

## Blending Teaching in English Language Large Classes

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### Abstract

The paper is based on action research carried out in the University of Khartoum. The research was conducted among second year students at the Faculty of Science studying English for Science as university requirement for 2 hours a week for 15 weeks. The main aim of the research was to discover students' motivation in large classes towards the use of the online tools in learning English language and to discover ways to increase time of exposure to English language. Online tools such as Yahoo Groups and Wikis were introduced with face to face instruction to increase contact time of the students. Blending computer mediated teaching with traditional methods were the main features of the action research. Different tools were used to investigate the learning outcome and students reactions toward the use of a blended teaching. Results showed positive attitudes of students towards the use of blended teaching and use of online tools in learning English.

*Key words:* action research, large classes, blended teaching, online tools, exposure to English

**Introduction**

In the year 1990 the Sudanese government announced what later came to be known as the “Revolution of Higher Education”. Some of the main features of this revolution were the opening of new universities, Arabic becoming the medium of instruction instead of English and the increase in number of students’ intake. As Arabic became the language of instruction English language became a university requirement, a subject to be taught in two hours per week in most universities for one or two semesters. In General Education English language standards deteriorated with emigration of qualified teachers, change of curriculum, closing down of teacher training institutes, cancellation of all extensive reading from the curricula and among other factors. Thus students entered institutions of higher education from the General Education with low proficiency levels in English language. This situation coupled with the phenomena of large classes in universities and limited time allocated to the teaching of English; universities graduated students with levels as low A2 instead of the C2 back in the 80s.

In 2002 oil was discovered in the country and this led to an influx of foreign investments. There was a greater need for higher English language proficiency levels among graduates of Sudanese universities. In 2005 the “Comprehensive Peace Treaty” was signed between the South and the North ending forty years of civil war in the southern part of Sudan. One of the main articles in the treaty was the language article that stated that English and Arabic are the two official languages of civil service and higher education. Later on English language became the official language of the southern part of the country.

In spite of all these factors, the situation of English language in higher education remained the same, a mere subject to be taught at first and second levels. No new policies were taken to improve the situation and to meet the growing need of the stakeholders for graduates with higher proficiency levels of English. English language was still taught as a university requirement in large classes. Teachers left with only limited time to complete the syllabus were only lecturing not teaching.

At the University of Khartoum, English language was taught as a specialization in the departments of English at the Faculties of Arts and Education. It was also taught at another department of English language in the Administration for University Requirements (AUR) as a university requirement in 18 different faculties around the university four campuses. As a university requirement English language was taught in first and second levels with a total of 2 hours per week for 45 weeks. The students study a general English course in level 1 and an ESP course according to their specialization in level 2. The students entering university would have studied English language for 4 years in the primary school and 3 years in the secondary school. The teaching at those two levels was totally grammar based aiming only to make students pass their exams. Thus students were entering university as ‘false beginners’ with very poor communication skills.

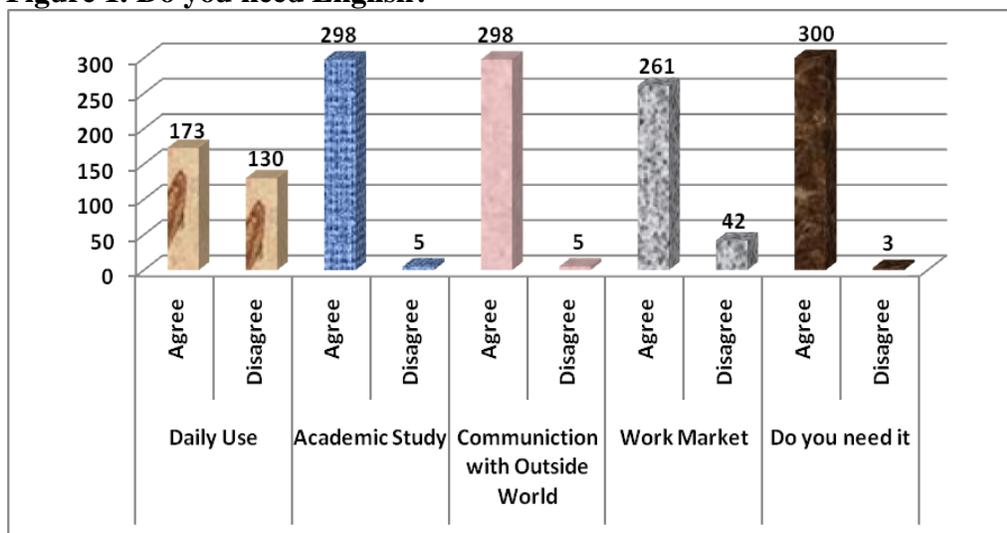
**Large Classes at University of Khartoum**

