Using Blended Learning to Support the Teaching of English as a **Foreign Language**

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Abstract
The recent development in the field of technology in education has led to renewed interest in blending traditional methods of teaching with technology which might enhance language teaching and learning. The purpose of this paper is to review the literature concerning the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning as a technology-enhanced pedagogical tool that combines online and face-to-face instructional activities, on the development of English skills, inclusive of its use in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Furthermore, this article sheds new light on how blended learning allows the learner to become autonomous and engaged in the construction the knowledge, rather than acting as passive absorbers. It is expected that this paper will contribute to enhancing the body of knowledge that exists in the area of blended learning, especially as it applies to the issue of the acquisition of experience in English as a foreign language. It can be concluded that the use of blended learning has the potential to support EFL learning and maximize EFL learners' opportunities to practice the English language freely at their convenience. There are issues which need to be addressed and, or resolved, such as ensuring that the library facilities are capable of delivering this type of approach, online materials are suitably supportive of the students needed to access them, and the design of blended learning approaches take account of the preferred learning methods of students, and the workload required to be successful.
Keywords: blended learning, distance education, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), face-to-face learning, flexibility, self-directed learners, technology-enhanced learning

Introduction

The rapid global technological progression has contributed to increasing the utilization of English as the language of communication on the Internet (Mohammed, 2018). At a time when modern technology appears to monopolize people's time, whether it is being utilized for shopping, leisure, or work, it is vital to recognize the opportunities that it presents for those learning the English language. The use of electronic educational technology allows for adjusting learning programs and courses to individual learners' needs, wants, and capabilities, which positively affects their performance and academic achievement.

In Saudi Arabia for example, despite the tremendous number of projects that aim to develop EFL curriculum, textbooks, and a variety of professional development programs, the level of English language competence among EFL students remains unsatisfactory (Alrabai, 2014). A key issue is that most traditional Saudi classrooms are teacher-centered; thus, students are not used to arguing, participating in open discussions, or questioning others. Instead, they simply sit, listening, and accepting whatever the teachers say (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015; Alrabai, 2014; Khoshaim, 2017). Previous studies (e.g., Alkubaidi, 2014; Khoshaim, 2017) have indicated that the predominant teacher-centered approach has resulted in a lack of student engagement and attention. For example, some students talk with each other during the lesson, use their laptops or mobile phones, or fall asleep, so the lesson becomes quite dull.

A large-scale study by Alrabai (2014) found that most EFL school students in Saudi Arabia are anxious learners because they are used to being memorizers; as a result, they appear unresponsive to communicating in classroom conversations and unwilling to ask or even try to speak in English.

A lack of motivation also exists among EFL students. Saudi learners often show no interest in English classroom activities (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015). Liton (2012) found that Saudi students in EFL classes suffer from a lack of enthusiasm and motivation. For example, long English class hours—up to five hours daily in some universities—with the same teacher and same class location to focus on only two language skills can result in demotivating students towards EFL. Similarly, Alhaisoni and Rahman (2013) pointed out that, although EFL in Saudi Arabia is presented as a mandatory subject from the fourth year in the elementary level (when learners are ten years old), there is a lack of motivation to help learners develop their English skills (listening, speaking, writing, reading) and change their attitude towards English.

As noted by Mohammed (2018), e-learning in general and blended learning, in particular enable students to practice their foreign language in a stress-free setting, which significantly contributes to their knowledge and proficiency. Second, as the use of blended learning is in its initial stages mainly in the Saudi educational system, the findings of this study could be used to promote the efficient implementation of blended learning by providing useful suggestions to address the challenges faced when implementing blended learning in the previous year in Saudi Arabia or another educational context.

In this paper, the term blended learning is used as a pedagogical approach to describe the integration of face-to-face instructions with computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as

virtual learning classes, online chats, and discussion boards, to help students use a range of online synchronous events (happening at the same time) and asynchronous activities (not occurring at the same time) that can enhance English language skills, activate learning, and facilitate communications.

Technology in EFL Pedagogy

In the field of English as a foreign language (EFL), however, pedagogy has long focused on constructivist principles and the importance of communicative competence (Forsman, 2010; Hymes, 1972), so the focus has primarily been on how technology can reduce the distance between teachers and students or encourage peer learning. This means that technology in EFL is much more precisely focused on technology as a tool to give students "access to a teacher or a curriculum in a single physical space" (Mihai & Purmensky, 2016, p. 300). This is most commonly expressed in computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which Warschauer (2000) helpfully described as developing in three stages since the 1970s. Bax (2003) linked each step to the dominant pedagogy of the time, such that mainframe technology was used in grammar-translation pedagogy for drilling and practice. PCs then developed in tandem with communicative pedagogy emphasizing communication exercises in the 1980s and 1990s before integrative pedagogy and discipline-specific communication developed alongside multimedia and Internet capabilities to give access to authentic learning materials. Thus, teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) literature draws close links among medium, pedagogy, and learning philosophy in a way that is arguably more broadly absent in the higher education literature.

