

Blended Learning Usefulness in Developing Algerian Students' Writing Skills: The Case of Algerian Veterinary PhD Students

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ABSTRACT: *It is the task of the language teachers to aid in developing the ESP students' linguistic and communicative competencies through the implementation of suitable approaches, including blended learning. Blended learning is summarized as implementing the best teaching-learning practices through onsite and online education to engage the learners in motivating oral and written communication. Thus, the aim of the current study is to investigate the significant challenges and thereby develop the PhD veterinary students' writing skills through the implementation of blended learning using questionnaires and focus group interviews. The PhD veterinary students were chosen randomly from different Algerian universities. The result revealed that blended learning is beneficial in teaching students the main strategies for developing writing skills, especially in scientific papers. Though the many challenges associated with the blended learning mode in the ESP settings, The students perceive this approach as enjoyable in overcoming the main challenges an ESP learner may face, including time constraints, immediate responses to the produced papers, and efficacy in controlling the linguistic and communicative deficiencies in higher education settings.*

KEYWORDS: ESP, PhD students, higher education, writing skill, blended learning,

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Introduction

Advancements in technology within higher education have resulted in the emergence of Blended Learning (b-learning), a hybrid educational model that integrates in-person teaching with technological components. This method is regarded as an optimal learning strategy because it effectively integrates the advantages of both in-person contact and technology-mediated education. B-learning improves learner engagement, fosters cooperation and creativity, and equips students with the necessary skills to thrive in a technology environment. It underscores learning autonomy and enables students to assume control of the educational process (Mulyadi et al., 2019).

In the realm of English Language Teaching (ESP), blended learning integrates in-person education with technology, using both online and offline activities and resources. It surpasses traditional face-to-face or solely online learning methods by offering genuine learning experiences and enabling students to assume control of their educational journey. B-learning has profoundly impacted proficiency in English reading, writing, speaking, listening, and vocabulary acquisition (Keogh et al., 2017). It fosters both individual and collaborative learning among ESP students and assists English language instructors in customising and integrating novel educational activities and resources.

The preparedness of educators in a blended learning situation has not been thoroughly examined. Consequently, more study is required to examine ESP educators' opinions of preparedness and to enhance the quality of blended learning training. It is the aim of the current investigation to examine the significance of blended learning in improving Algerian PhD veterinary students' writing skills. We seek to answer the following questions

What are the major challenges Algerian veterinary students face when they write scientific publications ?

To which extent can blended learning in ESP classes help the students overcome these challenges and develop their writing ability?

Literature Review

Blended learning in ESP settings

Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) stress the significance of blended learning in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education, highlighting the requirements of the ESP practitioner to assess students' needs, define learning goals, design relevant courses, provide training, and evaluate performance. For effective integration of blended learning, educators must understand the characteristics of mixed learning environments. Flexibility and learner-centeredness are crucial for designing successful mixed ESP courses. These courses must prioritise individual learners' learning needs and promote cooperation between teachers and students as well as among students themselves.

Momchilova (2021) proposes a tripartite framework for developing an efficient blended English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course: engagement, immersion, and assessment. By emphasising individual requirements, promoting reflection, and facilitating cooperation, blended learning may be effectively executed in English for Specific Purposes teaching. She (2021) defines blended learning as the suboptimal incorporation of onsite and online activities. Blended learning is a teaching strategy in ESP education that combines interactive exercises in a virtual classroom to promote students' learning engagement and information sharing, fostering active and autonomous mastering of English skills (Chen, Liu, Lin, & Wang,

2019). Blended learning integrates many instructional modalities to enhance and maximise educational outcomes. ESP educators must understand students' requirements to ascertain the most effective material and activities for both face-to-face and virtual instruction. This method fosters a learning environment in which blended learning and conventional instruction are mutually reinforcing and supportive, guaranteeing active participation from both educators and learners in the development of a blended ESP course.

