

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF BLENDED LEARNING ON KURDISH EFL LEARNERS' WRITING SKILL AT KURDISTAN UNIVERSITIES.

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ABSTRACT

The current paper aims to examine the effect of Blended Learning on learners' writing skills. Experts such as Jones and Sharma (2021) define Blended Learning as a method of education that enables the academic staff, including learners, to teach and learn through online platforms and traditional classes. The paper compares students' written performance in traditional and blended classes. Regarding the samples of the study, 181 second-year students were selected from Soran and Salahaddin Universities- in the academic year 2021-2022. For data collection, the study has used the quasi-experimental method in which two groups of study are included; the control group, who received the traditional method, and the experimental group who received the blended method. The findings of the study show that the students who received instructions through the blended method performed better than those who studied the traditional method. However, the traditional learning method was more effective in specific skills, such as recognition skills, than the blended learning method.

KEYWORDS: Blended Learning, Learners' Performance, Traditional Learning, Writing skill,

1. INTRODUCTION

Blended learning has rapidly spread in the education process in general and in teaching and learning a language. Applied linguistics' experts and researchers have focused on the importance and impacts of blended learning on language teaching and learning. Also, they have paid attention to measuring the effects of blended learning on language skills. Some studies claim the importance of blended learning in enhancing language skills, but a specific skill has not yet been a part of any study. This could be due to specific reasons. Among them are the difficulty in measuring the impact of the skills, selecting an inappropriate method or tool might be another reason, and the complexity of the blended learning process itself. Experts recommend that the learning environment, objectives, content, methodology, and assessment methods should be considered when designing blended learning courses.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Skrypnyk et al., 2015 state that technology has been used to improve the quality of

traditional classes and online learning. Three areas in that technology can be used for learning: are information technology, communication, interactive technology, and social software technologies. The mentioned types have been adopted in the learning process, and the first one is used for the personal use (computer-based), which supports access to information for learning purposes. Communication technologies can be used as a software platform on which users can share content; Learning Management System is an example. The last type, social technology, supports group activities and paves the way for helpful learning activities through bilateral methods of communication, such as arranging and exchanging information and building relationships.

In recent years, the growth of technology and the eLearning industry have led to the development of new methods in different areas of society. Blended learning has positively impacted education (Tandoh, Flis, & Blankson, 2014). As a term, it has been used in the business world first, where people in business corporate train into business. The main aim of using blended learning in business was to save cost and time. Then blended learning has been used in higher education and later in teaching

and learning because many blended learning features are applicable in the learning and teaching process (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008).

Despite the popularity of blended learning in business, higher education, and English Language Teaching (ELT), there are still various arguments about defining blended learning due to a lack of consensus. According to Maise (2006), all learning is blended. Bandos (2006) described it as a mixture of technology and face-to-face instructions in an appropriate way to optimize learning outcomes and save costs. Singh and Reed (2001), as cited in (Tomilnson and Whittaker, 2013), call blended learning a method that uses more than one medium to improve learning outcomes.

Blended learning has been used widely in the education process recently, but it has a long history. The first mode of blended learning in distance learning format went back to the 1840s when Sir Isaac Pitman used shorthand texts and sent them back to his students through the mail, and students sent them back to Pitman for assessing scoring. He found his own education company in 1837 and worked on developing distance education (Pappas, 2015).

In the 70th and 80th of the last century, private sectors started using video networks to train their workers; recorded videos aimed to save time and money. They recorded the videos, and trainers no longer had to be on-site during training. It was an exciting and motivating experience for trainers and trainees. At the same time, if trainees had questions, they could send emails to get answers (Pappas, 2015). Stanford University can be called the first academic establishment that used TV networks by using recorded videos, and instructors could record their lectures wherever they put them on the university platform. Also, learners could submit their assignments online (The virtual training team, 2019).

Pappas, (2015) claim that technological advances have led to growth in blended learning training and strategies. During 1980th and 90th, CD-ROMs became a popular medium of interactive learning in which students and instructors could record their tasks. During the mentioned time and for the first time, computer-based courses started to provide materials as a type of distance learning. Further, companies and academic institutions were looking for a way to follow their participants' progress. The first Learning Management System (LMS) was inset that did not have the same quality functionality

as today. Still, it improved the quality of distance learning, and organizations could track their learners' progress and enrollment performance during the course.