It has been claimed that TESOL has an influential culture of innovation and experimentation, perhaps rooted in a tradition of action research, in which new approaches are more quickly tested and then normalized (Bax, 2003) such that "it is no longer a question as to whether... but how effectively" technology is used in EFL (Mihai & Purmensky, 2016, p. 302). An excellent example of this is in the technology used to aid with learning reading in English in Thailand. Technology more efficiently supports "coordinated utilization of multiple strategies to negotiate the meaning of the text" (Akkakoson, 2013, p. 423) to the extent that students taught using CALL were less likely to adopt the unhelpful bottom-up, and passive reading strategies overly focused on unknown vocabulary which is commonly associated with EFL reading strategies of Thai students studying in the US (Sitthitikul, 2011).

Similarly, innovation in teaching writing within EFL has used technology not just to find more authentic models, but also to produce multi-modal texts and writing in different formats, thereby implicitly focusing students on the need to consider an audience when writing (Edwards-Groves, 2012). At its most innovative, writing pedagogy in EFL has also integrated peer-learning, self-directed learning, or widening participation agenda in projects such as the student-led Open Textbooks (Gruszczynska, Merchant, & Pountney, 2013) which conceptualizes writing as part of a broader digital literacy.

Trinder (2017) points out that students have easy access to an array of different technologies they can employ for communication with others, entertainment, and research. She added that the Internet, with its facility to download and stream films and television series, provides exposure to English language usage in specific settings and contexts, which has

previously not been possible. Many people make extensive use of the internet, with much of the interaction conducted using English as the communication medium, making this a useful addition to formal classroom activities (Sockett, 2014). Young people spend more time learning and making use of the English language online than within the confines of the classroom (Toffoli & Sockett, 2015).

Keisling's (2018) recent study found that it was not only teaching approaches that needed to be considered and, or modified to accommodate the use of modern technology as part of learning. His study examined the effectiveness of library services for university students. He stated that libraries need to employ robust user assessment programs to scale what they learn about their changing clientele to revise and enhance the services they provide within budget.

Blended Learning
What is Blended Learning?

The emergence and growing popularity of the Internet have significantly changed the teaching and learning processes (Ellis, Pardo, & Han, 2016). It is significant to recognize that this concept is in a constant state of flux and evolution, requiring continuous revision as technology improves (Tucker, Wycoff, & Green, 2017). E learning is commonly considered one of the most prominent trends to emerge from the Internet proliferation. According to Yalçınkaya (2015), at the same time, purely online courses and learning programs have been criticized for a low level of socialization as well as the lack of support benefits of traditional teaching styles and approaches (Güzer & Caner, 2014). This discrepancy has led to a blended learning approach that combines both online and offline instruction.

Given that the blended learning concept is relatively new, there is still no consensus among researchers and scholars on what constitutes blended learning. For example, Stein and Graham (2015) defined blended learning as "a combination of onsite (i.e., face-to-face) with online experiences to produce effective, efficient, and flexible learning" (p. 12). Although this definition provides the reader with the main idea behind the blended learning concept, it does not consider its focus on personalization. Therefore, in addition to the notion of time and place flexibility, blended learning provides students with ample occasions to attain actual personalized instruction (Harb &Krish, 2020).

Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) agreed that the nature of BL consists of contemporary learning that engages eLearning using information technology (IT) and interaction tools, such as online activities, where learners have the chance to communicate with the teacher and other students in the classroom. Accordingly, both traditional face-to-face (f2f) learning and e-learning settings are shared and combined to achieve the anticipated objectives. In assessing what is meant by the term blended learning, Oliver and Trigwell (2005) found that its definition varies markedly. Besides, the term is often misapplied to situations in which e-learning components are clumsily integrated into otherwise offline courses or where practice within the same session varies significantly among educators who have different attitudes toward digital education. For these commentators, a reconfiguring of digital education is required so that control over the social and interactive aspects of courses resides with learners rather than educators. With such control, the interactional aspects of teaching and learning can be fostered organically by students rather than

being corralled or ignored per the approach of different teaching figures (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). These commentators drew on variation theory, positing that, for learning to occur, "variation must be experienced by the learner. Without variation, there is no discernment, and without discernment, there is no learning. Discernment is at the core of our ways of experiencing the world" (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005, p. 22). Meanwhile, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) emphasized the effective integration of both types of learning: "thoughtful integration of classroom f2f learning experiences with online learning experiences" (p. 96). Therefore, BL is not just bringing technology into the classroom. It is not replacing textbooks with laptops or tablets. It is redesigning the instructional model, changing the way of working with students, and giving students more control.

