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Blended Learning in the Saudi EFL Classroom: Insights from Teachers on Pedagogical Impact

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Abstract

In an era where technology seamlessly blends with teaching methodologies, this study examines EFL teachers' perceptions in Saudi Arabia regarding the impact of blended learning methodologies on student engagement compared to traditional teaching approaches. This paper aims to explore the challenges these teachers encounter in implementing blended learning and its perceived effects on learning outcomes. Through a qualitative research design, the study engaged 42 EFL teachers, selected randomly to encapsulate a wide array of genders, academic backgrounds, teaching experiences, and levels of technological proficiency. A bespoke, researcher-developed questionnaire with open-ended questions was strategically employed to extract in-depth insights into the teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding blended learning within the Saudi educational context. Thematic analysis was utilized to uncover patterns and themes within the responses. The findings reveal that while blended learning methodologies are recognized for their potential to moderately enhance student engagement through increased participation, attentiveness, and enthusiasm for learning, challenges significantly temper their effectiveness. These include technological barriers, disparities in digital literacy, and the complexities of integrating blended learning into existing pedagogical frameworks. Despite these obstacles, the study identifies a cautious optimism among EFL teachers about the potential of blended learning to enrich educational outcomes, provided that the aforementioned challenges are systematically addressed. This research is significant as it contributes critical insights into the evolving role of blended learning in EFL education, highlighting the need for strategic implementation and support mechanisms to fully leverage its benefits in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes in Saudi Arabia. Based on these findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations were provided.

Keywords: Blended learning, EFL teachers, pedagogical impact, Saudi EFL classroom, technology integration

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Introduction

In recent years, the worldwide educational environment has experienced a substantial shift, predominantly driven by the unparalleled difficulties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic (Al-khresheh, 2023; Mudjijanti & Srimulyani, 2023). These difficulties have significantly impacted English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Saudi Arabia (Al-khresheh, 2022a). Amidst the global health crisis, blended learning (BL) methodologies were expeditiously and extensively implemented, integrating conventional in-person instruction with digital and online modalities (Ali et al., 2023). Despite its inception as a reaction to a worldwide emergency, this shift has created fresh opportunities for pedagogical advancement and progress within EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia.

The introduction of BL during the pandemic was a challenge for teachers in Saudi Arabia. While it offers an opportunity to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes through a more interactive and resource-rich educational environment, it also disrupts the established dynamics of the Saudi educational system (Abbad, 2021; Alam et al., 2022; Alhusban, 2022; Al-khresheh, 2022b). The pandemic has underscored the importance of integrating technology into EFL instruction, raising critical questions about the ability of teachers and students to adapt to this new learning approach, the effectiveness of these integrated methodologies in improving English language proficiency, and the overall impact on academic achievement.

Due to the increasing reliance on digital literacy and the expanding significance of English in global communication, implementing BL strategies in Saudi EFL classrooms is a national priority, not just educational. This study is significant as it provides critical insights into the evolving role of BL in EFL education in Saudi Arabia. It highlights the potential of BL methodologies to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes while identifying the challenges that need to be addressed for successful implementation. Understanding teachers' perceptions and experiences offers valuable information for teachers, students, and stakeholders. The main objectives of the research are to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the impact of BL methodologies on student engagement, identify the challenges EFL teachers face in implementing these methodologies, and assess the perceived impact of BL on learning outcomes compared to traditional teaching methods. To achieve these research objectives, the following research questions were put under lens:

1. How do EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia perceive the impact of BL methodologies on student engagement compared to traditional teaching methods?
2. What challenges do EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia encounter in implementing BL methodologies, and how do they perceive its impact on learning outcomes?

Literature Review

Definition and Types of Blended Learning

BL, together with the more or less synonymous but less used term hybrid learning (Hwang, 2018), has been used in educational discussions to label the combination of many types of educational constructs. Twenty years ago, it could denote any mixture of different educational philosophies (e.g. behaviourism and constructivism) in teaching regardless of any use of technology, or it could be applied to a mixture of any instructional technology (including film and DVD, not necessarily involving computers) with face-to-face instructor-led teaching (Hrastinski, 2019). Indeed, the coverage was so comprehensive that it was said that "blended learning can be any kind of learning" (Laster, 2004, p. 154).

Today, the term BL has largely settled down to mean learning that includes some online or IT-based element, usually out of class, in addition to traditional face-to-face learning with a teacher in a classroom (Smith & Hill, 2018). It may be regarded as combining virtual and physical learning conditions (Yu, 2015) or integrating distance and traditional learning (Hrastinski, 2019). It embraces both synchronous and asynchronous online activity (Moskal et al., 2013); it may occur when class members and teacher are all present and communicating at the same time, or not: it is often understood as engaging students in their learning more than traditional learning and so qualifying for the term 'active BL' (Armellini et al., 2021).

