English Language Assessment Through Blended Learning: An Investigation on Teachers' and ESL Learners' Beliefs and Practices in Technical Colleges

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This study investigated the influence of blended learning on English language assessment methods and practices in undergraduates' classes in two technical colleges in Saudi Arabia. The teachers, a total of six, were interviewed, and the students, a total of 70, were given a questionnaire to examine their perceptions toward assessment through blended learning. Results indicate that blended learning is an effective and enjoyable method, and it has a great impact on assessment outcomes and practices. This study suggests the usefulness of using different assessment methods through blended learning.

Keywords: blended learning, assessment, ESL, technical colleges

Introduction

Introduction of the Problem

Blended learning (BL), often known as a combination of in-person and virtual learning, is the practice of teaching students in part in classroom settings and in part through independent study at home. The practice of blended learning dates back over 20 years (Sharma, 2010). Previously, no Saudi educational institution had implemented blended learning. Globally, learning systems have been switched to distance learning for the past two years following the COVID-19 epidemic. This shift makes it easier to implement blended learning in Saudi Arabian corporations that provide technical and vocational training. Students and teachers have seen several benefits and drawbacks from using blended learning in English language classes, particularly with regard to evaluation. Additionally, a teacher's function has evolved to become more of a facilitator. The instructor will not be the exclusive source of knowledge; rather, he will just serve as a guide for his students. "The instructor is involved as a guide, steering the evolving group in a suitable direction," as stated by Alturki and Alfadda (2007, pp. 2694-2700).

In just the last 40 years, the assessment of English language learners (ELs) has drawn attention from the educational community due to the contention of many experts that language learning and evaluation are only

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tangentially related (Harris, 1969, as cited in Téllez & Mosqueda, 2015). The shift to blended learning has caused a new wave to overtake assessment procedures, while educators and academics were still grappling with problems and difficulties related to language exams. In face-to-face instruction and blended learning, several language assessment techniques and procedures are used. Blended learning, however, offers fresh possibilities for networks and software tools in conjunction with classroom evaluation. On the other hand, there are worries that this learning method would result in a lower-quality evaluation procedure and its findings. Several research studies have been carried out to verify the effectiveness of blended learning and its influence on the teaching and student assessment processes (Seidiu, 2014).

However, the main goal of this study is to examine how blended learning has affected undergraduate English language evaluation procedures and methodologies in two Saudi Arabian technical colleges from the perspectives of both teachers and students. It will go over the difficulties that educators and learners of English language proficiency face. It is crucial to study the views, opinions, and experiences of teachers and students in order to assess the effectiveness of blended learning in second language evaluation. This type of research is important because it offers in-depth understandings of real-world language evaluation procedures from the viewpoints of teachers and students.

Research Questions

(1) What are the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning on English language assessment from teachers' and learners' points of view?

(2) What skills of English language are the hardest to assess for a teacher?

(3) Which language assessment methods do teachers suggest practicing through blended learning?

English Language Assessment

Since assessment is an essential part of every curriculum, it is also essential to the advancement of teaching and learning. Regarded by Almossa and Alzahtrani (2022) as the cornerstone of the educational system, it has an impact on a multitude of processes, including teaching and learning (Coombs et al., 2018). "A combination of all kinds of formal and informal judgments and findings occurring inside and outside a classroom," according to (F.Mihai, 2010, p. 24), is what assessment is. Teachers can empower their pupils to learn by using assessment (Genona & Torres, 2020). It also helps educators and students identify their areas of weakness and work to strengthen them. In addition to evaluating their students, English language instructors utilize evaluation to scaffold learning, assess their techniques, motivate their students to study, and communicate grades to both the students and their parents (Jabbarifar, 2009, as mentioned in Alkharusi, 2021).