Hockly (2018) contended that it is crucial that both researchers and practitioners consider the meaning of the term blended learning in the context of ELT as well as having an appreciation of why there is a necessity to offer blended learning opportunities in language learning. It is equally significant to recognize the reasons behind using technology for teaching and learning, ranging from looking at the use of specific technology or technologies used within a particular area or discipline (Papastergiou, 2009, cited in Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

Hockly (2018) concluded that a growing body of research exploring the notion of blended learning in languages falls into two distinct categories: comparison and non-comparison studies (Grgurovic, 2011d cited in Hockley, 2018, p. 98). She states that comparison studies look to compare the impact of blended learning courses and traditionally delivered courses. In contrast, non-comparison studies concentrate exclusively on blended approach, concerning themselves with issues of course design, the implementation of blended learning programs, and the attitudes prevalent for teachers and learners towards a blended learning approach. Hockly (2018) observed that the prevalence of non-comparison studies could be rooted in the issues that arise due to comparing two different attitudes towards the delivery of learning programs in a meaningful way. She reported that the findings of existing studies are mixed, quoting Aguilar (2012, cited in Hockly, 2018), who stated that some researchers had reported enhanced language learning as a result of exposure to a blended learning model. In contrast, others have concluded that there is no significant improvement compared to conventional teaching methods. Hockly (2018) also highlighted that some cultural considerations must be taken into account concerning the impact of blended learning; for example, studies by Zhu, Valke, and Schellens (2009, cited in Hockly, 2018) and Liu and Chiu (2016, cited in Hockly, 2018) indicated that students might be reticent to engage in written discussions on the Internet due to a genuine fear of making mistakes. The findings of these two studies suggest that the design of blended learning courses must consider a multitude of different factors that can impact language learning (Kessler, 2018).
It is generally agreed that the idea of blended learning rests on the idea that the technology should not displace the traditional knowledge, but should add a further dimension to the learning experience. Part of the value of blended learning is that mutual support engagements in the classroom and other offline contexts can transfer to the e-learning elements of the commitment and vice versa (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019).

Historical Development from Distance Learning to Blended Learning
Distance Learning
Prewitt (1998) traced the development of distance education during the nineteenth Century,

explaining that universities in Pennsylvania and Chicago led the revolution of distance learning by presenting correspondence courses that provided students with broad access to essential skills to develop their knowledge. Casey (2008) indicated that the first university course adopted distance education in several developments; for example, regarding correspondence courses, the first one was the Pitman Shorthand training program in the United States. Panchabakesan (2011) listed four purposes of correspondence learning: students had specific circumstances that prevented them from continuing their education, students lived in remote areas, qualified students did not enroll because they could not find a place in universities. Some individuals had a desire to continue their education in a particular field of discipline. The majority of attendees in such courses were female. Following the advent of radio, lectures broadcast in the 1920s attracted many students, particularly Wisconsin's School of the Air, as it was the first distance learning American program.

In the 1970s, educational television (ETV) was beneficial mainly in rural and remote areas. During this period, the use of technological methods was without interactions. In the 1980s, the Open University in the United Kingdom served as an example to shift to distance learning and improve the quality of teaching and learning. It mainly concerned adult distance learners. This stage uses two methods of communications media, video conferencing and the Internet, to enhance learners' skills by increasing interactivity. Hoskins (2013) added that the evolvement of online learning dramatically changed the nature of education by improving communications to simplify collaborative interactions between learners: "the traditional sage-on-the-stage has been replaced with the guide-on-the-side" (p. 189). Besides, the widespread use of distance learning at the time resulted in the creation of some virtual universities, such as Jones International University (www.jonesinternational.edu), the first completely online university, and Western Governors' University (www.wgu.edu), which aimed to develop students' aptitudes (Olson, 2001). The following paragraph presents some definitions of distance learning.