During the Hornby School on 'Teaching English in Large Classes' in Ethiopia participants from seven different countries in Africa were asked to define a large class. Although the participants could not reach an agreement on a definition of a large class there was an agreement that a class of more than 40 or 50 students is a large class (Shamin, 2006). Perceptions of class size were subjective and also depend on a number of variables. Among these variables was the time allocated for the teaching of English language. In the University of Khartoum where Arabic

was the medium of instruction and English was still taught as a university requirement, classes sometimes exceeded more than 200 students. Classes were not equipped with any resources for English language teaching. As teachers were moving around teaching in the different faculties at different geographical locations it was very difficult for them to carry even a recorder for some of the listening activities. Classes in some faculties exceeded 300 students. The situation was depressing for teachers with no support from the administration of the faculties and the university.

Although the teaching environment was totally depressing for teachers, students were not so much negative about learning English in large classes. Motivation ran very high among the students learning English. In a study conducted in 2008, the subjects of the study were students studying English language as a university requirement who showed a high level of motivation (Nur & Al Sabah, 2008). The figure below shows some of the results of the study:

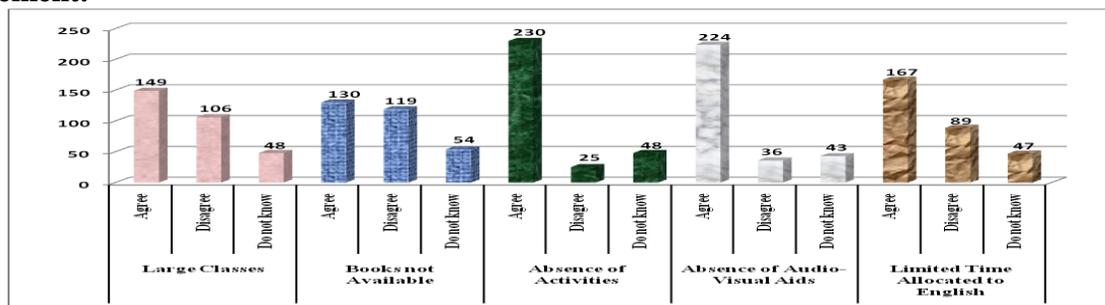
**Figure 1. Do you need English?**



Source: (Nur & Al Sabah, 2008)

The sample of the study population showed a very high level of motivation as it was clear from their responses that they knew that English language is very important in their future lives. In another question, students were asked about the problems facing them when learning English, they gave the following response:

**Figure 2. Problems facing students when learning English language as university requirement.**



Source: (Nur & Al Sabah, 2008)

Students were able to judge exactly the problems facing them when learning English. They rated the absences of activities and audio-visual aids as the highest problems facing when learning English. Limited time allocated to English came third followed by large classes and books not available.

### **Classroom Action Research**

With no administrative support teachers were left on their own to try to find ways to improve their teaching in large classes. Building on previous studies the department took the decision to implement Classroom Action Research (CAR) as a way to discover what works best in a particular class as the teachers were teaching in different faculties. Factors such as class size, content specialization of the students, level of administrative support from the different faculties and student demographics played a role in the extent students improved in English. Classroom Action Research was chosen as it is a systematic inquiry with the goal of informing practice in a particular situation. CAR is a way for instructors to discover what works best in their own classroom situation, thus allowing informed decisions about teaching.