Blended Learning

Blended learning is defined as the blending of traditional classroom instruction with web-based online instruction (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005, as noted in Sharma, 2010). Conventional education involves teachers and students interacting verbally and physically in a classroom setting. On the other hand, web-based learning entails sharing assignments and materials with students both synchronously and asynchronously outside of the classroom via the internet or a platform like Blackboard, Zoom, or WhatsApp. The research by Alfadda, Osman, and Metwally (2020) indicates that the 2019-Pandemic has demonstrated the usefulness of employing online platforms.

A study on the effects of blended learning on English language instruction was carried out by Gimeno-Sanz (2010) at one of Spain's technical universities, as reported by Sejdiu (2014). According to the study, language

teachers may now create materials that combine text, audio, video, and graphics in a way that best suits the needs of their pupils.

"Through Blended Learning, learners can develop communication, discussion, and fluency in-class," claims (Sharma, 2010, pp. 456-458). However, the online portion allows students to hone their critical thinking abilities. The second component of blended learning is regarded as a follow-up session that gives tutors the opportunity to apply the first part's learning objectives. Teachers need to take into account a few elements in order to increase the success of blended learning. As stated by (Muxtorjonovna, 2020), enrolling students is a crucial component of blended learning. Activities should also be imaginative. "Innovative and activity-different activities are important in course design" as mentioned by Kumar et al. (2021).

In order to give students flexible and worthwhile learning possibilities, blended learning integrates online and in-person learning experiences (Kumar et al., 2021). The findings show that professional development, higher education, and schools may all benefit from blended learning, and numerous online and e-learning resources have been created to help students become more proficient. The authors also discovered that the institutions were able to carry out academic activities during the epidemic regarding the usage of online resources like Blackboard, CodeTantra, and the G Suite.

English Language Assessment Through Online and Offline Learning

The effectiveness of online versus in-person assessments for blended learning is a contentious topic. Sejdiu (2014) did a case study with 40 pupils enrolled in a high school. The pupils spoke English as a second language and ranged in age from 13 to 14. They were split up into two groups: a control group and an experimental group that received blended learning. There were two English teachers in the sample as well. Pretests, posttests, and questionnaires were used as measurement instruments for influence. According to the findings, the experimental group improved more on the posttests and scored higher on the speaking and writing portions of the test.

Positive and Negative Impact of Blended Learning on English Language Assessment

Blended learning assessment is a very broad topic with two perspectives: positive and negative. Zygadlo (2007, as mentioned in Sejdiu, 2014), conducted a study to determine the impact of blended learning on language learning. The researcher chose 46 students from a single Polish school, and the results indicated that the students who learned with blended learning were more motivated and that their autonomy was promoted because they used multiple strategies, including self-study, the use of computer tools, and in-person instruction. Teachers need be equipped with technical skills to teach flexibly in blended learning. In the previous study, Sejdiu (2014) stated that in order to implement blended learning, teachers must be more comfortable with technology and know how to use platforms to teach and assess students.

Technical and Vocational Training Corporation

The Saudi Arabian Technical and Vocational Training Corporation owns the technical colleges. Since 1980, this federal institution has helped high school graduates who wish to earn diplomas in a variety of specializations by offering them technical and vocational training. The Technical and Vocational Training Corporation's strategic goals include providing enough training programs. In addition, more people should express a desire to advance their technical and professional abilities. Permit them to add labor to the labor market as well, additionally, to advance the nation's manufacturing sector. According to the "Public Association for Technical and Vocational Training" in 2024, it has 260 branches spreading across several cities, 196 technical colleges catering to males, 29 technical colleges catering to ladies, and 24 partnership institutions.

Methodology

This paper is a mixed method which combines elements of quantitative research and qualitative research to answer the research question. It is adopted to analyze and clarify the effects of blended learning on language assessment in two technical colleges in Saudi Arabia (Buraidah, and Hafr Albatin) and to interpret an experienced phenomenon in its natural setting.

Online interviews have been conducted with six English language trainers. All the subjects are Saudi citizens who studied the English language in Saudi universities and aged from 27 to 40 years old. They all have experienced blended learning, and they have used digital platforms to deliver the lessons, assess the students, and conduct exams. The interviews have been recorded after taking permission from the interviewed teachers and after their acceptance, and they will be demolished after finishing the research.

