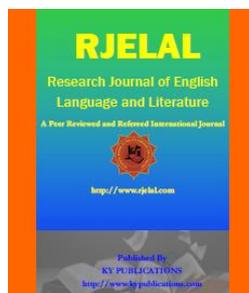**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

ADOPTING BLENDED LEARNING INSTRUCTION TO PROMOTE LEARNERS' ORAL COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the effect of Blended Learning on learners' oral competence and determine students and teachers' attitudes towards Blended Learning (BL). This study was instigated from reviewing of interrelated literatures and resources taken from different references, journals and previous studies. These resources defined BL as a combination of face-to-face and online learning. The study was carried out on a sample of 40 participants: 19 teachers and twenty-one students at Taif University, KSA. Two questionnaires were adopted to measure how BL can help to promote learner's oral competence and enhance fluency in terms of speaking English as foreign language. Teachers and students' questionnaires revolve round the attitudes, Application of Blended Learning and Developing Oral Competence. The two questionnaires were investigating the adoption of Blended Learning as an effective approach for promoting learners' oral competence in English EFL departments. The preliminary data were collected from various resources and previous studies. However, the core data were gathered and retrieved from collected from respondents (19 teachers and 21 students) whom were selected to adopt the BL in " situational English" course within the duration of 4 months. During this period Blended Learning and modern learning environments as well as the appropriate online materials were used to promote learning English as a foreign language and spoken English skills in particular. The study followed the descriptive and analytical approach of research design to assess and examine the integration and application of Blended Learning in situational English for English fluency purposes. The overall findings of the study showed no significant different attitudes between teachers and students attitudes towards BL and its application to develop oral competence. Finally, the study recommends intensive application of BL in English language oral courses to promote oral performance and competence.

Key Words: Blended learning, attitudes, oral competence, face to face

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age of today, modern approaches of teaching English as foreign language adopts new technologies in language learning and teaching to adequately reflect the current needs, attitudes and tendencies of the digital society.

This paper addresses the effect of establishing the trend of Blended Learning instruction in English Foreign Language (EFL) classes in five colleges at

Taif universities, KSA where technologies are required for teaching. It focuses on experiencing this type of learning where learners will be engaged in various types of communication task using internet and face-to-face communication.

In the case of Taif university branches, students do not practice adequately spoken English inside classrooms let alone outside their classrooms. Therefore, they need motivation to practice English to develop their communicative competence. One of the ways of doing this is BL learning instruction and technology involvement. Technology involvement is required in teaching and learning as it represents the medium through which students learn better. Nevertheless, conventional teaching and learning approaches still dominate classrooms and the One-man-show still is dominate as well at tertiary level. Thus, BL is required for their case because they can use face-to-face and online materials to develop their communicative competence.

Furthermore, the system of teaching at the university follows communicative approach (CA) as the optimal method that used in EFL classes to enhance oral competence. However, the researcher has observed the CA to be inadequate to ensure learners proficiency in language learning in this context. Instead, BL is appropriate due the challenges of the digital world such as globalization, internet, computer and modern methods of teaching and learning. Therefore, BL is required instead of other method because it gives the students and teachers more chances to develop oral competence outside classrooms. Finally, the study is believed to achieve varieties of objectives to raise the quality of teaching EFL through Blended Learning instruction for oral competency.

1. Objectives of the study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

a) To raise oral competence of students of English at Taif University through blending learning instruction, online activities and diversified using web technologies (online tools).

b) To identify best practices for Blended Learning in English as a foreign language (EFL) programs.

c) To reduce the oral practice anxiety in classrooms and develop learners' motivation.

2. Hypotheses:

Two hypotheses are examined in this study: the first hypothesis is that student's oral communication output is below the average due to limited conversation opportunities made only inside the classrooms; (2) the second hypothesis is that most students do not participate in real oral conversation due to psychological factors such as anxiety, lack of confidence and motivation and time factor.