ESP teachers must include blended learning into their instructional approach, guaranteeing flexibility and adaptation to evolving educational contexts. Blended learning methods convert the student into an active collaborator, enabling them to generate their own educational resources (Banditvilai, 2016). This transition corresponds with the empowerment and ownership facilitated by technology, which redefines the notion of knowledge construction (McLoughlin et al., 2008).

The significance of mixed learning environments is being reassessed in light of the advancing technology and changing learner characteristics. Generations Y and Z are influenced by smart technologies, resulting in a more independent attitude to pedagogical approaches. Blended learning integrates conventional teaching with autonomous learning in a digital setting, hence enhancing the efficacy of the educational process. The objective is to cultivate essential abilities in students, including the ability to read scientific publications, compose reports, deliver presentations, engage with global entities, and debate technical matters.

ESP teachers play a key role in developing a blended ESP course, guaranteeing that students are thoroughly engaged in authentic scenarios and problem-solving tasks. This immersion aids students in refining their communication abilities and deepens their comprehension of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The final assessment of the course verifies that it has addressed students' specified ESP requirements, confirming that the students have met the established educational goals. Momchilova (2021) assumes that blended learning in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education develops the students' competencies in understanding and interpreting technical publications, creating reports, delivering presentations, communicating with multinational colleagues, and discussing technical issues relevant to the learner's field of study. This methodology cultivates vital ESP capabilities and improves the entire educational experience.

Challenges implementing blended learning in ESP settings

Lungu (2013) highlighted the difficulties encountered by ESP students in blended courses, such as inadequate internet access, computers, and other gadgets. Bax underscores the need of appropriate apparatus and technical support for the successful integration of educational technology. Bourzgui et al. (2020) highlight the challenges encountered by students with inadequate language proficiency in using blended learning, since they find it difficult to navigate requirements and fulfil activities independently. Abbas (2015) recognises the procrastination in blended learning resulting from inadequate online oversight. Agustina et al. (2020) underscore the need for instructors to facilitate students' adaptation to an online learning environment.

The Algerian context

The Algerian university encountered obstacles in undertaking blended learning during the COVID-19 epidemic, as both educators and students struggled with accessing online classrooms, downloading materials, and participating in online examinations. A significant number of educators lack preparedness for contemporary technology and need more skills to effectively instruct in hybrid settings. Blended

teaching necessitates an integration of online and traditional pedagogical skills, and educators must possess the necessary tools and procedures.

Boudinar's 2023 study at the University of Setif 1 introduced blended learning in the Computer Sciences Master's program, enhancing student flexibility, practicality, and efficiency. This approach promotes self-directed learning, resource accessibility, increased motivation, and improved time management. Blended learning allows students to interact with instructional material effortlessly, regardless of time or place. However, students faced challenges in the changing dynamics between instructors and students, including doubts about their autonomous performance and the responsibilities of instructors in material delivery, feedback provision, and interaction management.

Methodology

The study was conducted at the faculty of veterinary science from different Algerian universities. The respondents were mainly veterinary PhD students. The researcher implemented the mixed method approach, qualitative and quantitative methods, to answer the research questions. Both a questionnaire and an interview were designed to collect the primary data relevant to achieve the research objectives.

Data collection tools

The questionnaire was composed of four main sections. The first one designed to find out the students language proficiency level. The second section aims to ascertain the students' communicative competence and the extent to which does blended learning aid them develop, particularly their writing ability. The third section the students' perceptions towards blended learning. The last part aims to identify their major challenges the respondents face while getting involved into blended learning.

The interview included seven items intended to ascertain the main challenges within ESP blended learning and the extent to which this method can aid the Algerian veterinary students improve their writing competence and thereby their academic achievement.

