

Blended CEFR in Enhancing Vocabulary among Low Proficiency Students

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Abstract

Emphasis on English language proficiency and digital literacy among Malaysian students in schools have been given utmost priority in the Malaysian Education Transformation (2013 – 2025). With the introduction of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), (Council of Europe, 2001) the emphasize for low proficient students to acquire vocabulary knowledge is crucial for them to move progressively into the next band as stated in the CEFR global scales. Yet, concerns arises as how the implementation of (CEFR) will impact the low proficient students with almost none to limited vocabulary acquisition. This poses an extremely high risk of these students being left far behind as English is a second language to most students. Thus, the aim of this study is to use blended learning to expand the vocabulary acquisition among low proficient students and enable them to move progressively in the CEFR band. The mixed method study employed questionnaires, face to face interviews, pre and post test and observations to collect data from 20 low proficient students aged 14 from a semi urban secondary school. Data collected were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The study found that using blended learning not only enhances low proficient students vocabulary count in CEFR English but it also promotes autonomous learning and understanding of sentence structures. Hence, the use of blended learning proves to be a crucial alternative for low proficient students to enhance their vocabulary knowledge and understanding of sentence structures through digital literacy that is capable of motivating and challenging them to achieve their highest potential.

Keywords: blended learning, CEFR, global scales, low proficiency, Malaysian context, vocabulary enhancement,

Cite as: Krishnan, P. D., & Yunus, M. M. (2019). Blended CEFR in Enhancing Vocabulary among Low Proficiency Students. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on CALL (5)*. 141-153. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call5.11>

Introduction

General Introduction

In Malaysia, the transition of digital literacy into language classroom has been emphasized in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013 – 2025) in the 2nd and 7th shift where both shifts priorities on English language and technology being essential tools for youths to be marketable in today's new emerging world. This is also emphasized in the National Transformation TN50 (2021- 2050) in producing youths who are equipped in contributing to the economic development, social advancement and innovation. One of the methods is to produce youths who are not only well-versed in the national language but also in English language as well.

The Malaysian Ministry of Education aims for all students to be able to use English language independently after leaving the education system. Globalization has brought on the wide use of English language internationally. Thus, students will benefit immensely with the bilingual policy introduced in learning two languages and keeping up with the rapid globalization (Zaba, Ramadan, Gunggut, Chuah, & Katsuhiko, 2011). Nevertheless, the proficiency level in English language among the students in semi-urban and rural schools have been very worrying especially among the low performing students. Their inability to cope with the language skills because of very limited vocabulary has contributed to these category of students being side-lined as a group of low performers not only in English language but other subjects as well. Less proficient students in secondary schools, especially those in lower grades, had problems understanding the materials set for students at their age mainly due to a lack of vocabulary and an inability to master the structures of the language (Latsanyphone & Bouangeune 2009).

Background of Study

The introduction and implementation of Common European Framework of Language (CEFR) into the English language curriculum in Malaysian schools is the Ministry's effort in up-skilling student's English skills regardless of their proficiency level. This is to meet with the rapid economic globalization of producing quality student outcomes by the year 2025. It gives opportunities for low proficient students to adjust their learning which is aligned with the CEFR international global scales for each of the skills taught. "The framework also defines the proficiency levels that allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a lifelong basis" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1).

With the use of blended learning in a CEFR aligned English language classroom will be a boost in helping students of different levels of proficiency to control the pace of their learning. While the face to face interaction in class can be assessed and monitored by teachers to ensure the lessons are aligned with CEFR's "can do statement" stated in the international global scales which is on the principle of equity. Blended learning is acknowledged to be the best approach that can help low proficient students in their learning process. This is supported by a study done by Vasbieva *et al.* (2016) that blended learning offers approaches to solving one of the main tasks of modern traditional education: the implementation and development of each student's potential abilities. Blended learning using face to face classroom activity and online instruction is becoming the alternative that is popular with language educators and thus so far several studies have shown that blended learning is highly appreciated and positively rated by the students (Popolzina, 2014).

