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Mixed Learning Environment for Learning English as a Foreign Language: The Post-COVID Kazakh Context in the Central Asia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic considerably reshaped higher education, prompting universities worldwide to expand their reliance on online and blended modes of teaching and learning. This study investigates students' experiences, preferences, and perceived effectiveness of mixed learning environments in the post-pandemic context of Kazakhstan. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, involving 515 undergraduate students from three universities in Astana. Data was collected through a structured online questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's Chi-square tests. The findings indicate that while 42.5% of students prefer traditional face-to-face instruction due to higher motivation and interaction, a majority (50.7%) favor blended learning as it combines flexibility with instructional effectiveness. Only six to seven% of respondents support online learning. Furthermore, 74.8% of students expressed a preference for retaining online elements particularly recorded lectures within future teaching

models. A statistically significant relationship was observed between age and learning preferences ($\chi^2 = 106.9$, $p < .001$), with younger students showing stronger inclination toward blended learning. The results suggest that blended learning represents a sustainable and pedagogically effective model for post-COVID higher education in Kazakhstan. The study highlights the need for institutional investment in digital infrastructure, faculty training, and inclusive policies to support hybrid learning environments.

Keywords: Mixed learning environment; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); higher education; student preferences; online learning; post-COVID-19 education; Kazakhstan; digital learning

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Introduction

The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic has transformed 'learning environments (virtual and augmented learning) across the globe. The decision to close institutions of higher learning was not an easy one as those in the decision-making institutions were faced with a dilemma on whether to close schools and limit interaction between students and educators to save lives or keep the institutions open and put the lives of students and educators at risk (UNESCO, 2020). A critical step in the fight against the pandemic was to close institutions of higher learning. The closure of institutions of higher learning subsequently disrupted the learning process, demanding the need to pivot the delivery of learning channels (World Bank, 2020).

Institutions of higher learning were prompted to introduce the use of online methods in the delivery of teaching. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), (2020) argues that while higher education institutions were swift to replace face-to-face lectures with online learning, the closures had an impact on learning, examinations as well as international students' safety and legal status in their host country. Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) posit that the use of online methods forced teaching to be conducted online, an approach that was not tested in many countries. Unfortunately, evidence is emerging that school closures have resulted in real learning losses, despite best attempts to set up a supportive remote learning experience (Donnelly, Patrinos and Gresham 2021).

The rapid transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for faculty related to technical support, student engagement, assessment practices, and work-life balance (Bhatia & Joseph, 2023). The COVID-19 crisis has brought to light several flaws and inequities in educational systems, ranging from a lack of access to broadband and computers required for online education, to the safe environments required to concentrate on learning (Pokhrel & Chhetri (2021). Unfortunately, evidence is emerging that school closures have resulted in real learning losses, despite best attempts to set up a supportive remote learning experience (OECD, 2020)

Donnelly & Patrinos (2022) are of the view that the shift to the use of online platforms for the delivery of lessons in institutions of higher learning has caused a gradual shift with student tests now going online, resulting in a lot of trial and error. Amid the confusion taking place in some institutions of higher learning, assessments that were supposed to be written online were

cancelled outright. Therefore, a logical decision making is needed in the direction of pedagogical selections and assessment preferences.

The objectives of the study follow:

To examine English language students' prior experiences with online learning before the COVID-19 pandemic and identify barriers to participation.

To investigate English language students' preferences for different types of teaching modes (online, on-site, blended) and the reasons underlying these preferences.

To assess the relationship between demographic factors (age, gender, locality, academic discipline, and device type) and students' learning mode preferences.

To evaluate the perceived effectiveness of on-site, online, and blended learning in achieving academic outcomes.

To explore students' preferences for future learning environments and the extent to which online or blended components are desired post-pandemic.

Literature Review

Pivoting Learning Approaches to Tertiary Education in Kazakhstan

Institutions of higher learning in particular in Kazakhstan were compelled to rapidly transform their teaching-learning approaches during the outbreak of COVID-19. Universities transitioned to online and blended learning modalities, utilizing digital platforms, virtual classrooms, and national educational portals. According to the OECD (2020), many countries, including Kazakhstan, demonstrated a notable capacity to shift educational activities online in response to the pandemic. However, the effectiveness of this transition depended largely on prior investments in digital infrastructure and strategic integration of technology in education systems (World Bank, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the transition toward digital and remote learning (Lockee, 2021), while also exposing differences in countries' preparedness to manage educational disruption (Alatni, et al, 2021).