An expansive definition of distance education from Sauve (1993) can still account for much of the technology-enabled learning pedagogy in use today. Sauve used the term *distance education* to refer to "an umbrella concept covering correspondence courses, televised teaching, radio-broadcast, open learning, computer-assisted instruction, individualized learning and self-learning" (p. 102). This definition considers the primary purpose of distance learning as a teaching method containing several technological communications. Similarly, Greenberg (1998) defined distance education to refer to "a planned teaching-learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning" (p. 36). This definition is close to Willis's (1994) description of distance education as "[a] basic level... [and] takes place when a teacher and student(s) are separated by physical distance, and technology (i.e., voice, video, and print) is used to bridge the instructional gap" (p. 4). This means students and teachers are geographically distant, and learners work independently with the learning materials.

Distance education opened opportunities to women and persecuting minority ethnic groups, changing the culture of campus life. Distance and part-time learning opened up access to the professions. New competitiveness among students—mainly working-class and female students—rejected the "just getting by" study habits of the elites (Horowitz, 1988). Horowitz (1988) further argued that students studying at a distance or by occasionally coming onto campus

were setting new standards of student professionalism, hard work, and academic rigor that challenge the status quo.

Distance learning became more than merely offering students passive consumption; it was opening universities up to change. Casey (2008) argued that this had improved the quality of university education in general in countries such as the UK, Australia, and Hong Kong. At the individual student level, initial snobbery at students gaining degrees without physically going to university was similarly replaced by respect for those students demonstrating higher self-discipline, motivation, and self-management (Lowes & Lin, 2015).
Unfortunately, this trend seems less prominent outside Anglophone countries. For example, online education is generally seen as less prestigious than campus-based instruction in the Middle East (Elango, Gudep, & Selvam, 2008), with a study of employers in Oman and Egypt indicating that the quality of such education was deemed inferior (Sadik, 2016). To some extent, Knight (2014) explained this as unfair stereotyping that non-native English speakers (NNES) take advantage of online education to cheat. This may also explain why online learning does not have this same stigma in these countries in subjects such as engineering (Ahmed & Zaneldin, 2013) and medicine (Masters et al., 2016).

Professional areas where English is a lingua franca or subjects where English is the language of instruction may not regard online learning as lacking prestige. Enthusiasm for online learning has similarly been linked to passion for innovation and student-centered learning (Randeree, 2006). The denigration of online knowledge in such countries may be more about traditional compared to current tensions or resistance to English-medium instruction rather than online education per se.

A particularly useful perspective on this tension is offered by Richardson (2000), who argued that the learning itself is similar, whether online or campus-based, and that differences are more about the backgrounds of students attracted to each mode. Richardson's study used a sequence of surveys and inventories to look for differences in terms of study habits, student progress, approaches to study, and even the much-maligned concept of learning styles. As such, Richardson provided a strong rationale for looking at the kinds of students attracted to online study rather than expecting to find differences based on how students are taught. Richardson essentially claimed for a demand-side understanding rather than a supply-side understanding.

Such an approach has been further strengthened by a recent systematic review of longitudinal research (Asikainen & Gijbels, 2017) drawing on Richardson's (2000) work to look at the development of deep approaches to learning (Entwistle, 2000; Marton & Saljo, 2005) in higher education—namely, online versus campus-based. Concluding that there was no consensus, Asikainen and Gijbels (2017) showed that deep approaches to learning were not stimulated more in one mode than another, and both could be done well or poorly. This supported Richardson's (2000) earlier finding that distance-learning students "resemble older students at campus-based institutions and differ from younger campus-based students" (p. 178). Still, it seems that much of this has to do with older and more emotionally mature students being attracted to distance culture rather than distance education itself having a causal effect on student maturity. Such findings also highlight the criticism that online training is under-theorized (Garrison, 2000) and uses imprecise

terminology (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011), making it challenging to find rigorous explanatory frameworks for such findings.

Technology-enhanced Learning and Distance Education

Kirkwood and Price (2014) highlighted the fact several studies have attempted to provide a meta-analysis of findings from both quasi-experimental and experimental investigations into the effects of technology-enhanced learning (Tamim et al., 2011, cited in Kirkwood & Price, 2014). In contrast, others seek to explore the ideas behind educational practice (Hrastinski, 2008, mentioned in Kirkwood & Price, 2014) and investigate teachers' motivation and aims (Jump, 2011, cited in Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

One such study, by Price and Kirkwood (2011, cited in Kirkwood & Price, 2014) noted that there were problems with the notion of enhancement and the evidence for this, which they felt required further investigation. Kirkwood and Price (2014) emphasized these issues and merged the two separate aims—that of changes like teaching approaches and modifications in how teachers teach and learners learn. Besides, they noted that many studies concentrated on the former, but not on how this teaching happens. They concluded that the potential for technology to have a transformational impact on teaching and learning has not yet been realized in research as most studies focus upon the reproduction or reinforcement of existing practice. They also highlighted the fact that research needs to be carefully targeted and indeed analyzed within a specific educational context to ascertain whether learning has been transformed.

