The Effect of Using Blended Learning on Iraqi EFL Students' Reading Achievement

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Abstract: Improvements in technology have made blended learning (also known as hybrid learning) a crucial component of education worldwide. The word "blended learning" (BL) refers to a teaching approach that combines classroom activities with online learning. In this study, the main objective was to investigate how blended learning affects students' reading achievements in Iraq. For the academic year 2022-2023, at the Directorate of Education, Diyala, 62 students were chosen from the fifth preparatory class, in order to investigate the effects of blended learning on the participants' reading achievements. The participants were classified into intervention and control groups. In the intervention group, the students received traditional general English instructions while using computers and internet-based learning. As for the control group, they were all instructed by the textbook, which followed the traditional learning model. The results demonstrated a statistically significant factor distinction within the experimental and control groups' mean achievement scores in reading comprehension, indicating that using a blended learning strategy is a more beneficial and effective strategy than using a traditional approach. According to the findings, blended learning presents an interactive and tech-based learning that improves the results of the teaching-learning process and opens up new opportunities for life-long learning and self-directed studies.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Distance Learning, Face To Face Learning, Iraqi Efl Students, Reading Ability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the idea of blended learning has received major consideration in multiple studies during the teaching of English, with a focus on how blended learning affects all areas of language instruction and learning. Online learning offers the potential to combine the most technological advances with the most important aspects of traditional education, such as participation and involvement (Islam et al., 2022).

Reading skills, among other language skills, can benefit from blended learning. A major part of language learning has always been reading, since it's a crucial source of information. Reading and comprehension of the reader's perspective on the text as well as the environment allows the reader to establish a relationship with the text (Lustyantie & Kasan, 2021). Therefore, readers must gain an understanding in this interactive reading process to acquire a better understanding of the content. However, many Iraqi EFL students struggle with reading and as a result, have difficulty understanding the text, which causes disinterest in reading and thus significantly impacts the educational system. Language teachers and educational designers must therefore create assignments and guidance that will aid in the improvement of language learners' skills throughout the classroom as well as outside. (Asadipiran et al., 2022).

One of the advisable approaches to cope with the students' reading comprehension problem is to use blended learning to raise students' reading achievements. However, traditional methods of teaching reading skills, for example, the use of textbooks is still common in our educational system, which leaves many Iraqi teachers unaware of the relatively new trend in teaching languages. Blended learning would be extremely beneficial to Iraqi students to improve their EFL reading and comprehension abilities (Belazi & Ganpathy, 2021). Blended learning techniques give students the chance to take advantage of both the flexibility of online learning and classrooms that encourage direct connection and engagement. Iraqi EFL learners and teachers face challenges due to blended learning (Altufaili, 2016; Kadhim, 2017).

Despite the growing interest in blended learning approaches, there are few studies in the area of English language teaching in the Iraqi EFL context. Few studies have thoroughly investigated how blended learning is actually implemented and few others have explored the students' perspective regarding their online class (e-learning) experience, particularly in terms of their reading skills. Recent studies have mostly compared students' reading achievements in reading courses between blended learning and traditional learning. It will offer some insight and direction for EFL teachers to develop blended reading courses that match the requisites and preferences of students by investigating how blended learning is implemented in a reading course and the students' opinions about their e-learning in the blended learning reading course. As a result, this study's objective was to investigate the effectiveness of using blended learning on fifth-grade secondary students' reading ability in Iraq.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Blended Learning
Delialioglu and Yildirim (2007) and Gulbahar and Madran (2009) define blended learning as the combination of online and classroom learning methods. In a similar vein, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) found that traditional classrooms are more effective when blended learning environments are used. Smythe (2011) claims that blended learning is a realistic framework that consists of a range of effective teaching and learning techniques. It uses a variety of

techniques to stimulate students' interest and encourages the use of computer technologies to speed up learning. On the other hand, a blended learning strategy is a teaching method that combines traditional teaching methods with technology in the classroom in order to maximize learning by transforming the classroom from a teacher-centered setting to a student-centered environment. This improves the results of the education and learning process and opens up new opportunities for life-long learning and self-directed studies.