Using blended learning in a CEFR classroom will enable low proficient students to choose materials and resources that are suitable within their capability levels. The curriculum of CEFR introduced in lower secondary level uses Learning Standards that are derived from the CEFR international scales and teachers are required to use material consisting of textbook materials (Pulse 2 text book) and non-text book materials. The CEFR is designed to accommodate an action-oriented approach in learning a language and use. Thus, the use of blended learning for non-text book materials in Malaysian secondary schools comprises 75% of the curriculum while only 25% is based on the text book Pulse 2 provided by the Curriculum Development Division (BPK). This will provide a platform for low proficient students to be able to choose resources and materials within their proficiency capability and motivate students to complete tasks which CEFR describes as “can do statements”. Thus, this paper aims to explore the use of blended learning among low proficient students in enhancing their vocabulary knowledge in CEFR English language.

Literature Review

Blended Learning in Malaysian Education System

The Malay language is the national language and the medium of instruction in Malaysian public schools. English language is the second language which all students are required to learn and master. It is recognized as an important second language in view of its status as the lingua franca of the world, essential for economic advancement and international communication. The introduction of CEFR in English language curriculum has changed the platform of using the traditional standardize textbooks to finding alternative materials in teaching school students in the classroom.

The adaption and adoption of blended learning in education has been gaining immense popularity in recent years with positive results. The use of e-learning in education system has been mushrooming all over the globe especially in higher education. In fact, this type of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) seemed to be more and more prevalent (Yunus *et al.*, 2013., Yunus, Salehi, & Amini, 2016). In Malaysian context, the priority of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education can be seen in the National Education Blueprint (2013-2025) in Shift 7 which is to “leverage ICT to scale up quality learning across Malaysia”. Grapragasem, Krishnan, and Mansor (2014) state that the virtual classroom, e-learning and blended learning are gaining momentum and becoming the current delivery mode of teaching and learning. The up skilling of Malaysia’s modern education system core appeared during the 1950s when it was called for a centralized national system of education. Base on the results of 2012 PISA exam, scores in reading (398) and science (420) are well below the OECD average of 496 and 501, respectively. Among their surrounding East Asian countries that participated in the 2012 PISA, Malaysian students only outperform their peers from Indonesia (OECD, 2012).

To overcome these issues, the Ministry of Education introduced the 2013 Malaysia Education Blueprint which established clear, ambitious goals for the education system to be accomplished by 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The Blueprint identifies five key system aspirations: to achieve 100 percent enrolment from preschool to upper secondary by 2020 (access); to be in the top third of countries in international assessments (quality); to yield a 50 percent reduction in achievement gaps (equity); to enhance shared values and experiences by embracing diversity (unity); and to maximize students outcomes within the current budget

(efficiency). In the effort to reach these aspirations, the ministry outlined eleven shifts to transform the system, which include leveraging information and communication technologies (ICT) to scale quality learning across the country.

Computer labs will be used to support a variety of blended-learning models. For example, students could access playlists of online content or take fully online courses from a computer lab. Based on the school visits, however, the lab rotation model—in which students rotate into a lab on a weekly or daily basis, and then experience face-to-face instruction back in their classrooms—was by far the most common use of lab space. Teachers use the lab rotation model normally utilizes the computers in such a way that they could easily identify student pain points (e.g. via individual or classroom-wide quizzes), which goes on to shape their non-tech lesson plans using some of that data. (Fisher, Bushko & White, 2017. p. 41).

Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

With the ministry's effort to transform language education in Malaysia, the introduction of CEFR was implemented at an appropriate time. With the 4th Industrial Revolution looming, a revamp in the education system in Malaysia needed to be revised and revamped in order to prepare youths for the digital world. This is important as English language at tertiary level is at Phase 2 of the roadmap (2017-2020) and the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) waves 1- 3 (2013-2025). CEFR is developed by the Council of Europe. It comes with a general framework which indicates what language learners need to learn to be able to use a foreign language effectively in practice. The CEFR “provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” (Council of Europe, 2001, p.1). It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop to be able to act effectively (Yamat, Umar & Mahmood, 2014).