3. Blended Learning (BL)

Blended Learning (BL) is a face-to-face learning as a traditional method accompanied by online learning. It is often defined as the combination of face-to-face and online learning (Williams, 2002). Many educators described the term as having the potential to transform educational delivery and content. As for Little John & Pegler (2007:3), BL fosters flexibility in time, enabling asynchronous working, and in space, allowing students to learn outside campus and classroom. Moreover, it is described as the mixture of traditional learning and e-learning environments. The reason for this combination is to make it possible for students to enhance their oral competence. On the other hands, Garrison &Kanuka (2004: 97) illustrates Blended Learning as representing "a fundamental re-conceptualization and reorganization of the teaching and learning dynamic" and identify that "what makes BL particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a community of inquiry." Blended learning is a flexible approach that combines face-to-face teaching/learning with remote (usually internet-based) learning, (Harvey, 2004–9). It is regarded as combination of learning components and learning events to create a meaningful learning.(Khan 2010: 2).

Wilson (2005) examined the combination of e-learning and lessons; e-learning before a lesson, e-learning in a lesson and , e-learning after a lesson, and reported that e-learning in a lesson is effective

SIDDIG AHMED ALI & MOHAMMED ABDALLAABDALGANE

for presentation of new materials and review as students have access to a teachers instruction and can receive feedback. According to Thorne BL (2003:16) is the most logical and natural evolution of our learning and It suggests an elegant solution to the challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of learners. Thus, BL represents an opportunity to integrate the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning.

4.   The salience of Blending Learning

The main reasons for establishing a BL approach in English oral setting is to increase classroom contact hours by adding more hours for oral practice. BL is considered salient as it creates motivation and flexibility in learning that congruent with the desire and interest of the students. In this regards, Burgon and Williams (2003) emphasized the importance of BL for student, he states that BL arouses the interest of the students and that their satisfaction increases in terms of oral practice. Likewise, BL provides flexibility and convenience for the learners. By and large, through BL students could be exposed to authentic material and real environment of English that embody culture and knowledge needed to develop their communicative competence. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) identified six uses and benefits for BL:

(a) To be used for pedagogical richness,

(b) To have access to knowledge,

(c) To improve social interaction,

(d) To make personal agency,

(e) To increase cost effectiveness, and

(f) To ease of revision.

Above all, BL is salient because it represents a real opportunity to create learning experiences that can provide the right learning at the right time and in the right place for all students at schools, universities and even at home. It can be truly universal, crossing global boundaries and bringing groups of learners together through different cultures and time zones. In this context, blended learning could become one of the most significant developments of the 21st century (Thorne, 2003:31).

5.   BL environments and styles:

The rapid emergence of technological innovations over the past few years has had a huge impact on the possibilities for learning in online environments and styles. Such environments as synchronous and asynchronous facilitate communication. Synchronous learning refers to a group of people learning the same things at the same time in the same place. This type is conventionally followed at schools and used for undergraduate programs however; it is not applicable in graduate programs. Asynchronous environment usually uses online materials and resources. In this type, the learners can share knowledge and information outside the constraints of time and place of classrooms formal settings. This type is based on constructivist theory, a student-centered approach that emphasizes the importance of peer-to-peer interactions. Abrams (2003) compared the effects of synchronous and asynchronous text-based communication on the quality and quantity of language produced and did not find significant differences between the two modes (Abrams 2003). However, in some instructional contexts, student-learning outcomes are reportedly superior in asynchronous online discussion rather than face-to-face discussion (Wang 2004; Koory, 2003). In this regard, synchronous chat, with attempts to emulate face-to-face discussion, is often viewed as inferior to asynchronous online communicative exchange (McDonald, 2002). Synchronous tools enable real-time communication and collaboration in a "same time-different place" mode.

A synchronous learning environment supports live, two-way oral or visual communication between the teachers and the students, which can facilitates the transfer of knowledge from teachers to the students.

Synchronous learning also incorporates these elements:

- Provides a dialectic learning environment with varying levels of interactivity
- Encourages spontaneity of responses
- Allows for optimal pacing for best learning retention
- Allows for immediate reinforcement of ideas
- Controls length of instruction when completion time is a constraint

- Is constrained by time, but not place

An asynchronous learning environment exists when communication between the instructor and the student is not real-time. Examples of asynchronous instruction in a distance learning environment are the use of text materials (print or electronic), and online discussion boards where students respond to questions from the instructor or other students. Asynchronous learning also incorporates these elements:

- Provides more opportunity for reflective thought
- Not constrained by either time or place
- Delays reinforcement of ideas
- Provides flexibility in delivery of content
- May have higher attrition rate, may extend time for completion interaction among learners, and is usually observed in the form of asynchronous realized via email, voice mail, forum and discussion boards, blogs and Wikis. Although synchronous environment is very promising in the promotion of spoken/conversational skills, it is not always the very first choice because it facilitates 'anywhere', but not 'anytime' interaction.