2.2 Reading Comprehension

In educational institutions, the word "readability" is frequently used to describe a variety of reading-related data. Reading proficiency is frequently used to describe the capacity to read grade-level material quickly and clearly.

Grabe (2014) suggests that reading comprehension requires the recognition of words, sentence processing, strategies, activation of relevant prior information, interpretation of meaning, and continuous monitoring of content comprehension. These are procedures that can be improved with continuous reading and practice. Reading a range of sources in the target language may help the reader learn at least 5% of new terms they come across. The rate could reach 15%, given the growing selection of reading materials. This leads to the conclusion that reading done in class is fundamentally different from reading done outside of class, because the range of reading sources are different from classroom reading.

According to AlKhaleel (2019), linking reading comprehension with blended learning involves combining the benefits of in-person and online learning into one learning experience. It is a fundamental and important transformation that modifies educational structures like teaching and learning methods.

When students have a deep desire to read, they show improvements and it has an overall positive impact on their reading comprehension (Stutz et al., 2016). Students are inspired to read so that they can engage in discussions with their classmates; much further, students' inspiration is increased when they are able to independently identify their own texts (Ragland & Palace, 2017). In addition, Fives (2016) reported that in her study, as soon as the students' attitude toward reading comprehension improved, she noticed considerable progress in her students' reading comprehension ability.

Reading is a productive activity that involves selecting and comprehending the meanings contained in written materials. Reading activities, according to Rahim (2019), are the most effective way of learning. It is common for readers to use prior knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, experience with texts, and other techniques to enhance their comprehension of written texts. Reading is the beginning of language comprehension symbols, a stimulus that aids in the procedure of rote memorization of what is read and building comprehension through the acquisition of knowledge (Smith & Feng, 2018).

The e-Learning approach to teaching English has also proven effective because it addresses real learning needs and allows students to read topics of interest by using a student-centered approach (Quigley, 2011). Additionally, e- Learning is doing a great job of helping students learn a language by providing engaging tasks for every language skill. Evidently, reading and

comprehension skills as well as the readers' motivation work together to encourage students to practice and promote their learning. When pupils are motivated, they can study independently both inside and outside of the classroom without the guidance of the teacher, developing into autonomous learners.

2.3 Empirical Studies

Through a blended teaching strategy, Shih (2011) examined the effect of including "Facebook" and peer evaluation with the training of a college English writing course. At a Taiwanese technology university, the subjects were first-year English majors. The study used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. An in-depth survey questionnaire that the researcher created as well as pre- and post-tests of students' English writing abilities were also utilized. The findings revealed that using "Facebook" for formative assessments in English writing seminars at the university level could be both entertaining and productive and through cooperative learning, students' knowledge and writing abilities in English could increase. Moreover, it came to light that students' enthusiasm and engagement could be increased by using Facebook in the classroom.

Rasmitadila et al., (2020) examined the effect of the blended learning approach (BLA) in inclusive educational courses. The study included 30 students and data was collected via open interviews to determine how students view the use of integrated learning. Researchers used content analysis methods to examine the interview outcomes. According to data research, students' attention was divided into four categories: the presentation of learning management systems (LMS); accessibility; advantages; and sustainability. Students' opinions of how the LMS appears on the web were consistent with the learning objectives, but they needed to be changed to make it simpler for them to understand.

None of the studies mentioned above, has been conducted in the Iraqi EFL context. Therefore, it seems that the issue of blended learning and its potential benefits is an under-explored area in the Iraqi EFL context. Therefore, drawing upon the reading comprehension skills of the Iraqi EFL learners, the present study aims to answer the following research question:

Does blended learning have a significant impact on Iraqi EFL learners' reading comprehension ability?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The present study was conducted during the academic year 2022-2023. The participants of this study were female students in their fifth year of secondary school at the Directorate of Education, Diyala. A sample of 62 female students were purposely selected to be the sample of the current study because their school (Fadak High School for Girls) is the only secondary school for girls in the district where the second researcher of this study resides. Two groups of students were selected. Both groups used the same textbook (English for Iraq 5th Preparatory Students).