The CEFR is derived from the international global scales where it distinguishes five communication skills, which are listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing. It also gives suggestive activities which are deemed appropriate for that particular skill. Language proficiency is measured in relation to the five skills on a scale beginning with A1, and progressing through bands A2, B1, B2 and C1 to C2. Proficiency in each skill is defined at each level by a series of “can do” statements. An important reason to set up and follow international standards is that they can be used to compare different language education systems, and to assess a single country's language education system relative to international best practice. This process is referred to as “benchmarking” (English Language Standards and Quality Council, 2015, p.64).

Impact of English language on Low Proficient Students

Language proficiency is an important influencing factor of interactions among students from the different nationalities. According to Tavakkoli and Rakhshandehroo (2014), language proficiency refers to the level of skills that an individual can speak, write and read a language or understand the language. In a qualitative study of cultural experiences of Arab and American students of American colleges, Abdulla (2008) also points out that language is believed to be an obstacle for people, including the ones who are able to speak the different languages.

Low proficiency learners are often categorized by their academic performance in tests, examinations or classroom learning tasks (Hsu & Sheu, 2008). Most Malaysian rural English as a second language (ESL) students possess low proficiency levels. However, despite problems related to the learners' remote location, most weak learners possess the desire to improve yet they are hindered by the lack of learning styles and the inability to use English language learning strategies.

To address this issue, a practical approach is needed to encourage these learners to acquire learning hows to learn skills and to take their learning beyond the classroom walls. With CEFR, low proficient students are given the leeway of controlling their pace and learning which is catered to individual preference and the use of blended – learning, it will up skill their English skills by enhancing their vocabulary count.

Method

Research Design

The study employs an explanatory action research design. This research study also applies mixed methods which are quantitative and qualitative that analyses and merges data from both resources which are survey questionnaires and face to face interviews with pre and post-test and observations. Quantitative data may support or contradict findings from the literature, while the qualitative data provides deeper insights as to why it is so.

Procedure

The study was carried out among 20 students in the age of 14 years old from a semi urban school. The 20 students were chosen using purposive sampling base on their level of proficiency in English Language using the class room assessment (PBD) which evaluates their English proficiency in all the four skills and also their summative grades in English subject.

The students were divided into groups of five members based on their English language achievement, forming a total of four groups. A blended learning workshop was conducted at the beginning stage to help the low proficient students to familiarize themselves with blended learning using station rotation and lab rotation. The blended learning phase was conducted for about 4 weeks using the CEFR related themes from the Pulse 2 textbook. Prior to that a pre-test was conducted to gauge the low proficient students' vocabulary level and their understanding of sentence structures. At the end of the blended learning phase, questionnaires was administered to all the 20 low proficient students and 8 students consented to be interviewed.

Data Analysis

Questionnaires were completed and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The thematic analysis were identified according to categories which are advantages and disadvantages. Online interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding and students were given code names (CB1, CB2 CB3...) and so on. The interviewees were also given the same code name based on their numbering using the chrome books that they used. The pre-test score which consist of vocabulary assessment was collected. The scores was accumulated in the form of percentage in comparison to post test scores at the end of the blended learning phase. This provided data on students' achievement in the vocabulary

enhancement and sentence making and answered the research questions pertaining to blended learning implementation among low proficient students.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the data collected from the study on how the use of blended learning impacts low proficient students vocabulary count and understanding of sentence structures and their acceptance level of learning using blending learning.

Vocabulary Enhancement

This subsection portrays the findings from the questionnaire in regard of low proficient students' vocabulary enhancement.

Table 1. *Vocabulary Enhancement*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	M
Vocabulary is important when I learn CEFR English.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	15 (75)	5 (25)	4.25
I learn better with the pictures and CEFR words from using online materials.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (15)	16 (80)	1 (5)	3.90
The CEFR words from Pulse 2 is easy to remember when I use video clips from YouTube via chrome book to learn.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (20)	14 (70)	2 (10)	3.90
I practise the vocabulary of CEFR with my group members through online learning and tasks.	0 (0.0)	3 (15)	3 (15)	12 (60)	2 (10)	3.65
I use the online dictionary to help learn vocabulary.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (10)	8 (20)	10 (50)	4.40

In terms of percentage in Table 1 the analysis revealed that almost all the low proficient students are aware that vocabulary is an essential part in learning a language and CEFR English language. With the mean obtained of (M=4.25) it implies that the low proficient students found the statement general true. This indicates that the students realize that the importance of vocabulary in mastering English language. For the item, *I learn better with pictures from online resources*, the mean scored is (M=4.60) which is high, showing that low proficient students learn much better in acquiring CEFR vocabulary using sources from the internet.