In addition, a questionnaire has been designed to investigate the learners' perceptions toward blended learning's impact on assessments. The questionnaire has been electronically designed and distributed on 70 students from the same selected technical colleges in 35 student from Buraydah and 35 others from Hafr Albaten. All the subjects are native speakers of Arabic and learn English as a general course through blended learning.

To collect the data, a survey questionnaire was designed. Closed-ended questions were added to the questionnaire to facilitate data collection. The questionnaire was designed to consist of three sections according to the study questions, with a total of 32 items. Section One (10 items) is about the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning on English language assessment from learners' points of view. Section Two (14 items) is about difficult English language skills for learners to be assessed through blended learning, and Section Three (eight items) is about language assessment methods learners experience through blended learning. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions on a five-point Likert scale to facilitate data collection. The researchers created a questionnaire that was distributed online via Google Forms.

Internal consistency dependability was calculated using the Cronbach's alpha which was 0.958 which are high values that indicate that the entire questionnaire is very reliable, also we used semi-structured, open-ended questions that were asked during the trial interview. The researchers selected open-ended questions to achieve the objectives of the study and integrate with the questionnaire tool.

Statistical Methods

Quantitative data analysis methods were used to process and analyze the questionnaire data. The statistical software SPSS V28 was used to perform descriptive statistics such as percentage, arithmetic average, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha to test the reliability of the questionnaire. In contrast, the interviews were analyzed using qualitative methods, which involved identifying themes, patterns, and meanings through content and thematic analysis. The goal of this analysis was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and motivations of the study participants.

Results

Questionnaire Results

To answer the research questions according to learners' points of view, their opinions on a set of statements were polled. The mean, standard deviation, degree of agreement, and rank of those statements were determined for each question as follows:

Question 1: The advantages and disadvantages of blended learning in English language assessment from learners' points of view. Table 1 indicates agreement among participants regarding the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning for English language assessment from learners' points of view. The mean score was 3.98 ± 0.59, indicating an overall agreement level. Ten different items were used to explore these advantages and disadvantages, and all but one were expressed as agreement. The range of their mean scores was between 3.45 and 4.35 out of five.

Table 1

The Mean, SD, and Rank of Learners' Opinions on a Set of Statements About the Advantages and Disadvantages of Blended Learning for English Language Assessment From Learners' Points of View

Items	Mean	SD	Degree	Rank
Blended learning helps boost the learner's autonomy through partaking in the online portion of the class and looking over class materials anywhere.	4.35	0.69	strongly agree	1
Blended learning provides the opportunity to develop a clear roadmap for each student's expectations and requirements to reach the end goal.	4.16	0.84	agree	3
Blended learning gives signs of weakness and strengths to each student since the assessment can be done in a more relaxed atmosphere.	4.19	0.87	agree	2
Blended learning gives an opportunity for learners to experience different measurement tools which help to understand each learner's needs.	4.15	0.81	agree	4
Blended learning gives the chance to assess learners who have trouble with technology.	4.15	0.77	agree	4
Adoption of blended learning techniques, tools, and means that are still difficult for students.	3.62	1.06	agree	9
The need for high speeds on the internet to finish the exam on time.	4.09	0.91	agree	6
Adopting blended learning in some currently unavailable technologies.	3.73	0.94	agree	8
Blended learning needs devices to be technically supported constantly.	3.95	0.93	agree	7
Constant updates in the technologies used are difficult to keep up with.	3.45	1.04	agree	10
Total	3.98	0.59	agree	

Overall, the results suggest that participants perceive several advantages of blended learning for English language assessment, such as increased autonomy, relaxed atmosphere, and clear learning goals. However, participants also acknowledge some challenges associated with blended learning, such as the need for technical support, difficulties in adopting new technologies, and the need for high-speed internet. These findings can help educators and policymakers better understand learners' perspectives on blended learning and develop strategies to maximize its benefits while addressing its challenges.