In Kazakhstan, although universities were able to implement remote learning relatively quickly, the transition revealed significant institutional and technological disparities. Institutions with stronger digital foundations adapted more effectively, whereas others struggled with limited infrastructure, insufficient training, and lack of preparedness (World Bank, 2020). Recent studies further indicate that both students and faculty faced challenges related to digital competence, engagement, and the effectiveness of online instruction (Amirova et al., 2023; Ibrayeva et al., 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted the Indian education system, accelerating the transition from conventional classroom instruction to online and digital learning while also exposing challenges related to technological access, teacher preparedness, assessment, and student engagement (Gothwal et al., 2022) The situation highlighted the need to rethink educational systems and develop more inclusive, flexible, and sustainable approaches to teaching and learning (UNESCO, 2021). The situation accelerated the transition from face-to-face to online education, requiring teacher educators to adapt pedagogical practices and integrate technology into teaching and learning (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). The rapid transition to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic also exposed significant inequalities in access to digital devices and reliable internet connectivity (Education International, 2020). In addition, School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in measurable learning losses, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing disproportionately greater negative effects (Engzell et al., 2021). The shift to

distance/online/virtual learning also had important implications for educational equity. As highlighted by the OECD (2020), emergency remote education exacerbated existing inequalities across many countries. In the context of Kazakhstan, students from rural areas and disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately affected due to limited access to reliable internet, digital devices, and supportive learning environments (Durrani et al., 2023). Additionally, students with learning difficulties and those requiring additional academic support faced greater risks of falling behind, reinforcing concerns about inclusive education. In addition to other challenges like limited internet access or lack of equipped classrooms, the increased use of online and e-assessment has also raised concerns regarding academic integrity, particularly cheating, plagiarism, and the authentication of student work (Mellar et al., 2018).

Furthermore, institutions with limited financial resources, particularly those relying on tuition or serving vulnerable populations, encountered significant operational challenges. These inequalities, which existed prior to the pandemic, were intensified during the crisis, threatening student retention and institutional sustainability (World Bank, 2021). Research also shows that many students reported lower satisfaction with online learning and a preference for face-to-face interaction, highlighting the importance of engagement and social presence in higher education (Iskakova et al., 2023).

The pandemic also exposed gaps in institutional preparedness and crisis management. As noted by the World Bank (2020), many higher education institutions globally had not sufficiently incorporated lessons from previous disruptions such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in the beginning of 21st century. In Kazakhstan, the crisis underscored the urgent need for robust risk management strategies, flexible assessment systems, and the integration of innovative teaching modalities. At the same time, it accelerated the long-term transformation toward digital and blended learning environments. This study, therefore, adopts a Kazakhstan-focused perspective to examine how tertiary institutions have adapted their English language learning approaches during the pandemic. Understanding these dynamics is essential for identifying key predictors of effective online engagement, improving institutional resilience, and informing future policy and practice in higher education.

Education Perspective in Kazakhstan

In responding to the crisis posed within the education sector by the pandemic in Kazakhstan, schools were temporarily closed due to the outbreak of COVID-19, raising serious concerns about students' continuous learning and educational equity. Similar to many countries, Kazakhstan rapidly transitioned to remote learning through online platforms, television broadcasts, and digital resources supported by national education authorities (OECD, 2020). However, this sudden shift exposed disparities in access to technology, particularly between urban and rural areas, affecting the consistency and quality of learning outcomes (UNICEF, 2021).

Evidence from Uzbekistan suggests that the educational consequences of COVID-19 were not uniformly negative, as students' mathematics achievement improved despite prolonged school closures, highlighting the importance of contextual factors and educational resilience (Iqbal & Patrinos, 2025)

The Kazakhstani responses align with global trends identified by Azevedo et al. (2021), who examined the potential impact of COVID-19-related school closures across 174 countries. Their simulations demonstrated that both the quantity of schooling and the quality of learning declined significantly at a global level. In Kazakhstan, these effects were particularly evident in

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where limited exposure beyond the classroom intensified learning loss.

Moreover, Kazakhstan's Trilingual (Kazakh-Russian-English) Education Policy which promotes instruction in Kazakh, Russian, and English faced additional challenges during remote instruction. Teachers were required to adapt to digital platforms while simultaneously managing multilingual pedagogical demands, often with limited training and institutional support (OECD, 2020). This highlighted the importance of teacher self-efficacy, digital competence, and systemic preparedness in sustaining educational continuity during crises.