One of the most influential organizations in distance education is the UK's Open University, which has established a global reputation for distance learning from its origins as a correspondence school through cutting-edge online and blended learning opportunities (Daniel, 2015). Indeed, Daniel (2015) pointed out that the Open University initially lacked prestige because of its widening participation agenda—indeed, it still accepts many students without traditional qualifications—but the quality of education soon established its status.

With this rise in the status of a technology-focused university came the growth of the state of online education such that, today, world leaders in training, such as Harvard and Yale, now offer some of the best online, and even blended, learning opportunities (Lazaroiu, Popescu, & Nica, 2016). Indeed, these highly elite universities offer these courses free to anyone who wants to study them and in many cases also invite the public to campus or offer tutorials, thereby demonstrating the potential for online learning to democratize education (Voigt, Buliga, & Michl, 2017). However, the dominance of these English-speaking institutions has arguably led to idiosyncratic practices in distance learning, which neglect parallel innovation in Eastern Europe and Asia (Keegan, 2013).

Nevertheless, these examples of the Open University and the Harvard and Yale collaboration through EdX also reflect historical trends in distance education. Expanding participation becomes inextricably linked with very high-quality provision. Although some initial distance education provision was intended as a next-best alternative for those living in remote areas or otherwise unable to come to campus or find a place (Panchabakesan, 2011), widening participation soon showed just how many people could benefit from and enrich the university

experience.

The Rationale of Blended Learning

One explanation for shifting to the blended learning approach is that it allows for creating autonomous or self-directed learners. Blended learning permits the learner to become engaged in the construction and the use of the knowledge, rather than acting as passive absorbers. It is necessary here to clarify *exactly* what is meant by autonomy and self-directed learning. Little (1991) gave his definition of the former as "the capacity of detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (p. 15). Sriarunrasmee et al. (2015) provided another definition as a "procedure where the learner considers and decides on the learning topic based on his/her own interests and abilities" (p. 156).

In settings of blended learning, where the teacher is physically absent for a large part of the time, two essential issues must be considered: First, the design of materials and activities must be clear and purposeful; second, the teacher's role is crucial in encouraging and supporting learners in their learning decisions and choices (Sriarunrasmee et al., 2015). This view is supported by (Terry and Reinders, 2008; Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019), who claimed that it is challenging for learners to exhibit autonomy without teachers' intervention and guidance. Furthermore, it has commonly been assumed that learners, who can accomplish further efforts to develop their learning skills will only profit from the useful outcomes of self-directed learning. Supporting this view, Bhat, Rajashekar, and Kamath (2007) asserted that, when an institution decides to adopt self-directed learning (SDL) approach, they have to consider heterogeneity and individual skills differences between students. The authors conducted a research project in an undergraduate medical program in India to compare two groups of students in terms of their exam scores by using a *t*-test; the first group was taught by SDL as a part of their learning method whereas the second one was prepared using a conventional approach. The result indicated that not all students could benefit from SDL; only good students with excellent learning skills could become capable self-directed learners.

Trinder's (2017) study of Austrian university students and their use of modern technology in independent settings led her to make the case that there should be a higher degree of attention given to online, informed methods of learning the English language. Her research indicated that online learning resources are of great value to students, not only in terms of the practical benefits to their language learning but also for improving their digital literacy and in encouraging self-directed learning, which will be essential for their future learning practices (Levy, 2017).

Much of the current literature on blended learning pays particular attention to the rationale for choosing it by large numbers of learners. Banditvilai (2016) experimental study set out to examine the efficacy of using BL to support self-directed learning within language skills among 60 undergraduate students in Thailand enrolled in a communicative business English module. In terms of academic listening skills, the results indicated that online supplementary materials provided in BL offered more positive advantages by supporting time flexibility, which allowed students to practice listening at any time convenient to them as well as take the responsibility for their learning, which students strongly appreciated.

The flexibility of time and place, where every student chooses the time and place that suits

him or her, is considered a vital. This is undoubtedly true in the case of adult learners who have to balance their jobs and families with their studies. Students who live far from the university or have other responsibilities that prohibit them from attending class illustrate this clearly. Such flexibility and approachability provided by blended learning have enabled more learners to access higher education, regardless of geographical location and culture.