CAR integrates the two faculty roles of teaching and scholarship and is one form of the scholarship of teaching and learning (Cross & Steadman, 1996). The criteria for choosing CAR as a way to discover what works best for a class was based on Hopkins (1985) advice on teacher research when he advocates the development of teacher's professional expertise and judgment. He provides a basis for the selection of classroom research by teachers:

- \*the teacher's primary role is to teach and any research project must not interfere with or disrupt this commitment;
- \*the method of data collection should not be too demanding on the teacher's time;
- \*the methodology used must be reliable enough to allow teachers to formulate hypotheses confidently and develop strategies applicable to the classroom situation;
- \*the teacher should be committed to the research problem under study;
- \*teachers must follow ethical procedures when carrying out research; and
- \*classroom research where possible should adopt a perspective where all members of a school community build and share a common vision.

Hopkins advice was very much appropriate to the situation of English language teaching as a requirement in the University of Khartoum. Teachers were different from their colleagues in other English departments they had the primary role of teaching and were not given the time to do research. They did not have enough time to do full research projects as most of them were teaching in two or three different faculties within separate campuses. Some of the teachers were really committed to make change in their teaching and so CAR was the obvious decision for them. The need is not only to look at solutions to the problems of teaching and learning in large classes but to develop contextually appropriate methodology for large class teaching (Holliday, 1994).

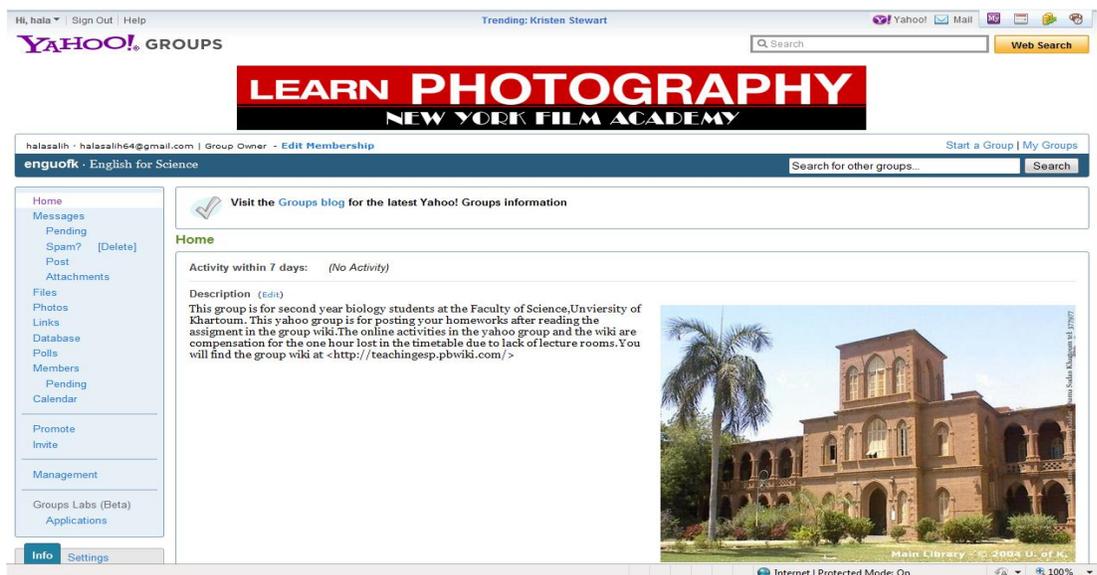
### **Blended Teaching**

In the academic year 2008/2009, a decision was taken to use computer assisted language activities in the faculties where the students and teachers had access to computers. But as motivation ran high in some of the other faculties which were poorly equipped with computers a decision was taken to carry out action research and investigate if introducing blended teaching