Evidence from Uzbekistan indicates that the educational consequences of COVID-19 were not uniformly negative, with Grade 5 mathematics achievement improving despite prolonged school closures (Iqbal & Patrinos, 2025). Recent studies in Kazakhstan provide further empirical support for these concerns. For instance, Nurgaliyeva et al. (2024) found that students, particularly in rural areas, experienced significant learning difficulties and perceived online education as less effective than traditional classroom instruction. Similarly, Durrani et al. (2023) argue that emergency distance learning exacerbated existing inequalities and hindered progress toward equitable quality education in foreign language (English) learning. In addition, research by Amirova et al. (2023) highlights the challenges teachers faced due to limited digital competence and infrastructural constraints, underscoring the importance of teacher preparedness in crisis situations.

Recent evidence suggests that blended learning can produce better language-learning outcomes than fully online instruction, particularly in the development of grammatical knowledge and skills (Ali et al., 2023).

Some studies indicate that students continue to value hybrid learning environments because they combine the flexibility of online participation with the interaction and engagement afforded by face-to-face instruction. Fabian et al. (2024) found that most students preferred synchronous hybrid learning despite technical challenges, while other researchers stated, "Students appreciate the flexibility of online learning but expect lecturers to be onsite." (Feubli et al., 2024, p. 761). Similarly, Mehta et al. (2024) reported that many university students favored blended learning models over exclusively online or traditional classroom formats in the post-pandemic era, highlighting the continued relevance of hybrid instructional approaches in higher education.

Some researchers reported across other EFL contexts, where blended learning has been shown to enhance learner engagement, autonomy, and language proficiency through the effective integration of digital technologies with face-to-face instruction. Sheerah (2020) argued that blended learning creates a more flexible and interactive learning environment that promotes active participation and supports the development of English language skills. Likewise, Myravyova et al. (2021) found that blended learning significantly improved professionally oriented foreign language instruction by combining online resources with classroom-based activities, thereby fostering communicative competence and learner motivation. Furthermore, Al-Samiri (2021) and Dhawan (2020) observed that the pedagogical innovations adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the integration of technology into English language teaching, providing valuable lessons for sustaining blended learning practices in the post-pandemic era. Collectively, these studies reinforce the view that blended learning is an effective instructional approach for enhancing English language education in higher education and vocational contexts.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature examining the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, several critical gaps remain, particularly in the context of Kazakhstan and broader Central Asia. Existing studies have primarily focused on the immediate transition to online learning, highlighting challenges such as digital inequality, limited infrastructure, and reduced student engagement (Durrani et al., 2023; OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2020). However, there is a lack of comprehensive research investigating the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of mixed or blended learning environments in the post-pandemic period. Moreover, while prior research acknowledges disparities between urban and rural learners and emphasizes issues of access and equity, there is insufficient empirical evidence exploring how these disparities influence learning outcomes, motivation, and language acquisition, particularly in EFL contexts within Kazakhstan and even neighbouring countries (now central Asia) which were earlier part of past Soviet Union regime. The unique demands of the country's trilingual education policy further complicate this landscape, yet limited studies have examined how blended learning models support multilingual instruction in practice.

Additionally, although teacher-related factors such as digital competence and self-efficacy have been identified as important, there is a notable gap in understanding how these variables interact with student engagement and academic performance in hybrid learning settings. Most existing studies adopt a descriptive approach, lacking integrated models that connect institutional readiness, pedagogical strategies, and learner outcomes.

Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by providing a context-specific, post-COVID analysis of mixed learning environments for language learning in Kazakhstan, with a focus on identifying key factors that enhance engagement, effectiveness, and equity in tertiary education.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design targeting students from selected higher education institutions in Astana, Kazakhstan. Data collection took place over two semesters in 2025. The study aimed to explore students' experiences, perceived benefits, and challenges within mixed learning environments, including both virtual and augmented learning platforms.

Participants

The participants were undergraduate students from diverse academic programs. Inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in courses that incorporated online or blended learning components during the study period. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided.