In the last two decades, the world has witnessed a rapid development in technology, computers have become available almost for everyone, at the same time, their features and qualities have improved, users can use them for different purposes and connecting to the internet has become feasible that gave a chance to everyone to be connected to the virtual world. The advance has a positive impact on the blended and eLearning industries. Instructors and students could use and enjoy a larger space, and to a great extent, they could leave CD-ROMs behind and upload their materials and assignments on specified locations (LMS) on the internet. Web-based learning has become popular quickly because of the availability and ease of using, downloading, and uploading materials (Skrypnyk et al., 2015).

Nowadays, blended learning is an inseparable part of education in most world countries. There are continuous advancements in blended learning strategies and methods for two main reasons. The first one is the rapid development of technology, and the latter is the number of private and public organizations interested in using eLearning industry facilities that have increased. Learners can present and attend seminars, webinars, and courses anywhere at any time. The mix of technology-based and traditional learning (face-to-face) has made the learning and teaching process engaging and exciting (Pappas, 2015).

In short, saving cost and time were two reasons behind using blended learning in business, but learning effectiveness could be added while the subject is teaching a foreign language. A number of reasons can be mentioned to support the use of blended learning in teaching foreign languages specifically; the first reason is the factor of motivation. Further research in this field provides documents and data that blended learning is motivating; it can be noticed that many learners are interested in using technological devices. The second reason is engagement which is a very effective way of improving the learning process because this method is more beneficial than paper-based assignments. The last reason is feedback, another helpful factor in the effectiveness of language learning; whenever learners receive appropriate feedback, it positively impacts their

learning performance (The virtual training team, 2019, Skrypnik et al., 2015.)

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Many years of research and investigation lead to the designing of many theories of learning which prove that individuals learn differently. According to Bersin, 2004, individuals can be divided into three categories according to their learning. The first way is visual learners, who occupy about 50 to 70 percent of learners' population. Visual learners learn best when they visualize pictures, diagrams, etc., and prefer to take notes while observing written information on graphs or whiteboards. The second category is the auditory way of learning, which covers approximately 20 to 40 percent of learners' population. This type of learners can learn best when they listen to seminars or lectures for example; they prefer to take notes later. The last category is kinesthetic way of learning. Learners of this category occupy the smallest population, which is about 5 to 20 percent of learners. This type of learners can learn by touching and doing; they can learn best when they imitate and try to do tasks.

According to researchers and experts such as Alsalhi, et al. (2021), and Turpin (2018), blended learning aims to make students experience modern classrooms and become active learners. Constructivism is a suitable theory to set the principles of blended learning because it provides students with different ways of learning and materials to solve problems and tasks.

During past decades much research investigated the importance of blended learning in education and a growing interest of educators to utilize blended learning in learning and teaching processes during the past few decades. In their work, Bonk and Graham (2006) and another study Arabasz and Baker, 2003, as cited in (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008), referred to the high interest of higher education institutions to employ blended learning which makes researchers expect extensive use of blended learning methods in near future.

3.1. Blended Learning

In recent years many educators have tried to define blended learning and there are many definitions that one may come across during searching for blended learning, one of the definitions states;

“Blended learning is the most logical and natural evolution of our learning agenda. It suggests an elegant solution to the challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of individuals. It represents an opportunity to integrate the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning. It can be supported and enhanced by using the wisdom and one-to-one contact of personal coaches.” (Thorne, 2003:16)

3.2. Models of Blended Learning:

Regarding the models of blended learning, there are different classifications and elaborations; in his research, Clayton Christensen claims that most blended courses are divided into four models, which are;

1- Rotation model: in this blended learning model, students rotate between online and face-to-face sessions. There could be a fixed schedule, or the teacher may decide how they will meet. The sessions are probably online, whole-group work, project discussion, small-group work, or in-class assignments. Generally, students know that they should follow teachers' instructions to rotate. The rotation model is categorized into four sub-models which are;

a. Station Rotation – in this model, the students experience all the stations inside the classroom, including online activities, face-to-face interaction, or group projects.

b. Lab Rotation – Students use computer labs for online sessions in this model.

c. Flipped Classroom – this type of learning encourages active learning. In this model, students receive information about the topics they are going to study before joining the classroom through online or electronic platforms. The aim is to maximize the use of class time and face-to-face sessions for practicing the activities and discussing their idea about the received information.

d. Individual Rotation – in this model, each student can receive an individual schedule from the instructors and does not need to rotate to existing modalities, which means learning is individualized (Christensen Institute, 2015).

2- Flex Model – This learning model pays great attention to online learning as the backbone and supporter of learning. The teachers use the classroom to guide and tutor students, and students will complete and submit their work and assignments online. This type of blended model encourages individualized learning where

they can improve their specific needs by receiving teacher assistance (Thompson, 2016).