Results and Discussions

The questionnaire

1. The respondents' age

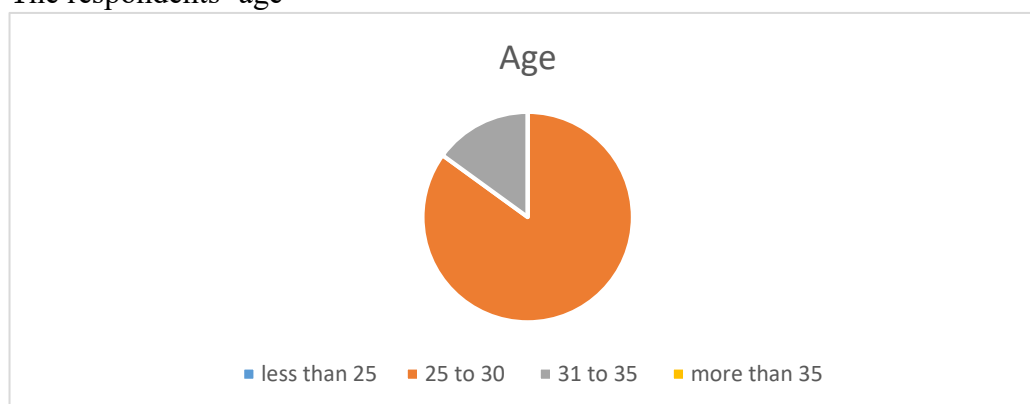


Figure1. The respondents age

Most of the students pursuing their doctoral studies were aging between 25 to 30 years old while the remaining are aging more than 31 years old. This indicated that the majority of the participants are likely

in the early and mid-stages of their academic and professional careers. They had to adapt to the demands of publishing in English might shape their development as researchers.

The students academic achievement

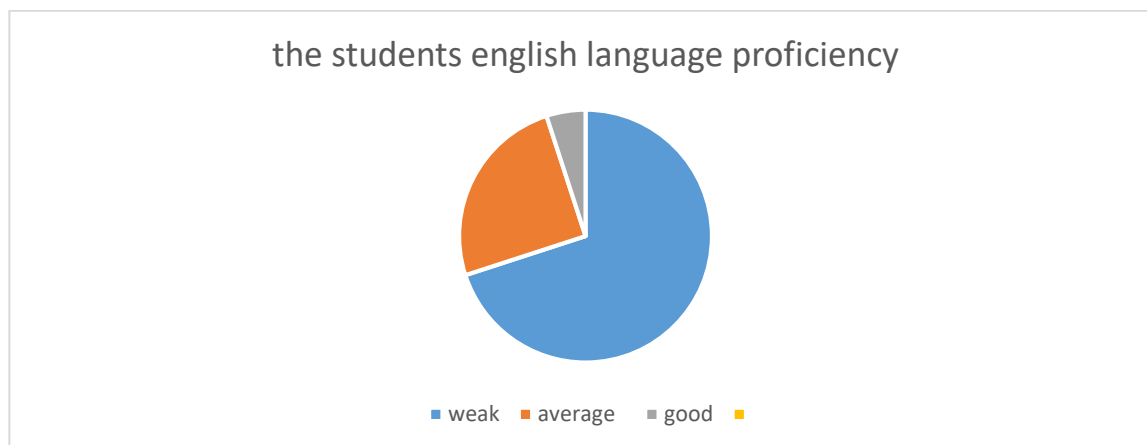


Figure2. The students academic achievement

Though the majority of the students are likely pursuing their studies, they had a weak level in English language, 25% are average while only 5% were good. This suggests that the majority are in the process of facing the challenges of adapting to English language for research.