The data shows that 85% of the low proficient students prefer using ICT materials to learn vocabulary instead of hardcopy materials given in classroom. Using the chrome book and finding websites that interested them is a motivational tool. This is also reflected during the lab rotations, where the researcher observed that the students were more engaged and motivated with the lesson. They are able to understand better in context of the topic.

Blended Learning Experience

The use of blended learning among low proficient students showed improvement in students' vocabulary, language aspects, interaction and focus attention in the lesson.

Table 2. *Blended Learning Experience*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	M
I enjoy lessons using Blended learning compared to normal lessons.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	14 (75)	6(25)	4.30
I find the station and lab rotations help me to master more vocabulary words.	0 (0.0)	2 (10)	3 (15)	12 (60)	3 (15)	3.80
Using Blended Learning makes me able to interact with other students better.	0 (0.0)	3 (15)	3 (15)	12 (60)	2 (10)	3.65
Blended learning made me interested to learn CEFR English.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (10)	16 (85)	2 (10)	4.00
I feel bored in a Blended learning environment.	13 (55)	4 (20)	3 (15)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1.50

From the study, low proficient students are able to improve their vocabulary count, sentence structure understanding, promote autonomous learning and focus attention in the classroom as can be seen in Table 2. From the questionnaire above majority of the low proficient students have agreed very strongly that the use of blended learning aids them in learning CEFR vocabulary. This reflects that low proficient students enjoy English lessons in blended learning environment. The use of lab and station rotations has also given a great impact on increasing their vocabulary with the mean of (M=4.00).

This shows a soaring score that blended learning encourages low proficient students to learn CEFR English compared to traditional method. Though there were still 15% of the students whom were neutral of this statement, but the majority of the low proficient students were interested and engaged throughout the blended learning lesson.

Pre Test and Post Test Findings.

The pre and post test was administered to the low proficient students prior to the blended learning phase and after. The study found that there were tremendous increase in vocabulary and understanding of sentence structures as shown in Figure 1.

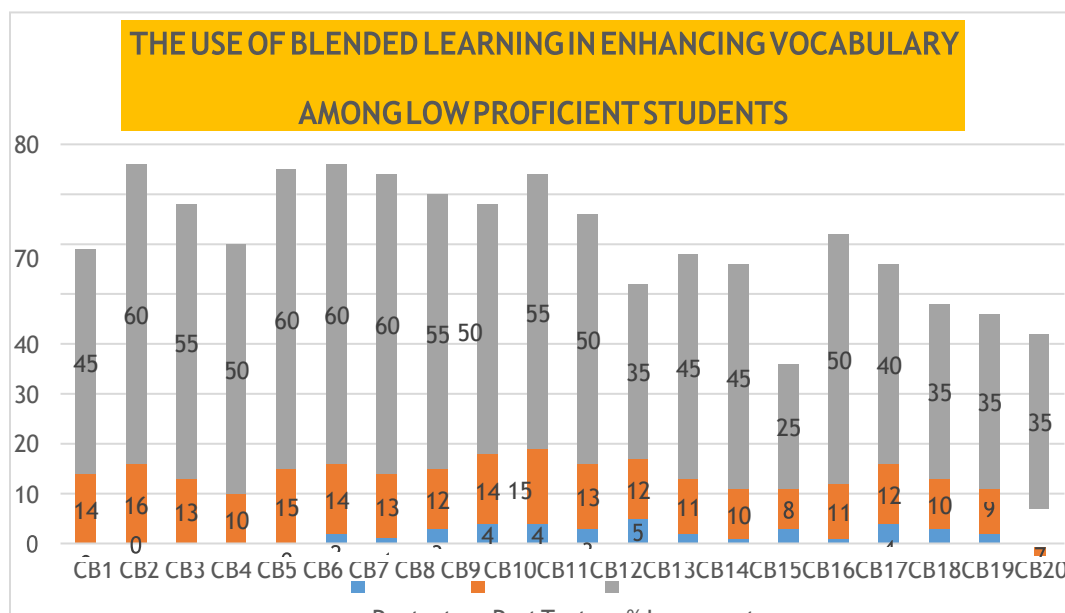


Figure 1. The use of Blended Learning (Station & Lab Rotation) to enhance vocabulary