Allen et al. (2007) further specify the number of instructions that qualify as blended. They regard the term blended as applying where there is between 30-80% of an online component. Below that, it is 'web-facilitated'; above that, it is 'online'. However, that terminology is not widely adopted. In the present study, the teachers are responding in part based on their experiences during the height of the COVID crisis, when one might say that teaching was almost totally online, so not in Allen et al.'s sense. However, their students' online activity has fallen back since, and we regard their teaching as blended today, in a broad sense.

We may note that BL is typically referred to rather than blended teaching. However, a teacher usually creates or selects whatever materials and activities use technology. When blended teaching is referred to, the term is often used interchangeably with BL (Wang, 2023). It has also been pointed out that the role of the teacher and learner in deciding what blended activity is used may also be decided more at an institutional or program level rather than at the level of a specific course or activity where the teacher and learner are central (Armellini et al., 2021), however, it is the latter that we are mainly considering in this paper.

Even within the above definition, BL still embraces teaching and learning regimes of a remarkably varied type. For instance, the teacher who, alongside traditional classroom teaching, has students use augmented reality technology in the classroom (Mundy et al., 2019) engages BL as much as one who has students at home access a discussion board with other students about the class material (QAA, 2020). Nevertheless, those are very different engagements, the former more concept-related and the latter more collaboration-focused.

Given the broad scope of the term BL, it is difficult to generalise from existing studies to any new situation. The nature of the BL and the context of any application of BL readily create unique combinations (Smith & Hill, 2018).

The Impact of Blended Learning

Although a considerable amount of research has been devoted to BL, it is hard to find studies close to the present one, which therefore fills a research gap. In particular, most studies in the literature use measures that are either based on learner perceptions (e.g. in Saudi Arabia, Alhusban, 2022; more generally, Kintu et al., 2017) or on objective improvement in student scores on tests (Tong et al., 2022). The teacher's perspective is overlooked. Furthermore, they primarily target teaching subjects other than EFL and in countries distant from Saudi Arabia (Castro, 2019). Thus, a study of EFL teachers' perceptions of BL at the tertiary level in Saudi Arabia is exceptional and timely.

In some areas of EFL pedagogy, such as the teaching of grammar or reading, the teacher perspective, often referred to as teacher beliefs, has become well-established as worthy of study (Mo, 2020). The teacher's understanding of pedagogy often guides their actual practices, though there may be exciting mismatches (van Vijfeijken et al., 2023). The few studies in this area

targeting EFL teachers and technology, however, usually target what the teachers think they do or should do concerning it rather than, as in the present study, what they think are the benefits and difficulties associated with it (e.g. Ding et al., 2019).

Theorists commonly expect the online element in BL to have beneficial effects because it can easily be aligned with several teaching and learning theories and ideas that are widely regarded positively. For instance, it is usually more learner-centred than the classroom, requiring students to be more self-reliant and manage their learning – choices, amount and timing (Adam et al., 2023). The learner focus also enables learning to be refined to suit specific learner preferences, usually by the learners themselves (Zhang et al., 2020). It is also often social in that peer interaction and cooperation are involved (Machumu & Zhu, 2017). At the very least, it introduces a more extended and varied exposure to relevant materials and activities, mainly because they are usually stored and can be revisited innumerable times (Jost et al., 2021). However, the expectations of theorists are not always fulfilled in reality.

Blended Learning and Student Engagement

Recent studies have underscored the significant impact of BL on EFL teaching, particularly in enhancing grammatical knowledge, oral production, and student engagement. Ali et al. (2023) conducted an experimental study comparing online and BL among first-year medical students, revealing that BL significantly outperformed online learning in improving grammatical skills. Similarly, Al-Qudimi and Hameed (2024) investigated Yemeni EFL students' perceptions of BL, finding it effective in boosting learning outcomes and positively influencing attitudes toward English learning. This study recommended integrating BL into curricula to enhance engagement and motivation. Furthermore, Ali et al. (2023) examined the impact of BL on first-year Arab university students' oral production, demonstrating notable improvements. However, the study highlighted challenges such as limited technological infrastructure and uneven digital literacy, which need addressing for effective BL implementation. These recent findings collectively highlight the efficacy of BL in EFL education and the importance of overcoming technological and pedagogical barriers to fully leverage its benefits.