The students training in ESP

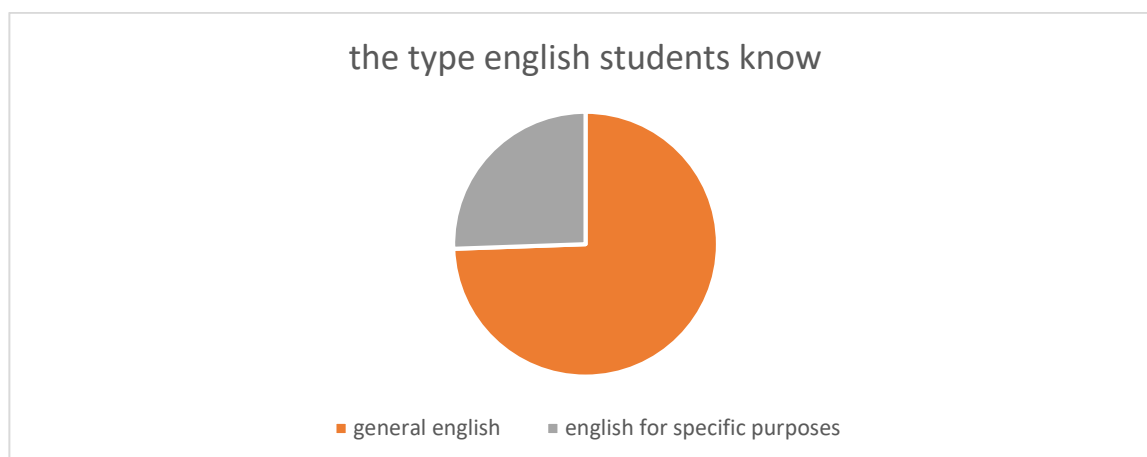


Figure3. The students training in ESP

The tiny minority who had a good or average levels declared that the English they know is and English for general purposes. This suggests that the participants are less confident in English reflecting a potential barrier in adapting to English for research publication.

The importance of the English language for writing research publications

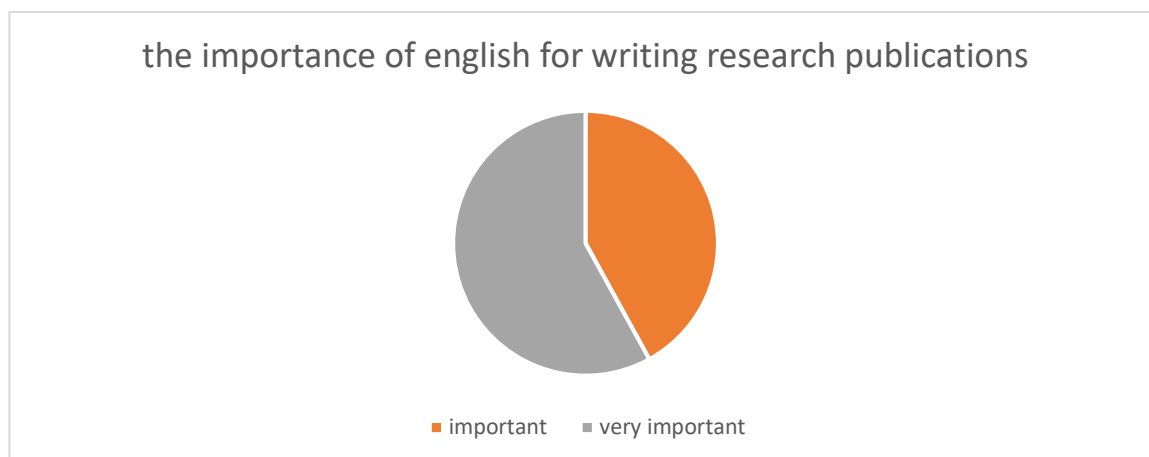


Figure 4. The importance of the English language for writing research publications

The respondents showed a common recognition to the significance of English for research publications. This emphasizes the critical role English plays in academic success and global communication for Algerian Veterinary PhD students stressing the urgent need to address the challenges they face in mastering the language for academic purposes.