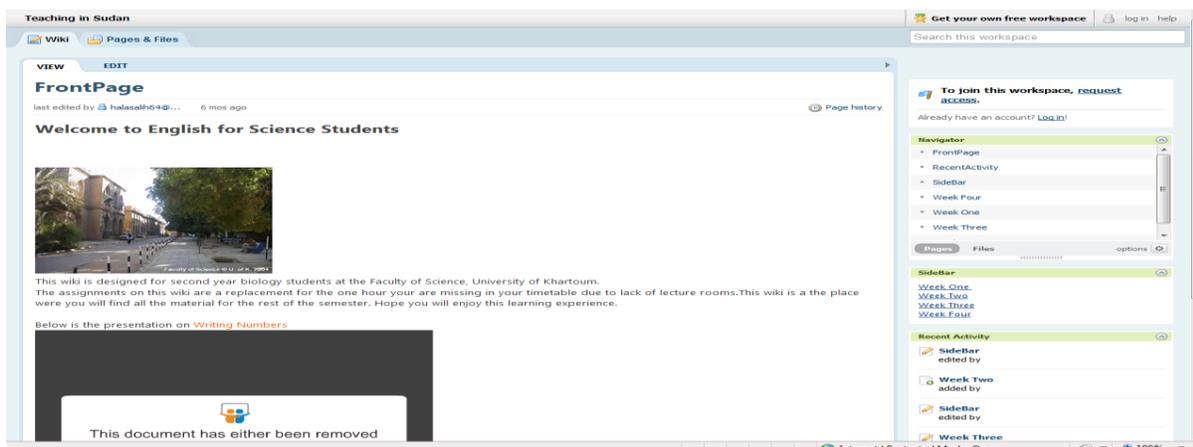
(computer mediated and face to face teaching) would make a change in the learning outcomes of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course taught to second year students at the Faculty of Science. The total number of the students in the class was 245 students, they had 2 hours per week for 15 weeks. The time allocated for English language was very limited and was not enough for all students to participate in class and there were no equipment to practice listening. Blended learning seemed as a good action plan to increase contact hours of English language teaching and allow students to practice listening.

Blended teaching was a mixing of different learning environments. The phrase has many specific meanings based upon the context in which it is used. A blended teaching approach can combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction. Integration of online activities seemed a very realistic option to increase contact hours and make the students more involved in the learning process. Two online platforms were established, a classroom Yahoo Group (Figure 3) and a Wiki (Figure 4).

**Figure 3. English for Science (class Yahoo Group)**



**Figure 4. Teaching in Sudan (class Wiki)**



In the 2 hours face to face instruction was carried on, but a lot of activities were designed to be carried online. This combination is believed to have achieved the following objectives:

- \* Increased contact hours outside the classroom as this was seen by the students as one of the problems hindering their learning of English language (Figure 2).
- \*Raised motivation level by introducing extra activities as the lack of activities was seen a problem by the students when learning English language (Figure 2).
- \* Led students to be more responsible for their own learning which lead to greater learner autonomy.
- \*Optimized learning by providing different learning styles in a large class.

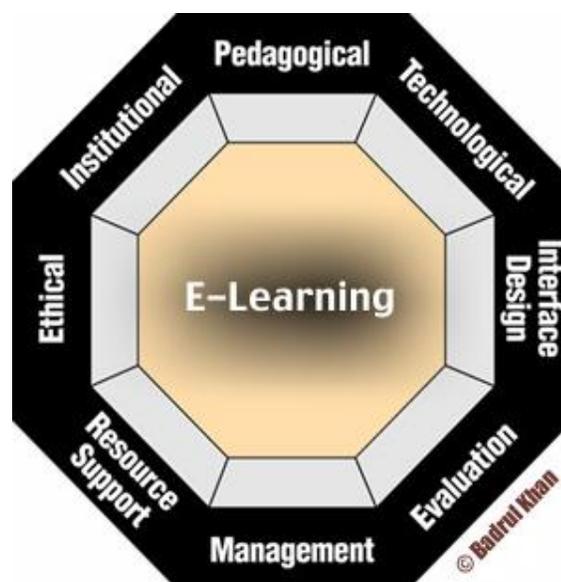
The design was that 60% of the course was carried in the classroom (face to face instruction) and 40% was asynchronous self –paced activities. The students were divided in groups of 3 or 4 and were given code names. The aims behind dividing the students into groups of 3 or 4 was as follow;

- \*More computer literate students will be able to help the less literate students.
- \*More interactions was visible within the small groups in comparison to the large class.
- \*Students were actively learning from each other as learning was becoming a social activity.

