Learning institutions have to reinvent themselves by searching for alternate teaching means such as online teaching and more autonomous learning for pupils (Guangying, 2014). This will require the government and other stakeholders to adopt policies and long-term goals to address future disruptions to the education sector. The pandemic effects on education are connected with many other impacts, such as the lack of nutritious food for many children who depend on schools for nutrition in various parts of the world (Hamdan et al., 2017). Schools and educational facilities also contribute to the employment of many whose revenue loss impacts families negatively.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most learning institutions embraced e-learning technologies as the following sensible approach to teach students and prevent the spread of the virus (Ja'ashan, 2015). Online learning is considered an educational strategy for the future that many educational institutions have continued to embrace and integrate to help curb the spread of Coronavirus. Some experts have moved ahead to anticipate that the "residential-based approaches" (learners taking classes at predetermined locations and times) in the near future will be a thing of the past. Despite the challenges, students could adapt to the new education technologies of full distance learning (Ja'ashan, 2015). Most students supported that blended education that combines distance and classroom learning can be implemented to make learning easier during the pandemic.

Creating a strong attitude toward learning can assist learners in overcoming some of the possible concerns posed by e-learning, for example, maintaining sufficient motivation or remaining focused during online classes (Guangying, 2014). Also, they are essential in supporting learners utilizing ICT (information and communication technologies) and efficiently using modern technologies for education. Intrinsic motivation to learn, positive attitude toward learning, and self-regulation play a crucial role in enhancing performance in schools in general but can be particularly vital should e-learning continue.

The dispositions and attitudes of students are affected to a higher level by the role models they are interacting with and the support they get from teachers and parents (Banditvilai, 2016). Diverse support forms from educators and parents, including educator enthusiasm and parental emotional support, are crucial for developing positive attitudes toward education. Educator enthusiasm and parental emotional support can ensure learners acquire dispositions and attitudes to maximize their abilities to make the most of the e-learning opportunities (Al Zumor et al., 2013). Due to a lack of curricular guidelines, a lack of time, and insufficient digital skills, some teachers and parents

can struggle to offer such support. To enhance guidance and information to parents on practical approaches supporting their children's education, education systems need to strengthen cooperation between parents and schools (Hamad, 2017). Educators also need support to successfully integrate technologies into their teaching methods and practices and assist learners in overcoming some of the concerns related to e-learning settings.

Important Theories

It is necessary to explore what takes place in the valuable strategy instructions, reading processes, and reading comprehension strategies to effectively offer students substantial help needed in reading. Practical reading comprehension instructions focus on the proximal development zone (ZPD) and the social and cognitive constructivist strategies.

Psychological and pedagogical studies discuss the significance of students' engagement in the process of learning and the results of this involvement. Moats & Foorman (2003) argued that the cognitive development outcome is thinking. Students' minds need to go beyond the particular information to discover problem-solving processes and generic concepts. Catts & Kamhi (1999) argued that metacognition awareness is essential for reading comprehension. Metacognition awareness refers to the action carried out by the student to evaluate, plan, and monitor a particular reading activity's success. It thus involves the utilization of reading approaches and comprehension occurrence consciousness.

Social constructivist learning models and theory explain how students learn and acquire knowledge (Stahl & Murray, 1994). Social constructivist learning theory asserts that interactive learning needs to occur because students construct personal and knowledge interpretation applying prior experiences and knowledge. This theory includes the concept that knowledge is a human

construction. Moreover, literacy investigators have been influenced by Vygotsky (1978). His proximal development zones and well-applied formulations affect literacy researchers. Vygotsky (1978) argued that children's mental functions have a social origin. The collaborations with adults mediate them, supporting the gradual responsibility release until the children can self-reliantly learn something new and effectively carry out the tasks (McCutchen, Abbott, et al., 2002). Thus, the roles of classroom instructions, teachers, and peers have got significantly focused by studies on literacy learning.

It has been proven that good teaching of reading must include some decoding rules and phonics instruction (Stahl & Murray, 1994). Earle & Sayeski (2016) assert that phonics is essential in teaching reading; it provides students with explicit tools to decode. From this process comes the ability to achieve fluency in reading. The recognition of letter-sound correspondence leads to solid decoding skills, which can build a reliable prediction for children's reading achievement in the future (Earle & Sayeski, 2016). Besides, phonics allows children to become independent readers through the decoding process; it is necessary to develop children's abilities to read without assistance from teachers or adults.