Much can be learned from previous studies and experiences of utilizing online and digital language learning and blended learning. Gordon (2014) looked at how e-learning (or technology-enhanced learning) can support flexible pedagogies and provide enhanced choices for learners in terms of where they learn, the pace at which they learn, and their mode of learning. Each of these things can be supported through appropriate approaches utilizing modern computer technology on campus, at the workplace, or in the home. He observed that the use of technology in people's lives is nothing new in the modern age. However, technology can enable the use of a diverse range of approaches in the delivery and assessment of courses.

Researchers have recently shown an increased interest in describing the role of blended learning in enhancing student engagement. Furlong and Christenson (2008) defined student engagement as "a concept that requires psychological connections within the academic environment (e.g., positive relationships between adults and students and among peers) in addition to active student behavior (e.g., attendance, effort, pro-social behavior)" (p. 365). This definition highlights the role of interaction among learners. This view is supported by Weaver, Spratt, and Nair (2008), who stated that: tertiary pedagogy is concerned with building meaningful learning relationships between learners and teachers and learners and their peers. It involves encouraging collaboration in learning as well as cooperation in learning for the promotion of innovative and interactive quality e-learning environments.

Using modern technology for learning can also encourage the notion of teamwork and learning with and from others. Cobanoglu, Yucel, Uzunboylar, and Ceylan (2017) examined blended mentoring practice (utilizing an online questionnaire methodology) in the learning of English and revealed that preservice ICT teachers thought of their English mentors as colleagues (team-mates) who supported, helped, and guided them in their efforts while also being a resource as experts in their field. Both mentors and mentees welcomed the blended mentoring practice, with all those involved in the study recommending that this type of approach be adopted for teacher education.

Learning outcomes are an important consideration when designing blended learning courses (Mugenyi, Zhu, & Kagambe, 2017) however, this must be viewed in terms of aligning factors such as student workload, assessment, and teaching and learning methods (Bralic & Divjak, 2018). The most essential of these factors is assessment in that appropriate vehicles for evaluation should be selected to ensure that students have the best possible chance of achieving the set goals (Hamad, 2017).

Thai, De Wever, and Valcke (2017) examined the role of the blended learning approach in student performance. Unlike many researchers in the field who focused on the precise nature of blends (Al-Alwani, 2014; Stein & Graham, 2015), Thai et al. (2017) explored how the flipped

classroom design impacted student outcomes. The flipped classroom is a particular type of blended learning, where students first attend web-based lectures before in-class sessions. By analyzing primary data obtained from 90 undergraduate students, Thai et al. (2017) concluded that, in the flipped classroom environment, the respondents demonstrated a higher level of self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and flexibility. These findings can be explained by the fact that, in such an environment, students can spend a significant amount of time reading, watching lectures, and preparing before attending face-to-face lectures (Ricci & Pritscher, 2015).

A highly relevant empirical study on the relationship between the blended learning approach and student outcomes was conducted by Alshehri (2017). The researcher investigated the level of satisfaction and commitment of 100 Saudi higher education students with a blended e-learning program. By employing both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, Alshehri (2017) found that those students who were enrolled in a blended education program demonstrated better academic results in terms of their grade point average scores as well as higher levels of commitment. Similar outcomes were produced by Zacharis (2015), who also found that participation in blended learning courses was positively associated with student performance and achievement. However, according to Alshehri's (2017) empirical findings, not all students were satisfied with the online study courses, which negatively affected their willingness to stay in blended learning as well as to comply with its requirements. These outcomes can be partly explained by such factors as the educational approach taken by the instructor, the quality of the Internet connection, and students' attitudes towards and perceptions of blended learning (Vasileva-Stojanovska et al., 2015).

Following, the holistic learning theory, the effectiveness of the learning process significantly depends on students' characteristics, including emotions, imagination, and intellect (Al-Alwani, 2014). Each of these elements should be activated to ensure that the learning process is effective (Ricci & Pritscher, 201). As noted by Ellis et al. (2016), the significance of blended learning lies in the fact that it involves a broader range of learning methods and channels than traditional learning, more significantly contributes to the development of students' skills, and can evoke positive emotions. From this vantage point, it is relevant to state that blended learning is more effective in activating the previously mentioned elements of students' personality compared to conventional approaches to learning. At the same time, Suda, Sterling, Guirguis, and Mathur (2014) reported no significant difference in examination scores and course evaluations between those students who had completed traditional and blended courses. These findings may demonstrate that, although the mixed learning strategy can add to students' ability to attain their course goals, its effectiveness and contribution depend heavily on the context in which it is implemented.