In a major meta-analysis of many studies in many countries, Cao (2023) found that student attitudes in UAE were the most favourable to BL of all countries included. However, those others were also positive (China, USA, etc.). That was, however, based on a single UAE study of students' attitudes toward a higher education course for teaching Arabic (Al-Qatawneh et al., 2020); furthermore, it did not access teacher beliefs. Another review study (Alammary, 2019) also recorded some beneficial effects of BL on student engagement, but this was based on measuring behavioural features such as time spent by students on relevant web pages; again, the teacher perspective was absent. Öncü and Bichelmeyer (2021), although again not tapping teacher beliefs, focused on BL-related causes of US student engagement. They found that the collaborative learner-centred work it entailed did improve engagement, although the overall level of engagement was still poor.

Pappa (2014) explored the relationship between teacher beliefs about student engagement and self-efficacy in Greek comprehensive schools. Although the study did not specifically compare BL with traditional methods, its relevance lies in highlighting that many teachers, especially during and after the COVID era, feel inadequately prepared to implement BL and lack confidence in their abilities (Zhao & Song, 2021; Zee & Koomen, 2016). In contrast, Pardede (2020) found that EFL secondary school teachers in Jakarta believe BL significantly enhances student interest and

motivation. Similarly, Altay and Altay (2019) noted that teachers and students in various global EFL contexts view engagement as a primary benefit of the online component of BL. However, the perspectives of Saudi teachers on the effectiveness of BL remain largely unexplored. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that increased engagement does not necessarily equate to improved performance, which should be assessed separately (Koomen, 2016).

Blended Learning and Student Outcomes

As Zhang and Zhu (2017) point out, BL is still in its 'beginning period' as a method, so it is not surprising that most articles study its outcome effectiveness. However, that is not usually studied through the teacher's beliefs. The aim is to identify the 'best of blends' (Smith & Hill, 2018), although the idea that there exists one type of BL that will be universally successful in all contexts is probably mistaken.

Cao (2023) described above, again found that achievement in UAE (measured by a test) favoured the BL group more than in other countries included (USA et al., etc.). Alsalhi et al. (2021) further found an achievement benefit for BL with math undergrads in UAE (but failed to describe the nature of the BL). Ali et al. (2022), in a Saudi university context, report superior learning from an online task than a classroom task. Yu et al. (2023) provide the most recent picture in a comprehensive meta-study. They report 'an upper-medium effect on students' learning performance', which is further affected by various variables such as the precise teaching method, the proportion of learning done online, the specific type of online interaction, and the region (implying a possible cultural factor).

Specifically, from the teacher's view, Rachman et al. (2021) report high agreement among Indonesian EFL schoolteachers that language skills were improved by BL (to a greater extent than student motivation). Once again, however, the teacher view is under-represented in research and, in Saudi Arabia, is missing.

Blended Learning Difficulties

Synthesising evidence from Alam et al. (2022), Altay and Altay (2019), Rasheed et al. (2020), and others, several potential difficulties have been identified, especially with the online or computer-based part of BL, and again usually researched from the student viewpoint. They are essentially prerequisites which, if not met, cause problems. Students have to possess or be lent the necessary hardware and software. This is often overlooked in studies in affluent Western settings but authentic in rural Bangladesh (Hasan et al., 2021). Second, the internet connection has to be robust (Rianto, 2020). Next, the materials and activities must be appropriately integrated with classroom instruction and constantly updated. Irrelevant activities, however enjoyable, are problematic (Ginns & Ellis, 2007). They cannot just be made or selected once and then forgotten. This may require additional teacher training and support (Kundu et al., 2021). Furthermore, they must be engaging (Kemp, 2020), and the teacher must decide how much autonomy the students should have in allowing them to use them. Indeed, the willingness of students to engage with the home/online element is required if BL is to succeed (Moskal et al., 2013). Last but not least, the assessment of blended instruction is problematic if the assessment is exams done online (e.g. cheating is hard to eliminate) (Mellar et al., 2018).

Some studies relevant to the present context also highlight teachers' difficulties with BL, although they do not cover all aspects comprehensively. For instance, Rachman et al. (2021) found high agreement among Indonesian EFL teachers on the challenges of preparing materials and using

media. However, their questions did not delve deeply into other issues. Despite BL's motivational and language improvement benefits, some studies report no effect and identify several potential problems. Additionally, teachers' perspectives may differ from student opinions or objective test results, making it difficult to predict what the current study on Saudi teachers might reveal.

Despite extensive research on BL, a significant gap remains concerning EFL teachers' perspectives, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia. Existing studies predominantly focus on learner perceptions or objective improvements in student performance (e.g., Alhusban, 2022; Kintu et al., 2017; Tong et al., 2022), often neglecting the critical insights of educators. Moreover, these studies generally address non-EFL subjects and are conducted in contexts distinct from Saudi Arabia (e.g., Castro, 2019). This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the perceptions of Saudi EFL teachers regarding BL and investigating its benefits and challenges in this unique educational and cultural environment. Understanding these perspectives is essential, as teachers' beliefs and experiences can significantly influence the successful integration and effectiveness of BL methodologies. Furthermore, this study will contribute to the existing body of literature by providing insights into how BL can be optimized to enhance English language learning outcomes in Saudi Arabia, considering the specific challenges and opportunities within this context.