The participants were between the ages of 17 and 18. All participants spoke Arabic as their first language. The students' reading comprehension abilities were evaluated using the Tests of Reading Comprehension (TORCH). The participants were randomly divided into experimental and control groups (A and B respectively). The second researcher of this study taught both groups; each group (A) and (B) consisted of 31 students.

3.2 Instruments and Materials

The researcher used two tests to determine the effects of BL on students' reading abilities: a pre-test and a post-test, which were planned for two groups. This method was used before the treatment to establish the current participants' general English level, and the researcher applied a pre-test to assess how the experimental and control groups performed. The pre-test allowed for standardization amongst the groups in terms of reading performance. This reading comprehension test contained six passages of different genres (poetry, short stories, and drama) followed by five multiple-choice questions. After that, the participants were told to read the materials and choose the appropriate answers. To aid students' learning, films, audios, photos, and slide shows were employed. After that, a post-test was employed, one that was made specifically for the participants, and it was administered to them. It intended to ascertain pupils' post-treatment reading comprehension levels. The reading exam was conducted using the student's book in order to assess the student's reading proficiency. To determine the students' reading achievement after the study was over, a post-test was administered right away.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

An experimental method was used in this study. Statistical analysis was conducted using the pretest-posttest design for randomized control groups. Two groups of sixty-two students were randomly selected: the experimental group learned English through using BL, and the control group learned English through traditional teaching. A different treatment was given to each group. Students in the experimental group received education partly through online learning, partly through face-to-face instruction, suggesting that the students in the blended learning group received traditional English instruction combined with computer-based learning. Student participants in the experimental group were introduced to online learning and blended learning.

During the first three sessions, the lecturer taught students the fundamentals of reading in a classroom. Student-teacher meetings were scheduled three times a week. They received their instructions using a blended learning method that involved face-to-face meetings with their teacher and oral and visual interactions with the instructor while they were learning the instructor's material. The teacher started allocating the students to online sessions in the subsequent classes. These sessions, which were conducted over WhatsApp, drew from earlier in-person courses, but required the students to use both online and offline resources (for instance, books or other libraries) to complete the assigned tasks. Face-to-face sessions were held to teach different topics and reading skills, and students were encouraged to work together in groups with classmates. They had the chance to widen their reading horizons by reading texts other than those in the textbook during the online session.

The students came to connect with their teacher and other classmates in person the week after the project outside of the classroom and through online learning. Inside the classroom, a learning test was conducted to identify the effectiveness and the impact of blended learning and its advantages to students and to verify their understanding of the new vocabulary. Students that performed well were identified and those that did not perform well were asked to interact with the students that performed better to help them improve their performance. While the control group utilized the traditional learning model, it didn't include internet access or use computers in the classroom, and the students were only taught from their course textbook. Teachers used the traditional teaching-learning method for the control group, which involved reading and completing activities from textbooks as well as taking tests during class time. The pupils and teacher had three regular meetings each week. The textbook, a standard whiteboard, and a marker were utilized as instructional resources in the traditional manner. Under the supervision of the researcher, the treatment lasted for 25 sessions of 60 minutes each. Both groups had been pre-tested. Their pre-test data included reading comprehension and vocabulary scores. The study concluded with a post-test measuring learners' reading comprehension skills to ensure the effectiveness of instruction and to assess their ability throughout the study.

3.4 Data Analysis

The Range Program processed the edited data after editing and analyzing it. To analyze the obtained data, the latest version of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to calculate the means, medians, and standard deviations. In order to confirm the significance of the results, a one-way ANOVA was used.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Construction and Application of the Pre-Test

A pre-test has been created with the aim of achieving equalization between the two included groups, experimental and control. There are seven questions included. The final five questions are related to the production level, while the first two questions are focused on recognition.