### E-learning Framework

In designing the course Badrul Khan's (2009) blended e-learning framework, referred to as Khan's *Octagonal Framework* was adapted. The Octagonal Framework enables one to select appropriate ingredients. The framework serves as a guide to plan, develop, deliver, manage, and evaluate blended learning programs.

Figure 5. Khan Octagonal Framework



The framework is made of eight dimensions: institutional, pedagogical, technological, interface design, evaluation, management, resource support, and ethical. These dimensions organize thinking and help the designer in creating a meaningful learning environment.

- a. Institutional: In the institutional dimension issues concerning organizational, administrative, academic affairs, and student services were addressed.
- b. Pedagogical: In the pedagogical dimension three areas were integrated, content, learners needs, and objectives.
- c. Technological: In the technological dimension the online tools or online platforms were chosen and designed with the specific content. Yahoo Groups and a Wiki were chosen as the suitable learning management systems.
- d. Interface design: In this dimension interface has to be sophisticated enough to integrate the different elements of the blend (face to face instruction and online activities). This will enable the students to use each delivery type and switch between the different types. The interface was important to make students assimilate the two elements of the blended course.
- e. Evaluation: the evaluation dimension compromised two tools, an end of term test and a questionnaire. The test was to evaluate the learning performance of each students, and the questionnaire to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning program as a whole.
- f. Management: In this dimension all the logistics of the course were put under consideration. Problems like groups not working together smoothly were managed and office hours were allocated to solve login and technical problems.
- g. Resource support: Resources were made available for students and office hours were specific. Extra resources were provided for students with a faster pace.
- h. Ethical: The Ethical dimension identifies the ethical issues that need to be addressed when developing a blended learning program. Issues such as equal opportunity, cultural diversity were addressed. One of the main aspects which were addressed here was the 'digital divide' between students coming from urban and rural areas, rich and poor, male and female.

### Evaluation Tools

To evaluate the learning outcome of introducing blended teaching in a large class for the purpose of extending the time allocated for English language for second year students at the Faculty of Science three tools were used, an end of term test and a questionnaire, and samples of students writing . The test was a pre-requisite to the end of the course but also it was used to investigate if the results of the test showed any improvement when compared to earlier tests taken by the students. The questionnaire was designed to investigate the students' attitude towards the blended course. The results of this classroom action research were used by the teacher to develop new techniques for teaching large classes.

On comparing the test results with last year results there was an increase in the ratio of pass by 30%. The test counted for 60% of the total mark of 100%. Other activities counted for 30% and attendance for 10%.

Writing skills was one of the skills where students showed great improvement. Students were writing and sending emails to each other and to their teachers. This was not a happening before blending online tools in their course. The students never used English to communicate with each other or with their teacher. One of the student wrote the following email at the end of the semester:

Dear Madam

First we want to thank u for giving us this chance to get through this new way to learn about English language which called CALL (I guess) , really we luv it like crazy cuz the way we learning English language since day one is BORING and make us sick in addition to that they just teaching us the same staff from the 4th grade till the graduation year from high school ,so this new way of learning is just FABULOUS .

Secondly we want to show you that we r fan of u and the way u treat and teach us cuz u make us feel like we r respectable trustable people.

Finally we want to say good bye and best wishes 4 u and us in the examination (by the way we r so sorry we know that we should send this message with the home work earlier than that but really we were confuse & in attention with the examination also u know that to be online and generally using internet is kind of hard and not available ..so SORRY) and best wishes have nice time till the next semester.

Your faithfully student group 38a f‘

Although accuracy was still not well improved and students made mistakes in grammar, register and vocabulary but the students showed improvement in their fluency. This was important as student no longer feared expressing themselves in English.