Method

This study employs a descriptive and qualitative approach, utilizing a short open-response questionnaire survey outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2023). The choice of this method is driven by the intention to capture the authentic and unfiltered responses of participants, allowing them to express their views and experiences freely. This approach contrasts with the restrictive nature of closed response items typical in quantitative surveys, as discussed by Cohen et al. (2017), ensuring a more comprehensive and genuine collection of data reflective of participants' proper perspectives.

Participants

In this study, 42 EFL teachers from Saudi Arabia were selected randomly to explore the pedagogical impact of BL. The participants varied in gender, academic qualifications, teaching experience, and technological proficiency. This variety was crucial for understanding the diverse effects of BL in various educational settings and experience levels within the Saudi EFL context. Table One presents the detailed characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. *Profile of Participants*

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	16	38.1%
	Female	26	61.9%
Qualifications	Bachelor's	31	73.8%
	Master's	5	11.9%
	Ph.D.	6	14.3%
Teaching experience	1-10	21	50%
	11-20	16	38.1%
	More than 20	5	11.9%
Technology Proficiency	Basic	7	16.7%
	Intermediate	19	45.2%
	Advanced	16	38.1%
Total		42	100%

The table details the demographic and professional composition of the study's participants. It reveals that a significant majority (61.9%) are female, and the highest proportion (73.8%) hold Bachelor's degrees. The teaching experience varies, with half of the participants having between 1 and 10 years of experience. Regarding technological adeptness, participants are almost evenly split across primary (16.7%), intermediate (45.2%), and advanced (38.1%) levels. This comprehensive demographic snapshot is essential for contextualizing the research findings, particularly given the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the teachers involved. The study focuses on the Saudi EFL context during the second term of the 2023-2024 academic year

Research Instruments

The instrument chosen for this study, a researcher-developed questionnaire, was specifically tailored to provide deep insights into the experiences and perceptions of EFL teachers regarding BL in the Saudi Arabian context. Using open-ended questions was deliberate, per the qualitative research approach recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (2023). This format allows for more nuanced and detailed responses, enabling participants to express their views without the constraints of predefined answer choices, as often found in quantitative surveys (Cohen et al., 2017).

The questionnaire begins with demographic questions, gathering essential background information on the respondents. This data can provide context for their experiences and viewpoints, adding depth to the analysis.

The core of the questionnaire consists of three open-ended questions, each aligned with a specific research question. These questions probe teachers' experiences with BL's impact on learning outcomes and engagement, challenges faced during implementation, and its comparative effectiveness to traditional methods. This direct relation to the research questions ensures that the data collected is relevant to the study's objectives.

To ensure content validity, expert judgment was employed. The initial set of questions was presented to knowledgeable colleagues in the field. Their feedback led to revisions, rewording, and a reduction in the number of questions to the current three, focusing on the most critical aspects of BL in the Saudi EFL context. This process of refinement based on expert input ensures that the questions are relevant, clear, and comprehensive in covering the study's scope.

Data Collection

Before distributing the survey, an introductory message was prepared and attached to the email containing the survey link. This message concisely outlined the study's objectives and emphasized its significance, aiming to engage participants and highlight the value of their contributions. The introduction provided a context for the questionnaire, explaining how participants' responses would contribute to a deeper understanding of the subject matter. This approach was intended to foster participant engagement and motivate them to provide thoughtful and comprehensive responses.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, a method well-suited for qualitative research, was employed to analyze the data. This involved a detailed and systematic review of the questionnaire responses, identifying recurring patterns or themes relevant to the study's research questions. Each theme was carefully defined and named, comprehensively understanding the participants' views on BL in the Saudi

EFL context. The thematic analysis method ensured the findings were grounded in the data, offering valuable insights into the teachers' experiences and perceptions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were thoroughly followed in this work. The study's primary objectives were clearly outlined at the beginning of the questionnaire. Participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and that opting in would be seen as granting informed consent. This method ensured that participants were fully aware of their participation and the study's objective. All replies were treated confidentially to protect participant privacy and follow ethical research standards, and no personal identifiers were retained.

Findings

The teachers had been given three open-response questions to answer, and their responses were richly varied and informative, though not always strictly answering the question asked. The thematic qualitative analysis showed the following findings for the three research questions.