3- A La Carte Model – A course that students receive could be online courses that students can take at school or even after school. Teachers can record the lectures and share them with students. Also, activities can be off-site and then submitted.

4- Enriched Virtual Model – this model provides the students with lectures in face-to-face learning sessions and then completes their program online at home. This model is different from the Flipped Classroom because students meet their instructors every day in person. Further, this model is not fully online because face-to-face learning sessions are not optional but required (Christensen Institute, 2015).

4. TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND BLENDED LEARNING:

Language learning and teaching have gone a long way, from traditional methods to reform movements and modern syllabi and teaching methods, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Nowadays, language teaching and learning aim to engage learners actively to maximize students' participation in the learning process to use the language effectively and enhance students' communicative and linguistic competencies. Meanwhile, technological development, technology integration, teaching, and process lead to new challenges and dimensions (Freeman and Anderson, 2015).

As mentioned, constructivism plays a vital role in the blended learning method. Garrison and Vaughn (2008) state that constructivism encourages learners to make sense of their experience which requires thinking critically and interaction. Therefore, blended learning should provide a framework that combines thought and action to enable the learners to earn more learning opportunities, mainly through interaction with others and reflecting on experiences.

Students can enhance their activities using various online applications and platforms in a blended learning system. Also, they can use online resources to enrich and support their works which help them save time and overcome geographical obstacles. Thus, it can be noticed that integrating technology with learning through its different techniques and methods in language activities can assist and support students' autonomous learning, which is one of the main

aims of language teaching (Freeman and Anderson, 2015).

5. WRITING SKILL AND BLENDED LEARNING

Writing is an important way of communication; writers use visual symbols representing sounds to deliver their messages. And because writing skill includes steps, rules, and process, it is a productive skill. Moreover, many educational systems consider writing skills an essential and last station of formal education (Gautam, 2019).

Ryabkova (2020) states that blended learning encourages learners' participation, leading to better performance in writing classes because instructors give students extra online assignments through writing and preparing e-portfolios and social applications to practice writing skills. Moreover, it motivates students to participate in online activities with their instructors and peers through online platforms such as Moodle and Edmodo.

Internet is a functional teaching method for English writing skills because it helps shy students communicate with their teachers and peers. Also, providing direct feedback through online interaction is another functionality of technology to be used in teaching writing skills (Al-Al-Haq and Al-Sobh, 2010).

6. PREVIOUS STUDIES

In their research entitled "Learning from home during a pandemic: A blended learning for reading to write activity in EFL setting," Setyowati et al. (2021) focused on the essay writing process. The study aimed to explain how foreign language students can be prepared to write an essay through reading activities in blended learning. Also, it aimed to discover students' feelings toward blended education. The study participants were fourth-semester students of the English Education Study Program. The research utilized a qualitative approach that focused on a case study. The tools used to collect the data were students' interviews, documentation of personal chats and conversations, students' essays, lecturer's teaching reports, and a list of papers published on the YouTube platform. Telegram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Google meet, Grammarly, and plagiarism checker was used as technological applications. The results showed that, despite the

students' challenges at the beginning of the semester regarding the learning system and using technological applications, the data revealed that the course was beneficial and that students learned a lot from it. Also, the results demonstrated that the students have positive feelings toward blended learning.

In her research entitled; "The Effect of Blended Learning Model towards Students' Writing Ability", Wahyuni (2018) stated that the aim was to determine to what extent blended learning impacts students' writing performance. She put the participants into two groups: the experimental, who received the treatment, and the control group, who received the traditional instruction. The former group used the Telegram application as a technological tool. The researcher used a pretest and post-test to collect the data. The findings of the study showed that the experimental group, who received the instruction in a blended way, performed better than the control group, who studied in the traditional method.

Guangying and Jiahao (2018) conducted an "Experimental Study to Develop Writing skills through Blended Learning in the Times of Internet+." The study concentrated on developing writing skills as productive skills via blended learning. The study was an empirical one in which the researcher followed students' progress in writing skills for half a year. Tools that researchers used to collect data were interviews, learning contracts, and teachers' observations. The findings referred to the advantages of BL in developing writing skills that encourage learners' cooperation. They could also learn different ways of learning from each other that enrich their skill, leading to a safe and pleasurable environment to practice writing.