The learners need to be online concurrently which could be quite difficult in cases where the learners have different commitments in terms of time. Moreover, in cases where the learners are spread on a large geography, time differences might make synchronous interaction inconvenient.

6. The ingredients of BL

There are five key ingredients emerge as important elements of a blended learning process proposed by Carman (2005)which improve oral competence of the students:

a. Live Events: Synchronous, instructor-led learning events in which all learners participate at the same time, such as in a live "virtual classroom."

b. Online Content: Learning experiences that the learner completes individually, at his own speed and on his own time, such as interactive, Internet-based or CD-ROM training.

c. Collaboration: Environments in which learners communicate with others, for example, e-mail, threaded discussions and online chat.

d. Assessment: A measure of learners' knowledge. Pre-assessments can come before live or self-paced events, to determine prior knowledge, and post-assessments can occur following scheduled or online learning events, to measure learning transfer.

e. Reference Materials: On-the-job reference materials that enhance learning retention and transfer, including PDA downloads, and PDFs.

7. Blended Learning as an effective instruction

 BL instruction is a new approach teaching and learning that is being promoted at many universities involving an integration of learning technologies and face-to-face teaching. It focuses on communication, integration and collaboration. These three skills can not only hone students' English language proficiency but also develop oral communication.

BL in an EFL setting combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of online environment (Dziuban et al., 2004). ELearning can allow access to target language culture through the use of videos, blogs, chat rooms, and discussion forums (Duff & Uchida, 1997).

These tools allow EFL learners to have more access to native speakers' language. AL-Jarf (2006) argues that online atmospheres help to make the students feel relaxed. The exposure of the students to onliner authentic materials and tasks enables the learners to use the process of practicing all language skills. In addition, the online activities facilitate the self-directed learning in relevance to the course material (Barenfanger, 2005).

BL is a coherent design approach that openly assesses and integrates the strengths of face-to-face and online learning to address worthwhile educational goals (D. Randy Garrison and Norman D. Vaughan, 2008)). Teaching and learning process is becoming learner-centered rather than the traditional methods in which teachers' role used to be dominant. In blended learning, the study flexibility is unlimited so that it creates motivation

and no boredom and the students can refer to the online materials in they need to them. Thus, it increases the opportunities of learning.

On the other hand, BL is used to describe a solution that combines several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, Web-based courses, EPSS, and knowledge management practices. Blended Learning also is used to describe learning that mixes various event-based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning and self-paced instruction."

Furthermore, Blended Learning systems (BLS) provide an opportunity for reaching a large, globally dispersed audience in a short period with consistent, semi-personal content delivery and learning Tool.

In this blended instructional mode, collaborative learning part in pairs is based on the notion of peer tutoring (Goodlad 1985), where students learn through instructing each other what is wrong, and the notion of peer assessment (Davies 1999), where students assess each other"s performance. Collaborative learning in pairs or in groups would be effective in language acquisition as it helps increase interactions among students and both input and output in the classroom (Pica & Doughty, 1985). BL style that includes collaborative learning, has been highly evaluated and widely recognized recently (Gagne et al., 2005:334). The teacher's instruction in this combination was based on the notion of teacher's appropriate scaffolding for students in the Vygotsky's theory (Van Der Stuyf 2002). Therefore, BL is regarded as multiple approaches of teaching such as self-paced, collaborative or inquiry-based study.

Self-paced learning implies solitary, on-demand learning at a pace that is managed or controlled by the learner. Collaborative learning on the other hand implies a more dynamic communication among many learners that brings about knowledge sharing. The blending of self-paced and collaborative learning may include review of important literature on a regulatory change or new product followed by a moderated; live online, peer-to-peer discussion of the material's application to the learner's job and customers.

8.   Blended Learning and oral competence

The ultimate goal for foreign language learning is to develop communicative competence along with a number of strategies, which will help the student learn how to learn and cope with the difficulties communication. On this concern, Vlachos (2006a) says mastering a foreign language in schools is a complex and demanding learning procedure in which teacher led instruction is central, because students and especially young learners need support, encouragement and guidance in the learning process, which is progressive and life-long, since it is going to continue and be enriched throughout the students' lives. Therefore, BL is required provide new options for communications.