Teacher Beliefs about Positive Engagement and Attitude

There was an endorsement of what many sources in the literature would see as the typical positive impact of BL on student attitude: "Of course, there is no doubt that BL has an amazing impact on students; it makes students excited to learn and their interactions are different, they enjoy learning more than before" (T16). Therefore, this shows that our teachers' perceptions are consistent with views in other studies based on student opinion (Al-Qatawneh et al., 2020) and that of teachers (Pardede, 2020).

T30 voiced the link between engagement and performance, which again is often stated in the BL literature: "In my experience, BL has enhanced students' learning because it provides more flexibility for the learning process, and as a result, students are more engaged in the teaching-learning process which positively affects their overall achievements." This echoes merits cited, for example, in Adam et al. (2023).

Another teacher, T25, however, was more cautious, suggesting that not all students found it engaging: "In my personal opinion, blended learning facilitates the educational process in many ways, but blended learning requires a specific type of student, and I think the problems of interest of the student and his family and their ignorance of the quality of education are the reason that hinders me." Indeed, when considering the difficulties below, we will see that engagement is often stated as a negative factor or as a prerequisite for BL rather than an effect of it.

Teacher Beliefs about Positive Performance and Achievement

Many teachers regarded BL as more effective than traditional teaching alone, thus supporting the general literature. For example, T12 said: "Blended education is more effective, easier to acquire language and knowledge, and keeps pace with the times". T31 also said: "It helps the student to develop himself, his abilities, and his educational skills". Our teachers, therefore, reflect the views of those in Rachman et al. (2021).

Many also stated or implied reasons for this benefit, such as those mentioned in the literature review above. T11 referred to the additional practice afforded: "I think it has a positive impact by helping students to use language and encourage them to practice it." He also indicated various available resources: "It helps teachers use more effective ways to enhance their classes by

using useful instructional media and tools." That is consistent with Jost et al. (2021) and shows teacher recognition of the benefit of more diverse practice.

Teachers also mentioned how BL caters to the students' preferences: T8 said, "Blended learning has proven effective in enhancing student learning outcomes due to its inherent flexibility. Students can engage with the material in a way that suits their needs and preferences." Again, T2 noted: "With the help of technology, it customises resources and tailors the learning experience to fit every student's need." This chimes with the stance of Zhang et al. (2020) reviewed earlier.

Once again, however, the view was stated that Saudi learners were not necessarily suited to BL. We have not found this point widely made explicitly in the literature, which, as we have pointed out, predominantly taps students' views rather than teachers'.

T29, for example, said, "Blended learning outweighs other learning methods by making instruction delivery effective and result-oriented right from the start, but this type of learning is not fully suited for Saudi EFL learners." He elaborated on that by saying he thought it did help in certain areas: "Traditional teaching methods are more effective than the blended learning methods in Saudi context because having benefits of technology it is also responsible for student poor performance and lack of interest in the learning process. Nevertheless, in the case of English language acquisition and comprehension, the blended method is more effective for the Saudi EFL learners because it helps in skill courses like listening, speaking and reading."

T18, by contrast, made the point that the benefit of BL depended on the student's self-study ability: "If the student is good at self-study, it is a 50% effective method. Otherwise, a waste of time." These teachers then suggest that the whole issue of the learning benefit of BL is far more nuanced and conditioned than much of the literature suggests. Their responses in the next section richly illustrate the wide range of factors that make it complex to derive benefits from BL.

Teacher Beliefs about BL Difficulties

Along with the above, many difficulties were mentioned, affecting engagement, achievement, or both. A few teachers mentioned difficulties with the classroom side of BL, e.g. large classes and rooms of insufficient size (T23, T33). However, most of the points about challenges related to the online component of BL.

A few teachers mentioned how BL made things easier for them: T28 "blended learning makes the teaching easier than traditional teaching methods," T23 "BL facilitates the learning process and allows the learner to search for information by self". However, most of the focus was on the difficulties or challenges of the online side of BL, which fell into the following categories.

The most mentioned challenges were engagement or attention. The citation of these as challenges is disturbing since BL is often said to be beneficial because it inherently generates more engagement than traditional classes. However, these teachers often saw engagement instead as a prerequisite that was not met. This conflicts with much of the literature reviewed, which views BL as a driver of improved engagement.

T18, for example, said, "Keeping students focused and active is an impossible challenge", albeit it is unclear if he was referring to the classroom or online part of BL or both. Probably referring to the online part, T30 said: "…. it is quite difficult to ensure the participation and attendance of students in blended learning." T8 refers to the online aspect of BL, saying: "In certain cases, it was observed that some students may not have allocated sufficient attention to online classes, as they were primarily responsible for comprehending the content independently. Consequently, they may have chosen to disregard these sessions."