Furthermore, teaching phonics to build reading skills should occur in the kindergarten and preschool stages. Research confirms that teaching early-year students to decode words enhances students' future achievement more than later or any other approach (McCutchen, Abbott, et al., 2002). Researchers in this scope state that reading instruction that emphasizes the systematic phonics in the early years' stage of learning will lead to a strong base of learning and effective teaching of beginning reading.

However, the phonics approach is sometimes criticized for emphasizing decoding letters rather than reading to understand and get meaning out of the text being read (Earle & Sayeski, 2016). In

this stance, Earle & Sayesk (2016) proved that in terms of reading for understanding, better results were achieved using methods that focus on decoding at the beginning than using methods that emphasize meaning. Here comes the importance of phonics for beginning reading instruction. At the very early stage, if children do not master the critical reading tool (decoding), they will not read new texts or books later. As a result, they will not understand what is written.

On the other hand, voices have been advocating that reading instructions should be done in a natural context, focusing on the comprehension of written words with little emphasis on their forms; this approach is commonly known as the whole-language approach (Earle & Sayeski, 2016). Indeed, it isn't easy to define the whole-language method because its proponents identify it as a philosophy of teaching rather than a specific approach. A holistic ideology supports a meaning-emphasis strategy, which claims that teachers should create a setting where they follow top-down reading instruction. As in the phonics approach, it focuses on comprehension as a starting goal rather than an ending pursuit. The whole-language system draws teachers' and children's attention to the overall language, not to the little bits of it like sounds or words, to help them understand what is being read. It suggests that teaching reading should be done contextually in genuine and authentic literacy experiences, starting with immersing children in a whole text (McCutchen, Abbott, et al., 2002). Students break the text into parts, and then they would reconstruct the text so that students can use the language in meaningful ways.

McCutchen, Abbott, et al. (2002) stated that reading is not only about interpreting or decoding written words, but it allows children to give meaning to writing. Also, advocates of the whole-language approach emphasize that even if children eventually master phonics, they will go no further than "recoding" print into oral form; they will become "word callers." They will not be able to understand much of what is written. By contrast, whole-language teachers claim that the

fundamental purpose of reading is to get meaning from print, which happens when teachers take advantage of the mother tongue, natural and language-rich environments, communications, and relationships. Reading proficiency begins from children's previous reservoir, what they have acquired as oral language competence (McCutchen, Abbott, et al., 2002). Eventually, the oral and written language systems will interact and support each other in the reading process.

Different perspectives can be viewed, including cognitive, educational, philosophical, physiological, affective, and sociocultural viewpoints. This research assumes cognitive learning models and theory aligned with Vygotsky's proximal development zone and social constructivism. Therefore, it follows the reading definition that involves students' mental processes in understanding diverse texts. These interests emerge from the claims that comprehending reading as a cognitive process is necessary for learning other strategies (McCutchen, Green, et al., 2009). The student's awareness of these processes, known as metacognition, is essential for monitoring their comprehension of texts, and research viewed the reading comprehension process as a cognitive and complex process. Therefore, this research considers reading as a cognitive process. A critical aspect of the English language is called phonics, which creates a relationship between alphabets (graphemes) and corresponding sounds (phonemes). In other words, phonics refers to reading by utilizing the Alphabetic principle; the reader focuses on a letter or group of letters' shapes and corresponding sounds. According to McCutchen, Abbott et al. (2002), once students hear a strange word, they use phonics to think about the letter shape and its associated sound and combine those letters to sound a familiar word out.

Many other reasons contribute to children's Reading and Writing learning; researchers confirmed that teachers have a significant role in teaching. Well qualified teachers are dedicated to helping their early graders succeed in Reading and Writing and handle print effortlessly (Earle & Sayesk,

2016). Highly effective classroom instruction includes strong content knowledge and pedagogical understanding, having teachers know what to teach and how to deliver the content to students. In the early reading and writing instruction, content knowledge and pedagogy require teachers to master the concept and skills of phonological awareness.

Possible challenges of Utilizing blended to support the development of English Language Skills

Several scholars exploring the BL problems have determined various challenges experienced by education institutions such as confusing instructions in Blackboards, workload, technical issues and lack of internet connectivity, and challenges faced by teachers and learners. English language educators lack the awareness of explicit instructions and the reading-learning strategies that improve learners' understanding (McCutchen, Abbott, et al., 2002). After exploring the classroom interactions in Qatar secondary schools, Ja'ashan (2015) argued that the "approach-in-application" in the studied learning institutions was not compatible with the formal English curricula adopting communicative language strategy. More current research twenty years later confirmed the ineffective instruction comprehension in Qatar public learning institutions. Ja'ashan (2015) argued that reading educators contributed little to word knowledge, language acquisitions of learners, and reading comprehension approaches during extracurricular reading interventions carried out in public schools. Skills required to implement this strategy may not be obtained yet by educators and students. However, Qatar's significant education reform objectives are to transform teachers' instructional practices into learner-oriented teaching.