Data Collection Instrument

Data was collected using a structured online questionnaire comprising four sections:
The questionnaire collected information across four main domains. The first domain covered participants' socio-demographic and academic characteristics, including age, gender, year of study, place of residence, and academic discipline. The second examined students' experiences with online (virtual) learning, focusing on access to online resources, frequency of participation, motivation, and challenges encountered during online study. The third domain explored students' learning preferences and the reasons underlying those preferences, particularly their views of face-to-face, online, and blended learning modes. The final domain addressed students' perspectives on the future of mixed learning environments, including their preferred modes of learning and

perceptions of the effectiveness of blended or mixed approaches. The questionnaire was reviewed by five experts in the field to ensure content validity. A pilot study was conducted to assess the reliability of the instrument, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.65, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Procedure

Participants received an invitation email containing a brief description of the study and a link to the online questionnaire. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were presented with an informed consent form, clearly explaining: The purpose of the study, Voluntary nature of participation, Confidentiality of responses, Ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. Only participants who provided consent were allowed to complete the survey.

Data Analysis

Collected data were coded and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables. Pearson's Chi-square test was employed to examine relationships between categorical variables, such as age, gender, academic discipline, and learning preferences.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed ethical standards in research involving human subjects:
Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants' identities remained confidential, and no personal identifiers were recorded. Data were stored securely on password-protected systems and were only accessible to the research team. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of universities in Astana (Kazakhstan) ensuring minimal risk and respect for participants' autonomy.

Results

As mentioned, finally a total of 515 students (English language) from three universities participated in this study. The socio-demographic distribution and academic level are presented in the following table-1.

Table1. *The academic and socio-demographic data*

Universities			
L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University	Nazarbayev University	Kazakh National University of Arts	Total students= 515
300 students	64 students	151 students	
Participants' age			
18-19 years old	20 years old	21 years old	≥22 years old
123	174	72	146
Participants' gender			
Male (216)		Female (299)	
Participants' residence/locality			
Urban = 393		Rural=122	
Academic level (Bachelor)			
First year =94	Second year =238	Third year =96	Fourth year =87

Table-1 depicts that the study finally involved 515 students from three universities in Kazakhstan: L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (300 students), Nazarbayev University

(64 students), and Kazakh National University of Arts (151 students). Demographic data was fully available for 515 participants, whose ages ranged from 18 to 22 years or older, with the largest group being 20-year-olds (174 students). The sample included 216 male and 299 female students. Most participants were from urban areas (393 students) compared to rural areas (122 students). Regarding academic level in the Bachelor program, second-year students constituted the largest group (238 students), followed by first-year (94), third-year (96), and fourth-year students (87). This diverse sample provided a representative basis for examining student experiences and preferences.

Table 2. *The students' preferences on different types of teaching*

Education mode	Frequency	Percent
Virtual learning (online)	35	6.8
Face to face (traditional teaching)	219	42.5
Mixed learning environment (blended teaching)	261	50.7

Table-2 shows that a total of 45.6% of the participants have already experienced virtual or mixed learning environment prior to the Covid-19 pandemics and 54.4% of them have first faced it only because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The internet access is reported to be mostly difficult for 54.2% of them and 60.8% state that if they missed the online classes because of the internet connection issues.

42.5% of the participants preferred on-site lessons (traditional teaching), mostly because they find them more motivated and engaged in classrooms activities. Around half of them (50.7%) preferred the augmented learning environment (blended methods of teaching): they want to have on-site classes and recorded lessons or educational videos as well, because 61.2% participants consider it the best understandable form of teaching (see table. 2).

Table 3. *The reasons of students' preferences about different types of teaching*

Statements	Strongly agree	agree	Neutral	disagree	Strongest disagree
I'm more motivated in blended learning classes	18%	22%	20%	25%	15%
On-site (traditional teaching) is more beneficial.	55%	30%	8%	5%	2%
I'm more focused during face-to-face teaching.	58%	27%	7%	5%	3%
Virtual (online teaching) is not very motivating	36%	28%	16%	8%	12%
I prefer face-to-face/classroom teaching.	52%	28%	10%	6%	4%
I interact more with the teacher in face-to-face classes.	60%	25%	8%	5%	2%
Classroom interaction is better for interaction.	62%	24%	7%	4%	3%
I am more aware of regular study in traditional teaching	50%	30%	10%	6%	4%
On-site teaching is more understandable	53%	29%	8%	6%	4%

Table 3 illustrates students' reasons for preferring different modes of instruction—online, on-site (face-to-face), and blended learning. Responses are presented as percentages, indicating the extent of agreement with each statement.