Question 2: The difficult English language skills for learners to be assessed through blended learning. Table 2 indicates agreement among participants regarding the difficult English language skills for learners to be assessed through blended learning. The mean score was 3.95 ± 0.67, indicating an overall agreement level. Fourteen different items were used to explore these difficult items, and all were expressed in agreement except one, which refers to neutral. So, the range of their mean scores was between 3.23 and 4.11 out of five.

Overall, the results suggest that participants perceive blended learning to be effective in assessing most of the difficult English language skills, such as reading, writing, and listening skills. However, some skills, such as speaking and writing mechanics, received slightly lower mean scores, indicating that participants may perceive them to be somewhat more difficult to be assess. Additionally, the item indicating that English

language skills are hard to assess through blended learning received a neutral degree of agreement, suggesting that some participants may have reservations about the effectiveness of blended learning in assessing certain language skills.

Table 2

The Mean, SD, and Rank of Learners' Opinions on a Set of Statements About the Difficult English Language Skills for Learners to Be Assessed Through Blended Learning

Items	Mean	SD	Degree	Rank
English language skills are hard for learners to be assessed through blended learning.	3.23	1.18	neutral	14
Listening skills by recognizing grammatical groupings of statements and words.	3.93	0.88	agree	12
Listening skills by identifying utterances that work together to produce meaning.	4.09	0.83	agree	2
Listening skills by the availability of background knowledge to guess and confirm meaning and remember important information.	4.05	0.84	agree	4
Speaking skills fluency by the comfortable and confident way you are in speaking English.	3.96	0.94	agree	10
Speaking skills by word and sentence stress, intonation, and rhythm.	3.84	0.97	agree	13
Reading skills by gaining the meaning of unknown words, or expressions quickly by using analysis of the structure	4.03	0.84	agree	6
Reading skills by gaining the meaning of unknown words or expressions quickly by using phonics	3.97	0.84	agree	8
Reading skills by gaining the meaning of unknown words or expressions quickly by using contextual analysis.	4.01	0.75	agree	7
Reading skills silently at speeds appropriate to the content and purpose.	4.11	0.84	agree	1
Reading skills orally with fluency, suitable speed, expression, correct pronunciation, and attention to enunciation.	3.96	0.93	agree	9
Writing skills by writing mechanics: grammar, sentence structure, spelling, etc.	3.95	0.83	agree	11
Writing skills by communicating ideas clearly and concisely.	4.03	0.88	agree	5
Writing skills by organizing ideas effectively.	4.07	0.76	agree	3
Total	3.95	0.67	agree	

Question 3: The language assessment methods learners prefer through blended learning. Table 3 indicates agreement among participants regarding the language assessment methods learners prefer through blended learning. The mean score was 3.96 ± 0.67, indicating an overall level of agreement about that. Eight items were used to explore these methods, and all were expressed in agreement. So, the range of their mean scores was between 3.82 and 4.16 out of five.

Overall, the results suggest that participants perceive various assessment methods through blended learning to be effective in assessing language skills. The most highly ranked methods include online quizzes, game-type activities, and peer evaluation and review. These methods are likely to be perceived as effective because they provide immediate feedback, engage learners in an interactive and enjoyable way, and encourage collaboration and communication among learners. However, the item indicating open-ended/essay questions received a slightly lower mean score, suggesting that some participants may perceive these types of questions to be more challenging or time-consuming than other assessment methods. This finding highlights the importance of providing clear instructions and rubrics for open-ended/essay questions to help learners understand expectations and feel more confident in their responses.