Table 1 Test Values for the Two Groups in the Pre-test

Group	No.	M	SD	T-value		D.F	Level of sig.
				Calculated	Computed		
EG	25	45.24	8.68	0.0772	2.0106	48	0.05
CG	25	45.40	5.66				

This question has five true-false questions and receives a 20 out of 20, whereas this question has five multiple choices and is rated out of 30, while Question Three has ten open-ended reading comprehension questions. Each of the open-ended questions 4, 5, 6, and 7 is scored out of five (05) points, and thus the entire pretest is graded out of 100 points. Experimental scores were 45.24, with a standard deviation of 8.68, compared to control groups' scores of 45.40, with a standard deviation of 5.66, following the test. The T-test of

two independent groups did not show statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the two groups when used as a test for differences in the results of the two groups. Based on the results of the pretest, the calculated value (0.0772) was less than the tabulated value (2.01), and the degree of freedom (48). Indicating equality between the two groups.

4.2 Post-test Achievement Distinction between the Experimental and Control Groups

Posttests are used to determine if the experimental group shows a significant difference from the control group. The experimental group received a score (68.68), whereas the control group received a score of (55.00). For two independent samples, the t-value calculated utilizing the t-test equation is (9.91), while the tabulated t-value is (2.01); however, the degree of freedom and significance level are (0.05).

Table 2 Posttest mean scores, standard deviations, and T-values for the two groups

Group	No.of Students	Means Scores	SD	T-Value		DF	Level of Sig.
				Computed	Tabulated		
Exp.	25	68.68	5.20	9.91	2.01	48	0.05
Cont.	25	55.00	4.53				

Accordingly, the experimental group outperforms the control group by a significant margin. Therefore, the first hypothesis is accepted.

4.3 Results of the Experimental and Control Groups after the Post-Test

The post-test is used to determine whether there is a significant difference between the data-level and production-level achievement scores of the experimental group.

Table 3 Students' Achievement at Recognition Level VS. Students' Achievement at Production Level.

Level	No.of Students	Means Scores	SD	T-Value		DF	Level of Sig
				Computed	Tabulated		
Recognition Level	25	37.76	2.63	9.81	1.71	24	0.05
Production Level	25	30.92	3.56				

According to the results, the average student performance on the recognition level was 30.92, and the average student performance on the production level was 37.76. Table 4 indicates a significance level of 0.05 and a freedom level of 24, which indicates a t-value of (9.81) for two paired tests, whereas the tabulated t-value is (1.71). Reading comprehension scores of

students were dramatically different before and after implementing the blended Learning (BL) technique, as evidenced by the stark difference in recognition scores. Consequently, it is acceptable.

5. DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to investigate the effect of blended learning on the reading achievement of Iraqi learners. To accomplish the current research's goal, for the academic year 2022-2023, 62 students were randomly chosen from the fifth preparatory at the Directorate of Education, Diyala. The samples were separated into two different groups: one for the experiment and the other for the control group.

The outcomes showed that there were statistically significant differences in the means of the two groups' performance on the post-achievement exam. The experimental group, which received instruction utilizing a blended learning technique, benefited from the difference. When compared to students who received traditional instruction way, the experimental group of fifth graders using the blended learning strategy showed greater progress in reading. It is possible to explain this by a number of factors, the most significant of which is the use of BL, which is an effective method for teaching English and has a positive impact on students' performance in the relevant subject. Blended learning also gave the experimental group the chance to learn at their own pace. Additionally, the experimental groups were able to visualize the course topics using PowerPoint presentations and online websites, which provided a more favorable learning environment for the students.

Blended learning also improves the quality of the teaching-learning process, enhances the results of that process, creates new opportunities for long-term learning, and improves the English proficiency level of students. It enhances communication between the teacher and the student.

These findings are consistent with empirical research by Djiwandono (2018) investigated the effects of BL on reading abilities, vocabulary mastery, and collaboration among university students. The present study is almost in line with this study. Both studies demonstrated that the benefits of blended learning on reading comprehension skills were in the experimental group's favor. Both studies showed that the BL factor is more significant than the traditional method in terms of instructions. However, unlike this study, Djiwandono examined the impact of blended learning not only on reading abilities but also on vocabulary mastery and collaboration among university students. The findings of both studies showed that blended learning has different purposes. Moreover, the two studies came up with some shared sources.