Blended Learning is an appropriate learner-centered approach where students can be actively engaged in different setting and situations. When integrating face-to-face and online learning the students have the chance to practice speaking and listening to English outside the classroom. BL addresses more learning styles and increased performance. It raises learners' communicative competence and oral competence as well. In spoken course for instance like situational English, the students can be exposed to online materials to enhance the oral performance. These online materials make the learners motivated, positive and active. The learners can share ideas discuss material in English and debate in English with no fear or procrastination. Online classes are usually virtual classes that enable the learners to study by themselves and refer to the materials when needed. As explained by Aydın and Yuzer (2006), the virtual classroom is composed of six main parts:

1. Content provider interface (slides, whiteboard, questions, video, images, web page Director and breakout rooms for learner interaction).

2. Learner interface (lesson content, File sharing, instructor-learner interaction [question and answers either in voice or text chat], Instructor's video and tabs that present the content).

3. Instructor interface (with control facilities).

4. Management interface (scheduling and login purposes).

5. Recorded Lesson interface (lessons archive accessible to students for review).

6. Database (Records of activity per student – attendance, oral/written participation rates, number of questions answered correctly and topic initiation rates).

Yuzer (2007) also discusses the virtual classroom project with a focus on the use of video conference in generating virtual eye contact. He proposes that virtual eye contact has several benefits including increased attention, better retention rates, community building, non-verbal communication and social presence among the participants.

9.   Factors that restricted EFL face-to-face oral interaction:

According to Fawzia (2002), factors falls into three categories: factors related to students, pedagogical factors and social factors. Factors related students are mental or psychological such as perception, attitudes, language factors, learning styles, background of students and personal affective factors. Pedagogical factors related to teachers, courses, topics, methods and teaching process as whole. Social factors include the gender of students in class and nature community feelings in a group. Other factors related to strategies and techniques are also influence language acquisition and learners' competence and performance. However, some related to topic of oral interaction are thought to impede oral interaction such as psychological factors of anxiety and lack of motivation in addition time factor. These factors influence the oral competence EFL learners as well. Therefore, many scholars advise the adoption blended learning to enhance oral competence and created unlimited oral interaction through web technologies.

10.   BL and Web technologies involved in for oral competence

These web technologies were prepared by Snider, (2009:4):

a.   Blogs

The term web-log, or blog, was coined by Jorn Barger in 1997 and refers to a simple webpage consisting of brief paragraphs of opinion, information, personal diary entries, or links, called posts, (Doctorow et al., 2002). Blogs can be focused on a particular topic like communicative competence. They are most often text-centric; making them highly searchable, though they can

also include embedded static images, animations, or videos. These videos could be used to enhance learners to enhance learners' oral competence. Unlike wikis, browsers do not edit blog postings, but rather communicate with the teachers and others students.

b. Social Networking

It refers to individuals using online communities to stay connected with each other, share interests, and explore the interests of others. Users primarily share information about themselves through their "profile page," choosing which elements to share and with whom Because social communicating with Large numbers of people. Social Networking websites are typically geared toward particular purposes, such as professional networking (*e.g.*, LinkedIn TM) 8, or a mixture of professional and personal interaction (*e.g.*, Face book). Social Networks can help individuals stay connected with each other far better than older methods such as simply exchanging business cards and basic contact information.

c.   Social Bookmarking

It provides users with publicly store, organize, and share links to web pages. Rather than storing links on your own computer, users add links to a central repository that is shared by many. Typically such applications allow for User Ratings of the links, such that over time the most popular websites will become apparent, and the links provided by particular experts can be quickly found. Social Bookmarking on the Internet is often wide ranging (*e.g.*, Del.icio.us) or can focus on links to news articles (*e.g.*, Digg TM). In organizations, social bookmarking can be used to identify resources of relevance to specific workgroups or job functions.

d.   Podcasting

Podcasts are audio recordings which a user can subscribe to and download to his/her computer or portable listening device such as an MP3 player (Barber, 2007).[1] A podcast is a series of audio files, typically in MP3 format, distributed over the Internet using subscription feeds. While the files can be played on desktop and laptop computers, the

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[1] Barber, E. (2007). *Fifty ways to improve your Business English using the internet*. Oxford: Summertown Publishing Ltd.