Table 3

The Mean, SD, and Rank of Learners' Opinions on a Set of Statements About the Language Assessment Methods Learners Experience Through Blended Learning

Items	Mean	SD	Degree	Rank
Students' work is assessed during the lesson.	3.91	0.88	agree	6
Online quizzes such as multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blanks, and hotspots.	4.16	0.79	agree	1
Open-ended/essay questions by thinking, organizing, and composing their answers.	3.82	1.00	agree	8
Drag-and-drop activities: By incorporating both images and text in a drag-and-drop activity.	3.95	0.92	agree	5
Teacher feedback that is personalized throughout brief online interviews with students.	3.89	0.92	agree	7
Training learners for real-life conversations with customers, colleagues, and others, and dialogue simulations.	3.95	0.84	agree	4
Game-type activities like answering a certain number of questions within a period of time and awarding points based on the number of correct answers.	4.01	0.85	agree	2
Peer evaluation and review: by allowing students to review and edit each other's work.	4.01	0.85	agree	3
Total	3.96	0.67	agree	

Interviews Analysis

The interviews conducted with teachers provide answers to the research questions. The results show agreement on many aspects and show disagreements on others. However, the analysis of the interview according to research questions is as follows:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning on English language assessment from teachers' and learners' points of view? Regarding the first research question, teachers stated that blended learning has many advantages and some disadvantages generally in learning and particularly in assessment. Some teachers indicate that the advantages of blended learning include the ability for high-level students to benefit from the self-study aspect of blended learning, while low-level students can receive more assessment and feedback. Blended learning also allows teachers to focus more on individual student needs, particularly in writing. Additionally, other teachers stated that blended learning provides flexibility in attending classes and access to better materials, leading to better results. It is also more effective since technology is widely used and it benefits both students and teachers. Furthermore, one teacher said blended learning "improves trainees' autonomy", as it consumes less time and effort and because it introduces content in an attractive way by including different types of media. Finally, many teachers agreed that blended learning is easier to deal with, and students are more likely to enjoy it than traditional classes.

On the other hand, teachers shared their perspectives on some disadvantages of blended learning. Firstly, the self-study part of blended learning does not include assessment, and it is up to the student to allocate time and complete the materials. Additionally, outcomes of assessment in blended learning depend on the student's responsibility to learn which may lead to poor performance and outcomes. Secondly, teachers in blended learning spend less time with their trainees, and it can be challenging for trainers to identify trainees' strengths and weaknesses. Thirdly, the assessment processes and outcomes may differ in blended learning because students can copy their answers, affecting the assessment's validity. Fourthly, technology can be challenging rather than useful, and students and teachers who are not tech-savvy can face a significant barrier in terms of assessment or

outcomes. However, one teacher said: "To make the assessment process more effective through blended learning, improvements need to be made".

What skills of English language are the hardest to assess for a teacher? Teachers have indicated their points of view regarding the hardest skills to be assessed during blended learning. Some of them believe that speaking skills can be difficult to assess in a blended learning environment, as teachers may not be able to provide immediate feedback or correction during live sessions. Pre-recorded speaking tasks can be used, but they may not provide an accurate gauge of a student's ability to communicate effectively in real time.

Other teachers think that listening skills can be challenging, as it is difficult to monitor students' attention and comprehension in a virtual environment. Teachers may need to rely on multiple-choice or short-answer questions to assess listening comprehension, which may not provide a complete picture of a student's ability to understand spoken English.

Which language assessment methods do teachers suggest practicing through blended learning? Some teachers prefer online quizzes or tests for assessing students' comprehension and retention of the course materials, as it provides an efficient way to evaluate large numbers of students and gather data on their performance. One teacher suggests self-assessment which can be a preferred method for students who are reflective and enjoy taking an active role in their own learning. It can be a useful tool for promoting metacognition and helping students to identify areas for improvement. She added "Peer assessment enhance collaboration". It can promote a sense of community and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.

Other teachers suggest the use of video or audio recordings for assessing students' speaking skills, as it provides a more authentic and realistic assessment of their pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy. While written assignments, such as essays or reports, can be suitable for assessing students' writing skills, because it allows for detailed feedback on their grammar, vocabulary, and organization.