The data reveal a pronounced preference for traditional face-to-face teaching in areas such as focus (58% strongly agree), teacher interaction (60% strongly agree), and overall perceived effectiveness (53–55% strongly agree). Students also report higher awareness of regular study

habits (50% strongly agree) and better comprehension during on-site lessons (53% strongly agree). These findings highlight the enduring value of face-to-face interaction for engagement, concentration, and understanding. Conversely, fully online learning appears less motivating, with 64% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that virtual teaching is not very motivating. Additionally, challenges such as internet accessibility and reduced direct interaction contribute to its perceived limitations.

Blended or mixed learning environment, however, emerges as a particularly favorable approach, balancing the benefits of both traditional and digital instruction. While only 18% strongly agree that they are more motivated in blended classes, combined agreement (strongly agree + agree) reaches 40%, suggesting meaningful acceptance. Moreover, students recognize blended learning for its flexibility, allowing virtual lessons to be accessed at any time, and its potential to address both pedagogical and contextual needs.

Overall, the findings suggest that traditional teaching supports engagement, discipline, and social interaction, whereas online learning enhances accessibility and flexibility. Blended learning, therefore, represents the most contextually adaptive and pedagogically effective model for higher education in Kazakhstan, accommodating evolving student needs post-COVID-19.

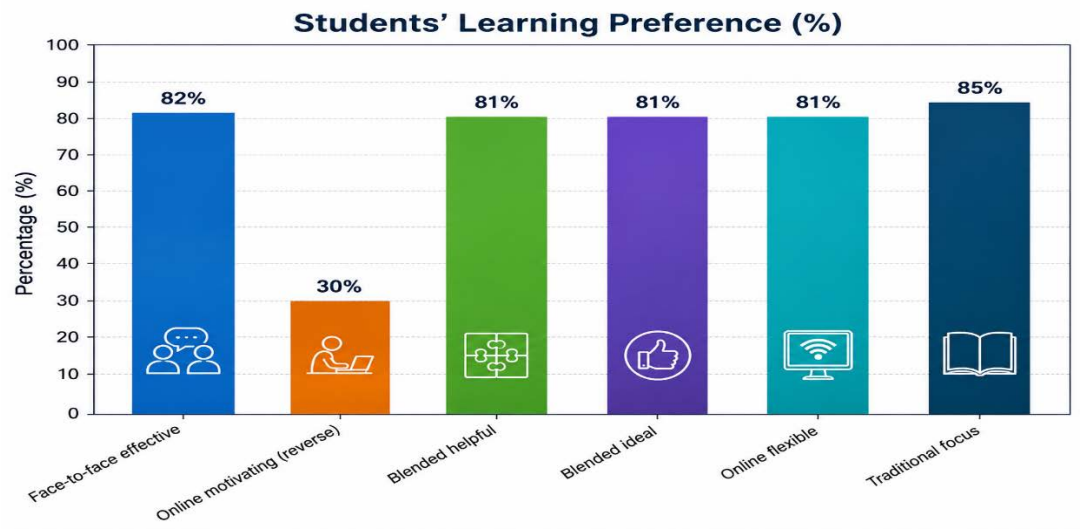


Figure 1. Learning preference and effectiveness

The figure1 illustrates students' perceptions of different learning modes. Blended learning shows consistently high agreement levels, comparable to traditional face-to-face effectiveness, while fully online learning scores significantly lower in motivation. This supports the argument that blended learning offers a balanced and preferred approach in the post-COVID educational context.

Table 4. *The perception of the different types of teaching impact on learning objectives' achievements*

The learning objectives are better achieved through:	Frequency	(%)
online teaching	31	6.0
on-site teaching	224	43.5
Mixed learning/blended teaching	260	50.5

Table 4 presents students' perceptions of how different teaching modalities contribute to the achievement of learning objectives. The findings indicate that Mixed learning/blended teaching is perceived as the most effective approach, with 50.5% (n = 260) of respondents selecting this option. This is followed by on-site (face-to-face) teaching, preferred by 43.5% (n = 224) of participants.

In contrast, online teaching is considered the least effective method for achieving learning objectives, with only 6.0% (n = 31) of respondents supporting this mode.

The results clearly demonstrate a strong preference for mixed learning environments, suggesting that students value a combination of both traditional and digital instructional methods. While face-to-face teaching remains highly regarded, its slightly lower percentage compared to blended learning indicates that students increasingly recognize the added benefits of flexibility, accessibility, and supplementary digital resources.

The very low preference for fully online teaching further reinforces earlier findings that highlight challenges such as reduced engagement, limited interaction, and technological barriers. Overall, the data supports the argument that blended (mixed)learning provides a more balanced and effective approach, aligning with the evolving educational needs in the post-pandemic context.