The students' communicative competence how do you rate your communicative competence

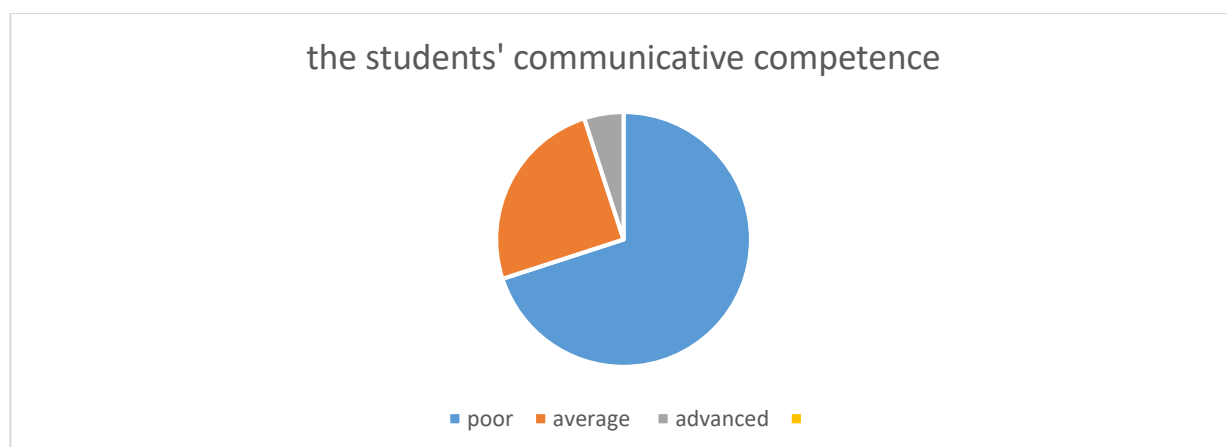


Figure 5. The students' communicative competence how do you rate your communicative competence

As represented in the chart, most of the respondents' (70%) communicative competence was poor, 25% stated that they were average and only 5% were good communicators. This suggests the urgency to meet the students' needs to a special training that addresses their lacks.

Which skill is more challenging?

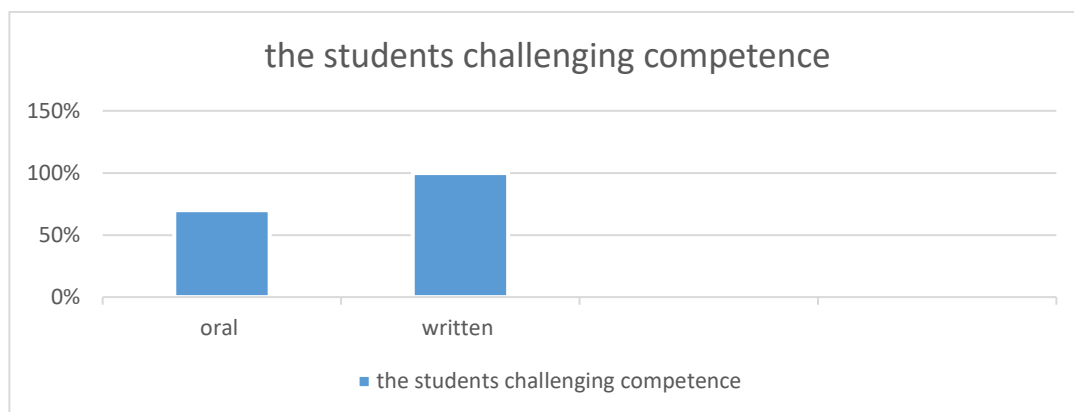


Figure 6. The students' challenging competence

The diagram represents that all the participants (100%) suggested written competence to be more challenging in an academic setting though they thought oral competence to be also challenging. This indicates the need for more specialized training.