Discussion

The present study investigated the perceptions of both teachers and students at technical colleges in Saudi Arabia in the blended learning and its impact on assessment. The sample of teachers were interviewed while the sample of students were given a questionnaire. The research tools provide answers on the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning on the assessment, the hardest skill to assess, and the best assessment methods through blended learning. These results show the sample's perceptions and practices.

Both teachers and students have similar perspectives on blended learning. Students perceive advantages such as increased autonomy, a relaxed atmosphere, and clear learning goals, while acknowledging challenges such as the need for technical support and difficulties in adopting new technologies. Teachers, on the other hand, see the benefits of blended learning in providing individualized attention, flexible schedules, better materials, and improved student autonomy. This finding is in line with a study conducted by Zygadlo (2007), as mentioned in Sejdiu (2014) who indicates that the students who learn with blended learning were more motivated, and their autonomy was promoted because they used several strategies such as self-study, computer tools, and face-to-face instruction. However, they also recognize some challenges, including the lack of assessment in self-study, reduced interaction with trainees, differences in assessment processes, and technological barriers. Nonetheless, both agree that blended learning is more enjoyable than traditional classes and can lead to better results.

Students and teachers share close ideas regarding the hardest English language to be assessed. Both perceive blended learning as effective in assessing most English language skills, but some skills such as speaking and

writing mechanics received slightly lower scores, indicating they may be more challenging to assess. However, some participants of students had reservations about the effectiveness of blended learning in assessing certain language skills. On the other hand, teachers have shared their views on the hardest skills to assess in a blended learning environment. Speaking skills may be difficult to assess in real-time during live sessions, while pre-recorded speaking tasks may not accurately gauge a student's ability to communicate effectively. Listening skills can also be challenging to assess, as it is difficult to monitor student's attention and comprehension in a virtual environment. Teachers may need to rely on multiple-choice or short-answer questions, which may not provide a complete picture of a student's listening ability. Overall, students and teachers agree on the effectiveness of blended learning for most language skills, including the challenges of assessing certain skills in a virtual environment.

Regarding the effective assessment method, both of students and teachers suggest various methods through blended learning as vital. Students perceive online quizzes, game-type activities, and peer evaluation and review being the most highly ranked. These methods are favored for providing immediate feedback, engaging them in an interactive and enjoyable way, and promoting collaboration and communication. However, open-ended/essay questions received a slightly lower score, indicating that some students may perceive them as more challenging or time-consuming. Teachers, on the other hand, have different views regarding the preferred assessment methods. Some prefer online quizzes or tests for efficiency in evaluating large numbers of students, while others suggest self-assessment as a tool for promoting metacognition and peer assessment to enhance collaboration. Video or audio recordings are recommended for assessing speaking skills, while written assignments, such as essays or reports, are suitable for assessing writing skills. Overall, both teachers and students agree that blended learning provides effective assessment methods, but they differ in their preferred methods and perceptions of certain types of assessments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the perceptions of teachers and students regarding blended learning in English language assessment in technical colleges in Saudi Arabia. The study included both quantitative and qualitative research methods through interviews with six English language trainers and a questionnaire distributed to 70 students. The results showed that both teachers and students perceive blended learning as an effective method of education that promotes autonomy, flexible schedules, and improved student autonomy. However, they also recognize challenges, such as the need for technical support and difficulties in assessing certain language skills, particularly speaking, and writing mechanics. Both teachers and students agree that blended learning is more enjoyable than traditional classes and can lead to better results. Regarding assessment methods, students favor online quizzes, game-type activities, and peer evaluation and review, while teachers suggest online quizzes or tests, self-assessment, peer assessment, video or audio recordings, and written assignments.

The findings of this study provide insights into the perceptions and practices of language assessment from both teachers' and students' perspectives in blended learning environments. It is important to consider these perspectives to ensure that effective assessment methods are utilized in blended learning environments, which can lead to better language acquisition outcomes for students. Further research is needed to explore other aspects of blended learning in language education and its impact on assessment practices for male gender or other educational levels like high school students.

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