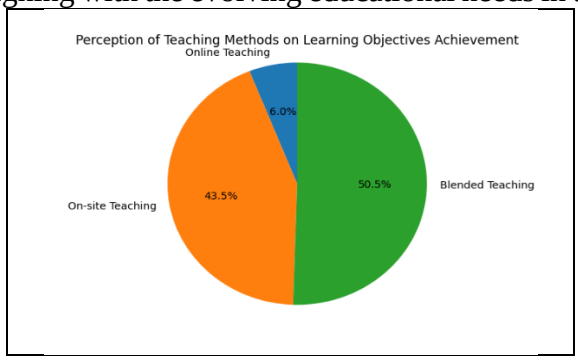


Figure 2. Teaching methods perception

The pie chart illustrates students' perceptions of the effectiveness of different teaching methods in achieving learning objectives. Blended learning accounts for the largest proportion (50.5%), followed by on-site teaching (43.5%), while online teaching represents only a small fraction (6%). This distribution highlights a clear preference for hybrid instructional approaches over fully online methods.

Table 5. *The perspective of different learning environments in the future*

The students' preferences on type of future teaching	Frequency	%
online teaching	33	6.4
on-site teaching	238	46.2
Mixed learning environment	232	45.0
Other	11	2.1

Table 5 presents students' preferences regarding the type of teaching they would like to experience in the future. The majority of participants expressed a strong preference for on-site (face-to-face) learning, with 238 students (46.2%) selecting this option. Nearly as many students favored a mixed or blended learning environment, with 232 students (45.0%) indicating this as their preferred mode, highlighting the growing appeal of flexible learning approaches.

In contrast, online teaching alone was chosen by only 33 students (6.4%), reflecting limited enthusiasm for fully virtual instruction. A small number of students (11 students, 2.1%) reported other preferences, suggesting unique or individualized learning needs not captured by the main categories.

Overall, the data indicate that while students value the accessibility and flexibility of blended learning, traditional on-site teaching remains highly preferred, and fully online learning is less favored for the future. This reflects a trend toward adaptive, student-centered educational models that balance face-to-face interaction with digital components.

Table 6. *The perspective of online or blended learning*

The students' preferences of having online learning elements	Frequency	%
On-site teaching with online elements	385	74.8
Only on-site teaching	96	18.6
No opinion	33	6.4

Table 6 illustrates students' preferences regarding the inclusion of online elements in their learning. A large majority of participants (385 students, 74.8%) preferred on-site teaching supplemented with online components, indicating strong support for a blended learning approach that combines face-to-face instruction with digital resources. In comparison, 96 students (18.6%) favored traditional on-site teaching only, reflecting a smaller group that prefers conventional classroom methods without digital integration. A minority of students (33 students, 6.4%) expressed no opinion on the matter.

Overall, the findings suggest that blended learning is widely favored, highlighting students' desire for flexible learning environments that leverage both in-person and online modalities to enhance engagement and accessibility.

Table7. *The future learning preferences according to different factors*

Students' age	Type of the teaching preferences		
	online	*on-site*	*blended*
19 years old	2.7%	40.7%	54.0%
20 years old	3.4%	41.4%	54.6%
21 years old	2.9%	48.6%	45.7%
>22 years old	15.2%	51.7%	29.7%
		Pearson Chi-Square = 106.9	P<0.000

Table 7 presents students' preferences for future learning environments according to age. Among younger students, 19- and 20-year-olds, a majority preferred blended learning (54.0% and 54.6%, respectively), with fewer opting for on-site teaching (40.7% and 41.4%) and minimal interest in fully online learning (2.7% and 3.4%).

For students aged 21 years, preferences shifted slightly, with 48.6% favoring on-site teaching and 45.7% choosing blended learning, while online learning remained low at 2.9%. Among students aged 22 years or older, the trend moved more decisively toward on-site teaching (51.7%), with blended learning preferred by 29.7%, and a notable increase in interest in online learning (15.2%).

The Pearson Chi-Square test ($\chi^2 = 106.9$, $p < 0.001$) indicates a statistically significant relationship between age and future learning preferences. These results suggest that younger students are more inclined toward blended learning, whereas older students show a stronger preference for traditional on-site instruction and greater openness to fully online learning.