T2 also said in detail: "A challenge of blended learning is to keep your learners engaged and motivated throughout the course. This can be difficult, especially when learners have different preferences, backgrounds, and readiness levels for online learning. You must design your blended learning course to appeal to different learning styles, provide feedback and support, and create community and collaboration. You must also monitor your learners' progress and participation and intervene when necessary to address any issues." This outlines how the much-lauded flexibility of BL to meet individual needs does not come automatically but has to be worked into the provision by the teacher.

T16 pointed to the teacher's absence in the online part of BL as the issue: "…. some of them have no one by their side through the lesson, then they do not focus on their lessons." T30 suggested this was especially true of less able students: "…. weak students sometimes feel distracted in the online part of blended teaching." Alhusban (2022) also highlights the value of teacher presence in online working in a Saudi context.

T25 cited a broader issue of lack of motivation to learn: "One of the problems that I have is that there are only four or five students who care about the quality of education and respond to it in preparation." However, this teacher was possibly not implementing BL in the usual way where the online material is looked at home after the relevant lesson. The word *preparation* suggests that he was attempting a 'flipped' method, where students at home should do the essential work for a lesson first, rather than by teacher presentation. Class time is supposed to be spent on more fruitful discussions and practice of what has already been studied (Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2020). That indeed does require extra motivation from students, which might be hard to obtain in the Saudi context. Perhaps it is better to have the more traditional sequence of classroom presentation first, then online practice at home after that, which is preferable.

The next most common difficulty was internet connection problems. T5 said: "Perhaps the biggest obstacle and problem with blended learning is the interruption of the Internet and the distraction of some students". T11 also said: "I think that internet connection problems are the main problem". This, of course, echoes Rianto (2020) in our review earlier.

The other aspect of the technology that could cause difficulty was the availability of devices for the computer-based part of BL. T16 said: "The biggest problem that we may have been the internet connection, and some of the students have no personal devices to use for learning….". On this matter, T27 added: "Students must be updated in technology so that they can learn properly. - For poor families, the cost will be high!" This is precisely the point made by Hasan et al. (2021) in Bangla Desh.

Related to that theme, somewhat surprisingly, it was suggested by some that students' computer skills were not adequate. T29 said, "The first challenge is the learner's unfamiliarity and inadequate knowledge of technology." T22 also said: "One of the obstacles is the low level of technology use from the students' side." Similarly, T30 said: "There are a few obstacles or challenges I faced in implementing blended learning. Firstly, students' lack of the proper use of technological resources in EFL learning can limit their engagement…." One would have expected students, as a young group of digital natives aged around 20, not to be facing problems with the use of the technology, which in the context of this study was mainly the Blackboard, not any more specialised programs. Possibly, it refers to some complexities of the Blackboard software itself, though no teacher named that an issue for the students or themselves.

Just a few teachers mentioned other challenges. The student's level of understanding was cited as an issue, presumably because it was below the threshold assumed by the online materials

(as also found by Alhusban, 2022). T13 said, "The ability of the students, they cannot understand everything". T19 also said: "The students had a hard time understanding the lesson online." These remarks appear to refer to understanding not of the technology but the English used or the lesson content. T21 also mentioned "thinking skills" as a problem. This, therefore, shows the teachers thinking of student knowledge as a prerequisite for BL, not just a product, echoing the view above of engagement as a prerequisite rather than a product of BL.

Finally, just one teacher (T29) mentioned a genuine issue that significantly damages student achievement: "…Secondly, the misuse of technology (cheating) that most of the learners do for getting good grades without understanding the concepts". This refers to online assessments where students' access to other websites or resources when answering is uncontrolled (compare Mellar et al., 2018, in the literature review above). In the study context, assessment has ceased mainly since the pandemic and has moved back to actual exam rooms on campus.

Discussion

Discussion of Research Question One

The study's findings suggest that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia recognize a moderately positive impact of BL methodologies on student engagement compared to traditional teaching methods. This observation is characterized by a moderate increase in certain aspects of student engagement, as reported by the teachers. Specifically, teachers noted a noticeable, though not overwhelming, rise in active participation in class activities. Students showed increased, albeit varying, levels of involvement in discussions and collaborative tasks. There was also a modest improvement in attentiveness, with students displaying somewhat enhanced focus and interest, particularly in digital content. Teachers additionally reported a slight increase in student enthusiasm for learning, attributed to the BL's diverse and interactive nature. This moderate enthusiasm was seen in students' class participation and willingness to engage with new concepts and technology-based assignments. The integration of digital tools with traditional teaching methods has been received positively by students to some extent, contributing to a learning experience that is engaging but within a moderate spectrum.