Figure 1 shows there is positive increment in both the vocabulary count and the percentage after the use of blended learning. There is an increment of about twenty five percent in the vocabulary understanding and count after the students watched online videos, listened to interactive stories, digital resources, games and mostly effective of all is the online dictionaries used by low proficiency students. This study clearly indicates to the researcher that the using technology and gadgets is effective in holding low proficiency students' focus in class. It is extremely relevant in moving low proficient students to higher bands in the CEFR scale. The CEFR curriculum emphasizes on students moving *progressively* in an interactive way from one CEFR level to another.

It is proven from the results from Figure 4.1 that low proficient students are able to move progressively up into the CEFR bands using blended learning. It helps in engaging students' participation in classroom activities and solidifies the understanding of vocabulary as well as improving their understanding of sentence structures as well. This study clearly indicates to the researcher that the use of technology and gadgets is effective in holding low proficiency students' focus in class. This is similar as reported by Tam, Kan and Ng (2010) in their study that a computer-mediated environment is ideal for low proficiency learners who lack confidence using English in the face-to-face setting. It is extremely relevant in moving low proficient students to higher bands in the CEFR scale. Students need to move progressively from A1 level to A2 level which can be

from low, mid or high A2 in the CEFR scale. The CEFR curriculum emphasizes on students moving *progressively* in an interactive way from one CEFR level to another.

Similarly, it was found that the students are able to identify vocabularies from the reading excerpts and answer the questions correctly after using blended learning in the post test. This clearly indicates that the use of blended learning while helping to hold the attention and focus of low proficiency students with the use of chrome book, it also enhances their receptive skills by listening to targeted sections of the online resources. Students were able to control the pace of their learning in the classroom while teacher acted as a facilitator.

Apart from that, the use of ICT integration in blended learning is a confidence boost among low proficiency students. This is also supported by Yunus and Suliman (2014) in their study that the blending of ICT in literature teaching benefits students in motivational aspects. The ability to maneuver their way using the internet to access resources related to the lesson and videos (YouTube), digital dictionaries, online games and many more shows that ICT integrated less promotes 21st century learning and students can choose the pace of the lesson in accordance to their learning ability.

This is an essential finding as low ability students poses the biggest problem in almost every school in upgrading English language. The fact that the use of blended learning using chrome book via station and lab rotation using internet (YouTube) is one method to help this group of students to improve their proficiency level. It also fulfils the nation's vision of creating students whom can master a standard of English language. Therefore, the data demonstrated that low proficient students activities during the researching, brainstorming, reading, and task activities of the blended learning stations on their respective group ultimately produces engaging and interactive English lesson.

This is align with a study conducted by Olasina (2017) that the usage of videos in teaching and learning has a boost on the students' interest and confidence to learn more. This ultimately enhances their vocabulary mastery and moving them progressively into a higher CEFR band which can be from A1 level to mid or high A2 level in the CEFR as proven in the data of the post test. However, not all the low proficient students were able to involve themselves effectively as some of them lacked the intrinsic motivation to engage in class activities. Nevertheless, there are many benefits to using blended learning among low proficient students in CEFR English classroom.

Discussion and Implication

From this study, it is proven that the use of blended learning helps low proficient students' improve their vocabulary by learning new words and reinforcing their mastery of the targeted vocabulary from the CEFR curriculum. This is reflected in the findings and the data presented. The low proficient students show a remarkable aptitude and ability to use language learning strategies to aid them in learning words and vocabulary from the online tools. This corresponds with the study conducted by Vasbieva *et al.* (2016) that blended learning offers alternative learning strategies to suit a learner's style.