Discussion

The present study confirms that most students had limited exposure to online learning prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a finding consistent with recent research showing that many learners were unprepared for the sudden shift to virtual education when face-to-face classes were suspended in 2020 (Ali et al., 2023). This lack of prior experience may reflect broader socio-economic and infrastructural challenges that constrained access to digital learning environments before the pandemic. In the post-pandemic context, connectivity issues remain a significant obstacle; for example, medical students surveyed in 2025 reported that poor internet access and technological barriers hinder their ability to engage consistently with online components (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Approximately 42.5% of participants preferred on-site (face-to-face) instruction, a preference grounded in the opportunity for active engagement, real-time feedback, and structured learning environments. This aligns with broader findings that in-person modes are frequently favored for enhancing engagement and learning outcomes compared with online-only formats (UK university study, 2024).

Mixed learning environment emerged as a highly attractive mode, resonating with recent literature that identifies blended instruction as an effective compromise between flexibility and academic rigour. Many students value the flexibility of online components alongside the interaction and feedback afforded by in-person sessions (Iskakova et al., 2023; Khalaf et al., 2023; Shatla et al., 2024).

The significant support for hands-on practicum in this study (53.8%) highlights the continued importance of practical learning experiences, particularly for health-related disciplines where online delivery cannot fully substitute for in-person clinical practice. Similar patterns have been reported in studies emphasizing that blended modalities may best support skills acquisition while accommodating some remote learning flexibility (Raes, 2022).

Device limitations also influenced student preferences, with learners using small-screen devices being more likely to prefer on-site instruction. Previous research has indicated that mobile devices often restrict student interaction and lower the quality of engagement in online classes, which may push students toward preferring more traditional modalities (Yasinzai & Ahad, 2025).

In terms of academic performance, students reported achieving higher scores in on-site environments but also recognized that blended learning could potentially help meet learning outcomes more effectively. This reflects broader empirical evidence showing that blended learning often matches or exceeds the effectiveness of fully online instruction when properly supported, particularly through instructor presence and structured design (Müller,et al, 2023).

Despite a relatively positive view of online learning, only 6.4% of students expressed a desire to continue with exclusively online teaching in the future. This finding is consistent with post-pandemic evidence from UK universities, where in-person learning was the most frequently preferred modality, while synchronous online learning was the most frequently selected least-preferred option (Mehta et al., 2024).

A good majority (74.8%) was still found to have been supporting online elements in future teaching, particularly recorded lessons , reflecting repeated access to materials increase student satisfaction and perceived learning support (Li et al., 2025; Alkattan & Alreshaid, 2025)

Lastly, variations by locality and discipline where urban and IT/management students favored blended learning more than rural students and those in health sciences suggest that access, infrastructure, and curricular demands shape learning mode preferences. This complexity

underscores the need for nuanced, context-sensitive educational planning as institutions design future hybrid pedagogies (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Overall, the findings harmonize with recent scholarship highlighting blended learning as a forward-looking educational model that integrates the strengths of both online and face-to-face instruction while acknowledging ongoing challenges related to technology, engagement, and discipline-specific needs.

Conclusions

The findings of this study clearly indicate that online and blended learning are poised to play an increasingly significant role in the future of higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated students' exposure to virtual learning environments and contributed to greater familiarity with digital platforms, online communication, and technology-mediated academic activities. At the same time, many educators gained practical experience in using digital tools and increasingly recognized the potential pedagogical value of integrating technology into conventional teaching and learning processes. Thus, the pandemic not only disrupted traditional educational practices but also contributed to a longer-term transformation in how higher education institutions approach teaching and learning.

The findings further suggest that the future of higher education is unlikely to involve a complete replacement of face-to-face instruction with online education. Rather, a more flexible and integrated model is likely to emerge in which digital technologies complement classroom-based teaching. Even in contexts where on-site face-to-face instruction remains the dominant mode of delivery, online components can continue to support assignments, projects, discussions, collaborative activities, assessments, and access to supplementary learning resources. Such integration may provide students with greater flexibility and opportunities for self-directed learning while allowing instructors to extend learning beyond the physical classroom.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of adopting a balanced and purposeful approach to online and blended learning. The effectiveness of these approaches depends not simply on the availability of digital technologies but also on appropriate instructional design, teacher preparedness, student engagement, digital access, and institutional support. Higher education institutions should therefore focus on developing sustainable blended learning practices rather than treating online education merely as an emergency response to crises. By strategically combining the strengths of face-to-face interaction with the flexibility and accessibility of digital learning environments, universities can develop more resilient, inclusive, and learner-centred models of higher education for the post-pandemic era.