2. The students perceptions towards blended learning

Have you ever implemented blended learning in your English Language class

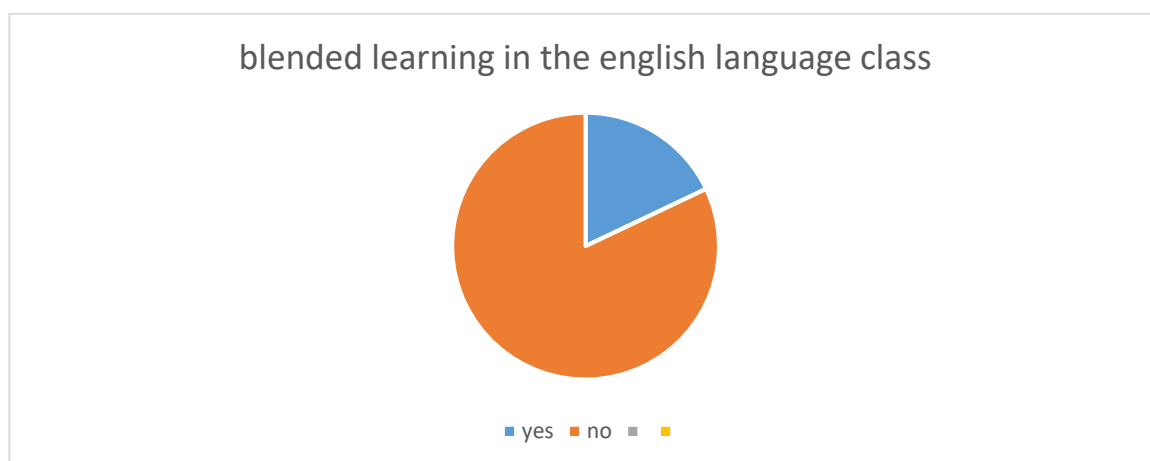


Figure 7. The students perceptions towards blended learning

How do you rate its effectiveness in developing your language proficiency

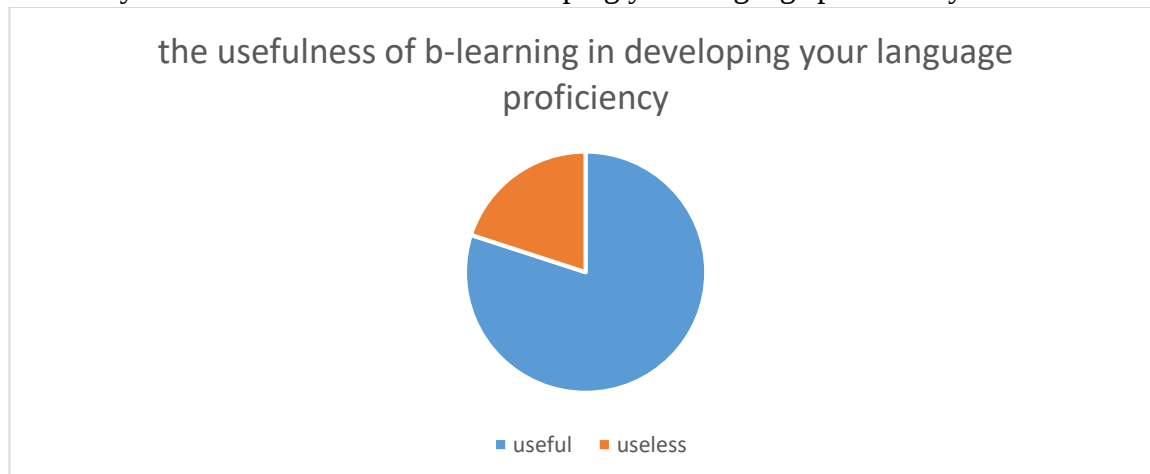


Figure 8. The usefulness of blended learning in developing language proficiency

The majority of the participants (80%) reported blended learning to be useful while the remaining identified this method to be useless. This indicates that the majority underscore blended learning while the rest who might experience blended learning during Covid 19 suggested it was useless.