Recent studies have tended to indicate that technologies offer both challenges and opportunities for educational institutions and students (Gordon, 2014; Ja'ashan, 2020). For learners, the chances of using blended learning strategies and technologies are that these allow students to have elements

of control over where, how, and when they study while permitting learners to customize their learning to the level that they can steer their ways through education materials with the supports of education systems best for their learning style. Also, this education flexibility is essential to environments that provide this approach type, especially regarding distance and part-time students, even though problems are encountered regarding the delivery of collaborative and safe learning settings enabling the maximum utilization of resources while also regulating and controlling plagiarism possibilities.

Learners studying English as a second language also encounter problems regarding internet use for supplementary readings. Hamdan, Mohamad, and Shaharuddin (2017) studied the factors affecting second language students' reading comprehension and their perceptions toward TESL. The scholars identified various aspects impacting learners' reading comprehension using semi-structured interviews, the Think Aloud Protocol, and reflective notes as methods of data collection. Both the designs and displays of reading materials were discovered to be essential, especially regarding long texts. The students felt that they would aid their reading comprehension if audio materials, videos, tables, pictures, diagrams, and illustrations were also availed with the texts. Also, they outlined the importance of the glossary to their comprehension. The learners acknowledged being distracted by the accessible social media platforms' accessibility, advertisements on websites, and poor internet connections that had detrimental impacts on their reading comprehension.

Matching learners with suitable programs to achieve their specific needs and characteristics is another challenge noted by Kintu, Zhu, and Kagambe (2017). The authors explored the blended learning setting effectiveness via analyses of the relationships between design features, individual student characteristics, and background and learning outcomes. The findings showed that several

design features and learner characteristics were important indicators regarding student-education outcomes when using blended approaches toward studying. The willingness of practitioners to engage with it is equally essential to the effective delivery of courses using technologies. This involved investigating nine educators involved in an online Bachelor of Science program using phenomenographic strategies. While novice educators who originally had more teacher-focused conceptions showed more rapid changes in their attitudes, the results determined apparent variations among novice and experienced educators. Experienced and competent educators showed virtually no changes in their conceptions. According to Englund et al. (2017), it was necessary to support conceptual changes as part of practitioners' continuous professional development (CPD) activities in ensuring the most successful applications of educational technologies. Kintu, Zhu, and Kagambe (2017) also made similar observations. The researchers argued that concerns of practitioners regarding utilizing asynchronous platforms to foster learning and reflections could be tackled by adopting online discussion protocols, with a focus on the facts debate threads might be resources for reviews themselves in that they trace and illustrate learner comprehension of particular matters and learning.

According to Sign and Reed (2001), students need to approach blended learning as a journey instead of a destination. This points out the significance of establishing successful plans to ensure success in the implementation policy of blended learning. Hamad (2017) also explored the literature on the nature of challenges and benefits when applying BL in educational systems in Saudi Arabia. The researcher illustrated the most necessary element to ensure that learners have the best possible chances of accomplishing the set objectives were assessments. Also, the scholar recommended a clear comprehension of challenges that can be experienced before BL implementations would be necessary because this method is relatively new in the global contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, applying contemporary technologies as part of blended learning is valuable and desirable regarding developing computer literacy and learning English. In many learning places, online learning has become the new normal with the major aim of averting the Covid-19 pandemic effects. Besides, the e-learning benefits can help mitigate the effects of conventionalism and deferment in the education institutions and foster the development of the critical thinking skills of students as would be anticipated in traditional residential practices if exploited effectively. Even though research myriads have proved that it is a student-and-action-based model that has the potentials to accomplish optimal education and learning outcomes when applied successfully, online learning more often than not has been criticized for being unable to engage learners amply. Understandably, in residential systems, teaching learners to develop critical thinking skills has been challenging because it needs the physical presence of students and faculty to participate in the analyses and syntheses of complex concepts for applications, clarity and better assimilations. To successfully apply the same in an e-learning setting will need augmented knowledge in the subject matters as well as knowledge in the e-learning dynamics, including applications of germane instructional strategies, contexts and influential theories.

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