Implications

These results highlight the need for higher education institutions to adopt flexible, hybrid pedagogical strategies that balance traditional instruction with online resources. Teachers should be supported with training and infrastructure to design blended courses that maintain student engagement, accommodate diverse learning preferences, and enhance academic outcomes. Additionally, policymakers should consider investing in digital infrastructure, particularly to bridge the urban–rural gap and ensure equitable access to online learning.

Limitations

The study has certain constraints. First, the sample was drawn from a limited number of universities in Kazakhstan, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, some demographic and experiential data were incomplete, restricting the analysis of certain subgroups. Finally, this research relied primarily on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by personal biases or recent experiences with online learning. Future studies could incorporate longitudinal data, a broader range of institutions, and objective performance metrics to strengthen understanding of blended learning effectiveness and student preferences.

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Appendix-A. Questionnaire

Title: Mixed Learning Environment for Language Learning (Post-COVID Context)

Please respond to the following statements. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used for academic purposes only.

Likert Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Section A: Socio-Demographic/Academic Information

(Please tick or fill in as appropriate)

1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say
2. Age: ☐ 18–20 ☐ 21–23 ☐ 24–26 ☐ 27+
3. Area of residence: ☐ Urban ☐ Semi-urban ☐ Rural
4. Employment status: ☐ Not working ☐ Part-time ☐ Full-time
5. I work part-time and cannot attend classes daily: ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. Level of study: ☐ first year ☐ second year ☐ third year ☐ fourth year
7. Field/ subject of study:
8. Mode of study (now) : ☐ Online ☐ Face-to-face ☐ Blended
9. The experience of the pandemic was very bad: ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Section B: Online (Virtual) Learning Experience						
1	Virtual (online teaching) is not very motivating					
2	I don't line online learning much.					
3	Online lessons are more informative					
4	Online lessons can be accessed anytime					
5	I sometimes face technology-related/ internet access issues					
Section C: Learning Preferences						
6	I'm more motivated in blended learning classes.					
7	On-site (traditional teaching) is more beneficial.					
8	I'm more focused during face-to-face teaching.					

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9	I prefer face-to-face/classroom teaching.					
10	I interact more with the teacher in face-to-face classes.					
11	Classroom interaction is better for socializing					
12	I am more aware of regular study in traditional teaching					
13	On-site teaching is more understandable					
Section D: Reasons of Learning Preferences						
15	I'm more motivated in blended learning classes.					
16	On-site (traditional teaching) is beneficial					
17	I'm more focused during face-to-face teaching					
18	Virtual (online teaching) is not very motivating					
19	I interact more with teachers and classmates in face-to-face classes					
20	More aware of regular study in traditional teaching					
21	I cant' stand online learning much.					
22	Blended learning with videos is understandable					
23	Virtual lessons can be accessed anytime					
24	On-site teaching is more understandable					
25	Face-to-face teaching is more effective					
26	Online lessons are more informative					
27	Blended learning is the ideal method					
28	I live in a remote area					
29	I work part-time and can't attend daily					
30	I face technology/internet issues					

Appendix. B. **Sample Student Consent Form**

Title of the Study:
Mixed Learning Environment for Language Learning: The Post-Covid Kazakh Context in the Central Asia
Principal Investigator:
Address and phone number/email:
Introduction:
You are invited to participate in a research study about students' experiences and preferences regarding online, on-site, and blended learning. This form provides information about the study and your rights as a participant. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions before agreeing to participate.
Purpose of the Study:
The study aims to understand students' learning experiences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and to explore preferences for future learning environments.
Procedures:

- Participation involves completing a questionnaire about your learning experiences, preferences, and access to online resources.
- It should take approximately 15–20 minutes to complete.
- There are no right or wrong answers; your honest opinions are important.

Voluntary Participation:
Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without any penalty or effect on your academic standing.
Confidentiality:
-All information you provide will remain confidential and will be used only for research purposes.
-Your name or identifying information will not be recorded in the questionnaire or any publication.
Data will be stored securely in password-protected files and will be destroyed after some months.
Risks and Benefits:
There are no foreseeable risks from participation in this study. While you may not benefit directly, your responses will help universities improve teaching methods and learning environments for students like you.
Consent Statement:
By signing this form (or clicking "I Agree" in an online survey), you indicate that:

1. You have read and understood the information provided.
2. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
3. You are 18 years of age or older.

Participant Name: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____
Researcher Contact: _____