The questionnaire had 6 closed ended questions and 2 open ended questions. The results of questions 1 to 5 were analyzed to show the following:

**Table 1. Questions 1-5**

No.	Questions	Yes	No
1	Did you have an email before the course?	76%	24%
2	Did you benefit from using the Internet in your study?	73%	27%
3	Do you prefer to use the internet in learning English?	79%	21%
4	Do you prefer to work in groups?	64%	36%
5	Was using the internet in learning English language difficult?	40%	60%

The results of question 1 showed clearly that the majority of the students did not have an email address before the course and this laid implications on another course taught at the computer department to the same group of students. Complaints were growing at the time that the course taught at the computer department was more of a theoretical type than a practical one. Students were being taught theories rather than practical uses of the Internet. Questions 2 and 3 were to investigate if the students did learn by using the Internet and would like to continue to learn English language in the future using the same type of delivery mode. The students' response to those questions were 73% and 79% consecutively. Students did learn and want to continue learning using the Internet. As many complains were raised about working in groups as some of students relied on their fellow students to do all the activities, a question was designed to investigate if the students wanted to work in groups, 64% of the students were positive about working in groups while 36% preferred to work alone. 60% of the students found that using the

Internet in learning English was not difficult while 40% found it difficult. Interviewing a sample of those who found it difficult, they gave four main reasons;

- Lack of prior knowledge in using computers.
- Low proficiency level in English.
- Fear from using the Internet in learning.
- Lack of access to computers 24/7.

Question 6 was designed to investigate the infrastructure available for the use of computer mediated teaching. Students were asked on how they accessed the Internet. Their answers were as follow:

**Table 2. Question 6**

University Network	45%
Home	21%
Internet Cafe	29%
Could not access the internet	5%

The students response was a surprise to the teacher as it was the believe that students will access the Internet mostly through Internet cafes. The students discovered throughout the university campus Internet rooms free for students in certain time of a day or they used the university Wi-Fi and were able to use these facilities to access the Internet to do the online activities.

Questions 7 and 8 were open ended questions as to give the students the chance to say their opinions regarding the course. In questions 7, students were asked what were the problems facing them when using the Internet to learn English language. Their response ranged mainly in the following areas:

- Using the Internet.
- Navigating the web
- No money to use Internet Cafes.
- Instructions not clear.
- No time.

In question 8, students were asked to give their comments on the course or suggestion for future courses. Their response could be summarized as follow:

- Provide more training in navigation of the Internet.
- Open more computer labs in the campus.
- Continue using the Internet in learning.
- Teach other languages.

From all the above responses it was clear that the students were mostly positive for the use of blended courses in learning English language.

### Conclusion

At the end of the course and after analyzing the data gathered in in the questionnaire it was clear that using online activities as a way to widen the exposure time in which the students had in the face to face instruction was successful. Problems have emerged such as that some students preferred not to work in groups and lack of knowledge in using the Internet prior to the

course. Also it became clear that instruction for online activities has to be designed in a way different from those of face to face. Some of the instructions for the online activities were not clear. Students continued emailing the teacher at the end of the course showing their appreciation and it was noted that the students were more confident to write longer texts than at the beginning of the course.

Learning in large classes does take place with the use of the right use of instructional methods. Using online tools for teaching raised motivation of the students to learn English. Blending teaching provided a variety of teaching techniques that suited the different learning styles in the class. Students were able to work on their pace and learn to edit and proof read their work. Limited time allocated to the teaching of English was overcome by introducing a Yahoo Group and a Wiki, students working hours extended from 2 to 6 hours per week. Blended teaching proved to be very suitable and rewarding experience for the teacher and students alike

#### **About the Author:**

**Hala Nur** is an assistant professor at the University of Khartoum. She has got PhD in literature and has been teaching English language and literature since 1988. Hala has been the head of the Department of English Language at the Administration for University Requirements and currently she is the founder and director of the English Language Institute at the University of Khartoum.

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