The type of courses offered during the blended learning training

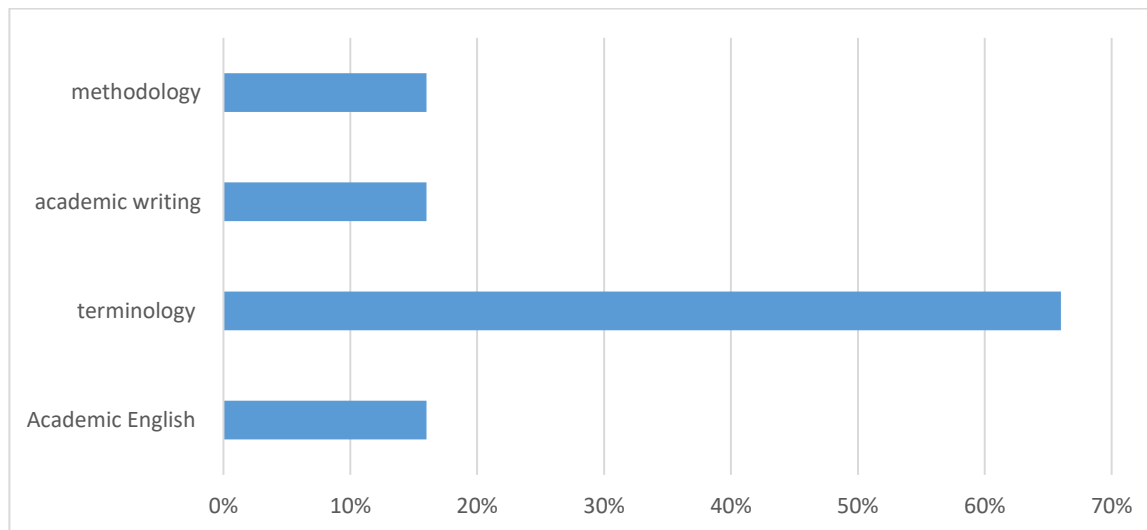


Figure 9. The type of courses offered during the blended learning training

The responses show that the majority of the informants agreed that the type of courses they received were targeted towards terminology improvement while the remaining (only 16%) admitted that the courses rarely address issues related to academic writing, methodology or academic English rated to be most important to raising standards academic achievement.

3. major challenges they face while getting involved into blended learning

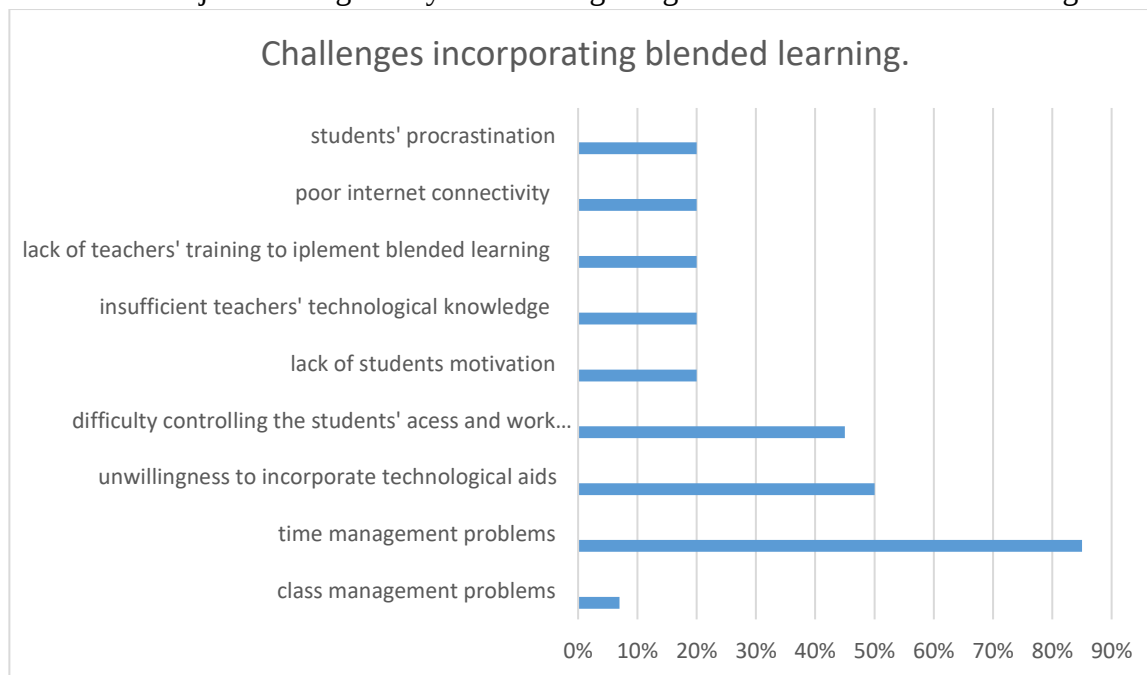


Figure 10. The challenges students face while getting involved into blended learning