This is definitely reflected in their post test result of improving their vocabulary count after the blended learning experience. In the blended learning phase, the low proficient students are able to

use YouTube videos, interactive story boards and games to remember words and targeted vocabulary. This is supported by studies done by Ibrahim & Yusoff (2012) of students using YouTube video during blended learning sessions to improve their language skills. In advertly, the students are able to create language strategies by using these online tools to master vocabulary.

The learning of vocabulary among low proficient students using ICT is another boost as most of them enjoy the use of chrome books. This indicates the use of ICT through the use of blended learning should be applied to low proficient students and not only focus on intermediate and good students only. This supports the study conducted by Yunus, Sallehi & John (2013) that 96.2% teachers believe that using visual aids creates a learning environment that is enjoyable in the literature classroom. This promoted independent learning among low proficient students that would enable them to control their learning and it will not be limited during class hours online. Low proficient students can take these learning strategies' outside of school or offline to continue their vocabulary learning and language sentence comprehending that would help them to move progressively into a higher CEFR band level.

Most of the low proficient used the online dictionary as their guide to learning new words and vocabulary. They found it very helpful as it gave them the meaning of words in their first language (L1)–Malay language. This enable them to comprehend meaning of words and sentence structures in order for them to get the gist of sentences. Lightbown and Spada (2013) supported this in their research that teachers can assist low proficient students to expand their style of learning strategies and develop greater flexibility in using learning strategies using instructional materials such as videos and digital tools to give students opportunities to practice the language outside of the class. As stated by Yunus, Osman & Ishak (2011) interaction between the students and the teacher becomes extremely important for successful relationship throughout the school year and this can be achieved through the face to face interaction.

In this study, low proficient students will benefit greatly in bridging the gap of language barrier with the intermediate and good students by using blended learning in learning CEFR English. In this study the low proficient students are able to use You Tube videos relating to the CEFR topics to familiarize themselves with content knowledge and vocabulary. They are able to use online dictionaries that gives the meaning and translation in their first language (L1) and enable them to understand the content, gather informational knowledge and understand sentences and phrases.

The low proficient students chose online materials, video and games that are related to the topic at hand and using the digital dictionaries were able to learn the targeted CEFR vocabulary. Furthermore, digital tools enable students to use places for learning other than the classroom, allowing them to learn anywhere and anytime (Burston, 2014, p. 103-125). Students can choose from a variety of activities, adapting them to the learning context. With this wide variety of online source, the blended learning experience gave them various platforms to practice the targeted language interactively using the chrome books as well as socially engaging with group members. However, it is well proven in this study using blended learning increases vocabulary knowledge among low proficient students.

The findings from the questionnaire and post-test also showed that low proficient students acquire better understanding of sentence structures which enable them to answer comprehension questions. In this study, the data from the post test showed that most of the low proficient students had improved tremendously not only in their vocabulary but also in the short reading excerpts. This indicates that the use of blended learning exposes students to English base environment and gets them to familiarize themselves with words and phrases.

Moreover, the blended learning using online resource were helpful throughout the learning phases. Blended classroom can be enhance by a technology to cover areas of the curriculum that is not covered in the classroom (Yunus, 2018). This relates to content knowledge where in the learning phase, the low proficient students were able to compile their online sources and web references in different, creative ways. Brainstorming was where the blended learning phase was the most helpful. Many interesting manners of online learning tools generated meaningful learning with the use of online dictionary. Some of the low proficient students even showed their IT savvy capability by downloading and uploading Medias like images, games and videos into their Google Drive which they shared with their group members and other groups. However, there were those who were passive learners who just followed their group members. As a result, the more active students compensated more in their group task and activities. Nevertheless, there were groups who practiced genuine group participation in the blended learning and were able to compile media sources which they enjoyed learning independently.

Conclusion

The findings of the study indicates that using blended learning among low proficient students in learning CEFR English enhances their vocabulary knowledge, language aspects of understanding sentence structures, promoting autonomous learning and enabling them to harness their ICT skills as well. This in long term would enable them to comprehend all the four skills being taught in CEFR English and help low proficient students to move progressively into the next CEFR band from A1 level to A2 level and so forth. The use of blended learning has proved in this study to be an alternative method in aiding teachers in not only enhancing low proficient students vocabulary and understanding of sentence structures but also in promoting autonomous learning by using their ICT skills.

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