Potential Challenges of Using BL to Support English Language Skills Development
Recent research has tended to show that technology provides both opportunities and challenges for students and institutions (Ja'ashan, 2020 & Gordon, 2014). For students, the opportunity to use technology and a blended learning approach allows them to have an element of control over how, when, and where they learn while enabling them to personalize their learning to the extent that they can navigate their way through learning materials with the support of systems suited to their style of learning. This flexibility of education is also vital to settings which offer this type of

approach, particularly concerning part-time and, or distance learners, although challenges are faced in terms of the delivery of safe, collaborative learning environments allowing the maximum use of resources while also controlling and regulating the potential for plagiarism.

Students who are learning English as a second language also face challenges in terms of the use of the internet for supplementary reading. Hamdan, Mohamad, and Shaharuddin (2017) investigated the perceptions of second language learners (TESL undergraduates) towards TESL-related hypermedia reading materials and factors impacting their reading comprehension. Utilizing the Think Aloud Protocol, reflective notes, and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods, the authors identified a number of factors affecting students' reading comprehension. Both the design and display of reading materials were found to be necessary, particularly in terms of long texts; the participants felt that it would help their reading comprehension if illustrations, diagrams, pictures, tables, videos, and audio materials were also made available with the text. They also highlighted the usefulness of glossaries to their comprehension. The participants noted being distracted by advertisements on websites, poor internet connections, and the easy accessibility of social media websites, which had a detrimental impact on their reading comprehension.

Another challenge identified by Kintu, Zhu, and Kagambe (2017) is matching students with appropriate courses to meet their specific characteristics and needs. The researchers looked at the effectiveness of a blended learning environment through an analysis of the relationship between individual student characteristics and background, learning outcomes, and design features. The results indicated that several student characteristics and design features were significant predictors concerning student-learning outcomes when utilizing a blended approach towards learning.
Equally necessary to the successful delivery of courses utilizing technology is practitioners' willingness to engage with it. Englund, Olofsson, and Price (2017) conducted a 10-year longitudinal study to examine practitioners' conceptions of approaches towards the use of technology as part of their teaching and learning. This involved studying nine teachers engaged in an online Bachelor of Science course utilizing a phenomenographic approach. The findings identified apparent differences between experienced and novice teachers. Qualified teachers demonstrated almost no change in their conceptions, whereas novice teachers, who initially had more teacher focus conceptions, demonstrated more rapid changes in their attitudes. Englund et al. (2017) concluded that it was essential to support conceptual change as a part of practitioners' Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities to ensure the most effective use of educational technology. Similar observations were made by Rivers, Richardson, & Price, (2014) who commented that practitioners' concerns concerning using asynchronous forums to promote reflection and learning can be addressed by the adoption of protocols for online discussions, with an emphasis on the fact that discussion threads could be a resource for reflection in themselves in that they can track and illustrate student understanding of specific issues and learning.

Singh and Reed (2001) pointed out that one should "approach blended learning as a journey rather than a destination" (p. 7). This highlights the importance of creating an effective plan to ensure success in the BL implementation journey. Furthermore, Hamad (2017) reviewed the literature about the nature of benefits and challenges when using blended learning in the Saudi educational system. She indicated that the most essential factor for ensuring that students have the best possible chance of achieving the set goals was assessment. She also suggested a clear

understanding of challenges that may be faced before blended learning implementation would be useful as this approach is considered relatively new in the Saudi context.

Several studies investigating the challenges of BL have identified several problems faced by institutions, such as a lack of Internet connectivity, technical issues, workload, and confusing instructions in Blackboard (Al Zumor et al., 2013; Banditvilai, 2016; Guangying, 2014; Hamdan et al., 2017; Ja'ashan, 2015; Poon, 2013; Thang et al., 2012) as well as difficulties encountered by students, (Alshathri, 2016; Hamad, 2017; Ja'ashan, 2015; Thang et al., 2012; Vaughan, 2007) and instructors (Alaidarous & Madini, 2016; Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Badawi, 2009; Yang, 2012). Ja'ashan (2015) examined 130 undergraduate students' perceptions toward challenges in BL in an English module. He noted that an inadequate number of computers, the absence of qualified and skilled instructors in IT proficiencies, and a lack of organizational maintenance were significant challenges to blended learning in many developing countries. Similarly, Al Zumor et al. (2013) used a survey to assess 160 male EFL undergraduate students' effectiveness when using blackboard in a blended learning module. The study found that more than half of the participants were generally dissatisfied with the BL course. The problems stemmed from a lack of Internet connectivity as the most serious limitation, followed by ineffective synchronous and asynchronous activities in Blackboard compared with f2f interactions. Moreover, BL was not considered adequate by all students despite being hugely welcomed by the majority of students around the world. For example, students with limited IT skills might lack the enthusiasm to work independently, resulting in disadvantages in the BL environment. The study findings suggested that, to support the implementation of blended learning, technical difficulties should be resolved, and active online activities should be included. Furthermore, Poon (2013) interviewed nine instructors and surveyed 260 students to investigate their perceptions about the advantages and limitations of using blended learning in a university in the UK. The study indicated that the role of the institution and the student are significant factors in ensuring blended learning's effectiveness. The study warned that a poor Internet connection and unclear instructions in text-based media might cause some frustration, especially among students with computer illiteracy, such as how to use virtual learning tools.