The graph identifies difficulty controlling the students' access and work submission, the unwillingness to incorporate technological aids, and time management problems to be the main challenges a student face during the blended learning course for the majority of the students (85%, 50%; 45%). This suggests that the blended learning is not systematically implemented due to lack of training and institutional support highlighting the significant gap between practice and theory. The remaining challenges including procrastination, poor internet connectivity lack of students' motivation and insufficient teachers' technological knowledge were thought to be the main hindrances facing the implementation of blended learning for 20% of the respondents which reflects their recognition to the serious problem within blended ESP classes.

Interview

The respondents' acquaintance with blended learning, especially after Covid 19 measures

The respondents agreed that the implementation of blended learning was mainly due to Covid19 pandemic safety measures. The students were not used to such method the reason why they had many problems being engaged.

The main reasons behind the implementation of blended learning

The implementation of blended learning was mainly to overcome the onsite limitations and to offer chance to all students to participate and benefit considerably.

The effectiveness of blended learning and the extent to which blended learning is implemented systematically

The respondents advocated for enhancing students' interest and motivation in blended learning, as shown by the interview findings, which imply that learners must be adequately motivated and self-regulated during independent studying at home. Which is not the case in the current study. The interviewees believed that the challenges outweigh the benefits though the academic consensus behind blended learning utility in ESP settings.

Do you think that you are equipped with the required tools and skills to get involved in a blended learning environment

The interviewees underscore the need of efficient time management and concentration on activities, especially while using mobile phones with internet connectivity, as it tackles concerns about challenges in maintaining attention. Yet, the poor internet connection prevent from successfully develop the necessary skills for the students to be integrated into a blended learning environment, language problems are the first obstacle.

The language teachers preparation to be good users of the technologies to implement blended learning

Information Technology developers and English instructors will cooperate to create educational technologies such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), speech engines, and translation tools, therefore enhancing the training of English for Specific Purposes facilitators for improved results.

To which extent you think blended learning aide in improving your communicative competence especially to write academic articles

The students underscore the necessity of augmenting students' dedication to learning, evaluating their preparedness and progress, stimulating curiosity and motivation, enhancing educators' technological proficiency, establishing Learning Management Systems (LMS), prioritizing autonomous learning, overseeing social media engagement, performing needs assessments, expanding online learning initiatives, instituting infrastructure for blended learning, and lowering plagiarism.

Conclusion

Any successful language learning environment must include real audience engagement, task participation, diverse and imaginative language use, social interaction, absence of time restrictions, timely feedback, learner autonomy, and a stress-free experience. Blended learning facilitates comprehensive growth by promoting successful interactions between teachers and learners throughout the educational process, hence fostering sustained motivation and mastery of skills. It provides personal autonomy, enhancing students cognitive and social affective skills. Blended learning fosters a constructive educational atmosphere characterized by clarity, flexibility, usability, and objective evaluation, so guaranteeing quality, satisfaction, and efficacy in education. Nevertheless, a mere combination of technology and in-person contact is insufficient to fully harness the potential of blended learning. The objective is to identify the most effective and efficient amalgamation of learning modalities and enhance the educational experience.

Though the many challenges associated with the blended learning mode in the ESP settings, the students perceive this approach as enjoyable in overcoming the main challenges an ESP learner may face, including time constraints, immediate responses to the produced papers, and efficacy in controlling the linguistic and communicative deficiencies in higher education settings.

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