The observed enhancements in student engagement with BL methodologies, as reported by EFL teachers, can be ascribed to some factors. The amalgamation of digital tools with established teaching practices primarily introduces an innovative learning paradigm that more effectively garners student attention than traditional methods. Nevertheless, the degree of this enhanced engagement is somewhat contingent upon the student's proficiency and ease with digital technologies, along with the strategic implementation of these tools within the curriculum. Moreover, this increase is relatively modest, while there is a discernible uptick in student participation in interactive discussions and group activities. This observation implies a dichotomy in student preferences, with some students resonating more with the BL approach while others continue to favour traditional pedagogical styles. Besides, the slight elevation in attentiveness and enthusiasm towards learning may mirror students' diverse spectrum of digital literacy skills and potential inequities in technology accessibility outside the classroom. These factors could ostensibly influence student engagement levels, particularly during the digital segments of BL. Furthermore, the efficacy of integrating digital and conventional instructional methods is pivotal in shaping student engagement levels Al-Qudimi and Hameed (2024). An imbalanced integration may lead to only a nominal enhancement in engagement rather than the profound impact anticipated from a more seamlessly executed BL strategy.

The findings of this question, revealing modest enhancements in student engagement through the use of BL methodologies within Saudi EFL classrooms, present a fascinating point of comparison to existing literature. Al-khresheh (2023) noted considerable engagement in virtual classrooms among Jordanian EFL students during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting a more substantial impact of digital integration under certain conditions or in different settings. On the other hand, Hrastinski (2019) focused on exploring the diverse interpretations and applications of BL, which may provide context to the moderate impacts observed in our research. In addition, Cao (2023) performed a meta-analysis that identified a spectrum of BL effects internationally, potentially clarifying the contrast with the more marked improvements reported elsewhere. Armellini et al. (2021) found significant positive responses from students to BL in higher education, juxtaposing the less pronounced progress seen in our findings. The variation in findings might reflect the distinct educational methods, cultural factors, and digital literacy levels among students in Saudi Arabia, underscoring the non-uniform nature of BL's effectiveness across different educational and cultural landscapes.

Discussion of Research Question 2

The study identified multiple challenges EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia face in implementing BL methodologies. A predominant obstacle pertains to technological issues, encompassing inconsistent internet connectivity, a shortage of adequate digital resources for students, and a disparity in digital literacy levels among teachers and learners. These technological impediments often obstruct the seamless integration of BL in the educational process (Alam et al., 2022; Altay & Altay, 2019). Equally significant is the challenge of student engagement, particularly in the online segments of BL. Teachers observed diverse student adaptability to the BL environment, noting that while some students thrived, others struggled with self-motivation and focus outside the traditional classroom. This variance in engagement presents a hurdle in achieving uniform and effective learning outcomes (Yu et al., 2023). Moreover, the preparation involved in BL, including developing and organizing digital content aligned with classroom activities, was considerably more demanding than conventional teaching methods, often placing a strain on teachers. As for the impact on learning outcomes, teachers reported mixed perceptions. Some noted observable enhancements in student performance and more profound comprehension of material through BL, while others believed that the operational challenges might impede these potential advantages. This dichotomy suggests that the efficacy of BL in enriching learning outcomes in the Saudi Arabian EFL context is intricately linked to addressing these multifaceted challenges.

The implementation challenges of BL methodologies, as encountered by EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia, indicate systemic issues extending beyond the immediate educational context. Technological barriers, characterized by erratic internet connectivity and limited student access to digital tools, mirror broader infrastructural deficiencies prevalent in educational systems globally, not solely within the Saudi Arabian framework (Rasheed et al., 2020). Complicating these issues are the variable levels of digital literacy among educators and learners, creating disparities in the efficacy of BL engagement. A significant concern is student engagement in online BL components, where the lack of a traditional classroom setting – typically a bastion of structure and direct teacher interaction – necessitates a shift towards more self-directed learning approaches. Such a paradigm shift demands considerable self-motivation and discipline, qualities that may vary widely among students from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, the augmented preparation time inherent in BL

underscores the complexity of curating enriching learning experiences that synergize digital and traditional pedagogical methods. Developing engaging, educationally robust digital content is labour-intensive and requires a specialized skill set that may fall outside the purview of conventional teacher training. Consequently, the mixed perceptions of BL's impact on learning outcomes can be traced back to these diverse challenges. Although BL can enrich the learning process through interactive and tailored experiences, its success is inextricably linked to overcoming these technological, motivational, and resource-oriented obstacles (Ali et al., 2023).