Although BL offered the opportunity for learners who are reluctant to participate with peers to exchange views in English, previous studies found that blended learning has drawbacks. Students reported some negative opinions, such as isolation, decreased real time to communicate with their teachers and peers, more time-consuming than f2f classes, and difficult instructions to follow in Blackboard. To better understand the difficulties that students encounter when using BL, in terms of the large number of assignments, Thang et al. (2012) interviewed 34 undergraduate students using nine focus groups to examine their perceptions about coursebook and online content of an English for academic purposes module used in a university in Malaysia. The study found that undergraduate students suffered from heavy workloads in written and reading tasks in both settings, which required an extra time commitment. Instructors needed initial preparation and training to become aware of the exact nature of mixing the two environments, which should include rethinking the teaching and learning experiences. The researchers argued that two serious challenges might hamper students' progression in a BL environment: a slow Internet connection and a heavy workload. Students often have unrealistic assumptions about the nature of BL and expect less work to decrease class time (Garnham, Kaleta, & Sudzina, 2003; Vaughan, 2007).

However, other students reported challenges regarding managing their time in both settings, being active learners, and dealing with technological problems, especially undergraduate students who had recently transferred from high school to the university, where online activities are essential. Therefore, the study concluded that teachers must confront this challenge by enabling students to be autonomous and active in choosing which homework is appropriate for them.

Other studies suggested that training programs should be implemented to develop faculty members as well as students to create a successfully blended learning environment. For example, Yang (2012) examined problems faced by teachers in BL English writing courses in a university in Taiwan and found that lecturers' lack of IT skills was a significant problem in transitioning to the blended learning approach. In other words, unskillful teachers who have not been trained to use computers and the Internet, for example, might lead to a lack of excitement for their teaching in the BL context. In this regard, Alebaikan (2010) addressed some practical issues raised by faculty members regarding the time they spent developing their course material as online content. Considering all of the evidence presented thus far, it seems that BL could raise challenges for students, teachers, and institutions. The lack of Internet connectivity, technical problems, a lack of efficiency among some teachers using blended learning, and training deficiencies are additional severe challenges. Although Poon (2013) focused on the delivery of suitable (technical, human) resources and appropriateness of technology infrastructure in universities as the most significant factors for effective BL implementation. Cobanoglu et al. (2017) were more concerned with the creation of clear institutional policy, the careful setting of strategic and operational plans, and efficient support to teachers and students. They confirmed that learning with recent technology could also encourage the notion of teamwork, engagement, and learning with and from others. They indicated that success in BL is highly dependent on a clear institutional policy and robust leadership. Besides, the identification of goals, costs, available human resources, and technical and administrative support is vital to sustaining the implementation of BL.

The studies suggest that practitioners must not only understand the reasons behind using modern technology to supplement and enhance teaching and learning, but also embrace this concept to improve their classroom practice and to enhance their delivery of the curriculum. Equally important is the balance between face-to-face and online activities and, or time to ensure that all students are catered. Some will prefer to work as an individual, alone at their own pace, whereas others will value the interaction that occurs in face-to-face encounters in the classroom. Some issues need to be addressed and/or resolved, such as ensuring that the library facilities are capable of delivering this type of approach towards the curriculum, that online materials are suitably supportive of the students required to access them, and that the design of blended learning approaches take into account students; preferred learning methods, the assessment of their courses, and the workload required to be successful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of modern technology as part of blended learning is not only desirable, but also useful in terms of learning English as well as developing computer literacy. Making use of online resources and the internet is a sensible course of action as it allows students flexibility in their studies and exposes them to practice English in a variety of contexts, in addition to the time that they spend interacting with their peers in the classroom. The studies suggest that practitioners

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