This study is in accordance with (Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017) who investigated the effectiveness of blended learning on the reading proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. In both studies blended learning on was used to assess reading achievement. Both studies demonstrated that blended learning positively impacts reading achievement. However, unlike

this, Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour followed a quasi-experimental design in their studies. The findings of both studies showed that both students' reading comprehension achievement improved with the use of the BL strategy.

This outcome is in line with the findings of (Sivakumar & Selvakumar, 2019; Wichadee ,2017), who discovered that BL is a more effective approach when traditional face-to-face instructions are combined with virtual online teaching. These models help students improve their scientific understanding as well as their skills.

Blended learning, according to the findings of these studies, gives students more realistic learning experiences and encourages interactions, which encourages students to participate more actively and become more engaged during the teaching process. Such findings imply that by enhancing today's educational experiences with the development of web technology, blended learning gives more effective learning results. The findings of this study support those of earlier studies, which have demonstrated that blended learning significantly improves student achievement and highlights the importance of BL in the emergence of motivating factors and favorable trends for learning subject matter content. Recent studies also found that BL improves students' motivation to learn and was associated with good learning trends. (Ceylan & Kesici, 2017), for example, attempted to study the impacts of blended learning on students' academic progress in middle schools in Turkey's southwest region. In their study, students' achievement increased significantly in a blended classroom environment. (Fazal & Bryant, 2019) investigated the impacts of blended learning, particularly the station rotation model, on student math achievement. According to their results, students who were instructed using BL performed better on the mathematics assessment than students who were instructed purely in a face-to-face setting.

Furthermore, according to Radial (2019), blended learning is highly dependent on the combination of various methods, which leads to improved teaching and learning that can meet a wide range of students' requirements for ease of access to learning and flexibility.

More specifically, the results of this thesis demonstrated that students in the experimental group who received instructions using blended learning (BL) outperformed students in the control group who received instruction using the traditional approach. This shows that the BL strategy is superior to the traditional approach for teaching English text reading comprehension.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The utilization of the BL method proved to be significantly helpful in increasing students' reading comprehension abilities. Unlike traditional ways of teaching reading, BL offers an accessible and engaging environment in which both the teacher and the students share knowledge, evaluate difficulties, and express ideas, therefore improving reading comprehension teaching techniques. Students gain knowledge about reading passages and texts. As a result, English dialect instructors currently have a modern opportunity to explore present-day English instruction methods. Both teachers and students appear to benefit psychologically from the BL method. Timid students are more socially reserved when

conversing with their teachers. However, with BL every student is able to participate completely and work on their English skills due to the creative environment of teacher-student interaction.

To conclude, the use of the BL strategy should include at least two distinct types of sessions, each with a distinct aim. The teacher should teach the learners efficient reading strategies during face-to-face sessions, including explicit instruction on certain essential vocabulary items. This should be followed by online sessions in which students deal with different materials that they understand using the methods they learned in person.

The results of this study could have a substantial impact on the use of blended learning in EFL classrooms and students' reading achievement. Additionally, the students could benefit from the outcomes of the present study since blended learning can enhance their reading skills if they become familiar with it.

Teachers and institutions must take steps to enhance students' ability to govern their own reading by providing explicit reading strategy instruction supplemented by participation in metacognitive reading strategy tasks. This study's findings show that when students actively participated in their own reading, they developed into self-regulated readers who could plan their reading activities and materials, take account of their comprehension, and assess their performance and comprehension. Significant online reading tasks could be included in classroom reading education. In this study, students indicated that intensive reading activities boosted their language inputs, expanded their vocabulary range, and reinforced their reading skills, resulting in improved reading comprehension and learner autonomy. In this session, the teacher advised the students to engage in blended learning activities and facilitated their learning by utilizing both an online platform and comprehensive reading.

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