SIDDIG AHMED ALI & MOHAMMED ABDALLAABDALGANE

more common intention is to provide information for playback on portable media devices, such as iPods. It is important to realize that providing downloadable audio files is not podcasting: in order for a series of files to be a podcast, the user must be able to subscribe to the series feed, typically through RSS (see below). Although some use the term "podcast" more broadly to include video content, others use terms such as vid-casting, v-casting, or video casting in such cases.

e.   Discussion Forums

A discussion forum (alternately known as groups or boards) is a web application for holding discussions between users. A forum is typically structured as a series of discussion "threads," which start with an initial posting, followed by replies, and replies to the replies. Such threads can have any number of levels of responses, and thereby promote conversation between many users, not just a dialogue between two. Many forums are meant for Q&A purposes, but often one or more people serve as "moderators," allowing or the Group can see disallowing each posting before it. Discussion forums have been available through the Internet since well before the recent surge of Web 2.0 technologies, but they share many of the critical characteristics of Web 2.0 technologies: user interaction and generation of content, collaboration, and so on.

11.   Questionnaire

The questionnaire is composed of 15 items revolving around Blended Learning in terms of improving oral skills of the learners at tertiary level. The targeted population of the research is 19 teachers and 21 learners (20 males and 20 females) at Taif University, in kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Attitudes and application of BL are surveyed together with promotion of oral and communicative competence. The questionnaire seek If a correlation between Blended Learning variable is   strong enough, knowing about one variable allows a researcher to make a prediction about the other variable of oral competence. In order to test the validity and reliability, the questionnaire was delivered to panel of experts. Then collect the Questionnaires and using the results of the opinions of experts and specialists who modified the questionnaire. A number of questionnaires in the next step modified

using a number of contacts and complete research about the content and length of the questionnaire. To determine the reliability of the questionnaire, 40 copies of the questionnaire in the university have completed, then SPSS 16 software to investigate questionnaire reliability.

According to the results of questionnaire reliability and validity levels are acceptable, and shown as follows.

SPSS Statistics

Reliability	Validity	Correlation
0.765666	0.875023	0.620307

12.   Data analysis and Discussion

Collected data were handled using a data base software programs (SPSS version 16). Analysis included the views of teachers and learners on Blended Learning and traditional learning. A 90% of the respondents strongly support Blended Learning instruction providing positive attitudes toward the technology involvement and hybrid learning. Very few participants were against applying blended learning. They attribute their opinions waste of time and low technical devices and breakdowns. Although Blended Learning is not a new instruction, it has gain the concern of learners and teacher at university due to interest and facilitation of involving technology in education process.

3.4. Results

This study revealed that the oral competence is enhanced when blended instructions is involved. Moreover, those students' views on Blended Learning process are positive and encouraging. They were in favor of web environment rather than face-to-face environment. Results also revealed that the highest mean score corresponds to blended aspect of the process when students' evaluation concerning the implementation is taken to consideration. The overall findings showed no significant differences between students' point of views and teacher's point of views in terms of Blended Learning and oral competence. The study recommends intensive computer and internet courses for both learners and teachers.

Axis	Position	N	Mean	Std. Deviation		F	t	df	Sig.	Status
Attitudes towards Blended Learning	students	21	2.05	.590	Equal variances assumed	.378	-.342	38	.542	Not significance
	teachers	19	2.11	.459	Equal variances not assumed		-.347	37.211		
Application of Blended Learning	students	21	2.38	.740	Equal variances assumed	.815	1.079	38	.372	Not significance
	teachers	19	2.11	.875	Equal variances not assumed		1.070	35.462		
Developing Oral Competence	students	21	2.29	.463	Equal variances assumed	3.893	.953	38	.056	Significance
	teachers	19	2.16	.375	Equal variances not assumed		.964	37.565		

3.5. Conclusion

The study concluded that BL is regarded a salient strategy required to ensure the enhancement of oral competence through online and traditional environments. Collaboration and oral practice is guaranteed in and outside classrooms. Psychological factors inhibited oral practice are overcome through blended learning and web technologies. Thus, BL has been proved to be an effective method for oral interaction.

3.6. Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Since learners' attitudes are positive about BL at university, it is recommended that teachers and educationalists should make it an integral part in their curriculum.
2. Focus should be drawn to learning center instruction.
3. E-learning should be taken into account as a means to develop oral communication a long with traditional learning.
4. Conduct future research studies dealing with mobile learning and other types of technical learning.

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