The findings of this question, highlighting the complexities encountered in implementing BL methodologies in Saudi Arabian EFL classrooms, present a notable contrast to Al-khresheh's (2023) research, which observed heightened engagement within Jordanian virtual classrooms. This divergence underlines contextual factors' significant role in determining BL's efficacy. Furthermore, the study by Alsalhi et al. (2021) identifying the positive influence of BL on mathematics achievement starkly contrasts the variegated outcomes observed in our research, pointing to the influence of subject matter and educational levels on BL's effectiveness. Alhusban's (2022) insights into pioneering BL practices in Saudi Arabia offer intriguing avenues for overcoming the challenges highlighted in our study. These comparative analyses accentuate that the effectiveness of BL is intricately nuanced, being profoundly influenced by the distinct educational milieu and the availability of resources.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The findings garnered from this study into adopting BL methodologies by EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia impart significant theoretical contributions to educational technology and language pedagogy. Initially, the research delineates the intricate process of assimilating digital tools into established pedagogical practices, thereby underscoring the imperative for theoretical frameworks that encapsulate BL's technological and instructional dimensions. This revelation necessitates a recalibration of existing theoretical models to more accurately reflect the intricacies associated with digital literacy among educators and students, infrastructural constraints, and the cultural determinants impacting the success of BL initiatives. Furthermore, the observed fluctuations in student engagement and the disparities in educational outcomes underscore the urgency for BL theories to adopt a more nuanced and learner-centred stance, acknowledging the heterogeneity of student populations and their distinct learning environments. Moreover, the challenges encountered and the ambivalent views on the efficacy of BL underscore deficiencies within prevailing theoretical constructs, particularly concerning the systemic and infrastructural prerequisites for BL's implementation. Consequently, this research advocates for broadening theoretical vistas to enhance comprehension and facilitate the efficacious deployment of BL across varied educational landscapes, emphasizing areas grappling with technological and structural impediments.

Practical Implications

The findings also present practical implications for various stakeholders in the educational domain. For university authorities, teacher feedback underscores the necessity of robust internet connectivity on campus. Moreover, provisions for students lacking suitable devices or software for BL, such as university-loaned equipment, become imperative. While ensuring internet access at off-campus locations remains challenging, universities can enhance student preparedness by

providing foundational computer skills training, like mastery of platforms such as Blackboard, potentially through mandatory courses. Teachers, on their part, are encouraged to address engagement challenges in BL. This involves devising strategies to make online activities more relevant and captivating, possibly by initially mandating the use of online materials. Monitoring the usage of these materials through subsequent in-class activities and assessments could be a viable approach. Moreover, adapting online content to be more smartphone-friendly may increase student receptivity, considering the prevalent preference for mobile devices over traditional computers.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study has some limitations, each coupled with a pertinent recommendation for enhancing future research. Firstly, the limitation posed by the small sample size potentially compromises the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. To mitigate this, future research should attempt to incorporate a more substantial and varied sample, thereby bolstering the validity and applicability of the results. Secondly, while fruitful in providing detailed insights, the study's reliance on a qualitative research framework constrains its capacity for broader statistical generalization and the establishment of causality. In response, it is advised that future studies adopt a mixed-methods approach, amalgamating both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to yield a more robust and encompassing analysis. Lastly, the research's primary concentration on teachers' perspectives may inadvertently overlook students' varied and potentially differing viewpoints. To address this, it is recommended that future investigations include research conducted from the students' standpoint, aiming to achieve a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the educational dynamics under consideration.

Conclusion

This study elucidates the nuanced yet affirmatively moderate impact of BL methodologies on student engagement within EFL settings in Saudi Arabia. The evidence delineates a discernible elevation in student engagement, characterized by an uptick in active participation, heightened attentiveness, and increased enthusiasm for learning. Such advancements are primarily credited to the symbiotic integration of digital tools with conventional teaching methodologies, ushering in a dynamic learning paradigm. Nonetheless, the efficacy of BL is contingent upon a constellation of factors, including the digital literacy of students, their access to technological resources, and the judicious deployment of digital tools within the academic curriculum. Moreover, this research delineates formidable challenges in adopting BL, including technological constraints, variances in digital literacy, and the imperative for creating compelling digital content. These impediments underscore the intricate nature of incorporating BL into educational frameworks, highlighting the imperative for holistic strategies to surmount these challenges. Despite these obstacles, the capacity of BL to augment the learning experience and foster superior educational outcomes remains palpable, predicated upon surmounting the identified hurdles and optimally leveraging the amalgamation of digital and traditional pedagogical methods. The findings from this study provide critical insights into the moderate influences of BL on student engagement alongside the attendant challenges, offering significant implications for teachers and educational stakeholders intent on amplifying the effectiveness of BL in educational milieus. Addressing both technological and pedagogical barriers presents a fertile opportunity to exploit the advantages of BL more

comprehensively, thereby cultivating a more immersive and efficacious learning environment for EFL students in Saudi Arabia and potentially in similar contexts globally.

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Authenticity
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During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used the premium version of Grammarly in order to improve language quality. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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