Another research entitled; "Enhancing EFL Learners' Writing Capability in a Blended Learning Environment: The Effects of Learning Styles" by Mofrad (2017) indicates that the aim was to investigate to what extent, in blended learning, writing practice would be productive. The research put the participants into four groups: Extroverted-blended, introverted-blended, Extroverted-traditional, and Introverted-traditional. The blended groups practiced writing in a blended environment by using various technological devices and platforms. In contrast, the traditional groups traditionally practiced writing without using technological tools. The results revealed that students' written performance was better in a

blended environment, and within blended groups, extroverted performed better compared to introverted.

The current paper is different from other papers investigating the impact of blended learning on students' written performance in two universities and examining additional writing skill features to categorize the students' performance in various writing areas.

7. Methodology and Research Design:

The current section deals with the methods and procedures that are used in conducting the study. First, it presents the research design, methods, study sample, tools, and procedures. Finally, the section ends with the validation and reliability of the tools used and ethical considerations.

7.1. Methods

The study uses a mixed approach, qualitative and quantitative; using a mixed method gives the researchers a clearer picture of the problems and complexities of the research (Creswell and Clark, 2007) as cited in (Molina-Azorin, 2016). The research design is quasi-experimental to achieve the aims.

There are two groups of students in the experimental design, the experimental group and the control group. The first group will experience a blended learning class (experimental group), and the latter will be exposed to the traditional way of teaching classes (control group). The module selected is "Communication", a part of the English Department curriculum at Soran and Salahaddin Universities studied in the second stage due to the flexibility of the syllabus and the variety of writing activities it includes.

7.2. The Sample of the Study

The population of the study was second-year students who were studying the "Communication" module as a part of their program, at both Soran and Salahaddin universities, college of Education and Arts, in the academic year 2021-2022. Among those, (181) students were selected, and a pretest was used to determine students' levels before receiving the instructions. By the end of the course, their performance was assessed again. Based on the collected results, students' written performance was compared with their results collected at the beginning of the course (pretest). Then the results of the experimental and the control groups were compared.

7.3. Validation

Validity refers to measuring what is expected to be measured. Validity is an integral part of any research method because validity increases the quality of the study; invalid works mean works that are worthless (Cohen et al. 2007). In this study, a committee of experts was consulted to guarantee the validity of the tools and make necessary amendments and changes.

7.4. Reliability:

Reliability means the consistency of the measures. For example, if the identical item has been asked repeatedly, the answer should be the same, then it can be said that reliability is achieved. Reliability in research can show to what extent the measurements are biased (Pandey and Pandey, 2015).

To achieve the reliability of the tests, researchers used Cronbach's Alpha as a statistical tool. According to the standards of the tool, if the obtained value is more significant than 0.7, the test is reliable (Taber, 2017). The results of Cronbach's Alpha for the control group are 0.773 and 0.769 for the experimental group. These results reveal that the tests are reliable.

7.5. Ethical Considerations:

At the outset, the vital point is to refer to the ethical consideration of the researcher. A high level of attention to ethical consideration is necessary since it may help the researchers to ensure scientific integrity, transparency, confidence, and belief in the results and conclusions regarding the topic of the study (Cohen et al. 2007). To abide by and follow ethical considerations, the researcher informed the participants of the study, and the research procedure in detail, and before starting the research work, consent forms were given to the participants

8. Data Collection Tool:

Data collection tools refer to the methods and instruments used to collect data and information (Pandey and Pandey, 2015). The selection of the tools for the research is a vital part of the research because researchers select the tools based on the purposes and aims of the study.

The current study uses the test to collect its data, including a pretest and post-test.

Test:

A test is a common and important tool in conducting data collection procedures. There are

different types of tests based on the aims of the study. Some researchers use standardized tests that are ready and available. Some other researchers modify an existing test to match the study objectives (Wewer, 2020).

This study used a test, which included a pretest and post-test, as an essential tool to assess students' level at the beginning of the course and students' achievements at the end of the course; then, the results of both tests were compared to discover the impact of blended learning on both groups. A well-designed test can help the researcher to obtain accurate and actual data to be analyzed for the study (Fluchers and Davidson, 2007).

The written test consisted of four questions; the first question was to assess their recognition skills by asking to identify the structure of an academic paragraph, the next question was about assessing students' performance in using punctuation marks, the third question aimed to examine students use of transitional expressions, and the last question targeted students' production skills by asking them to write a meaningful paragraph about a topic

8.1. Pilot:

Pilot studies are the micro application of the tools before the macro application. The purpose of pilot studies is to check the tools' comprehensiveness, clarity, practicality, and management before using them on a large scale (Leavy 2017).

The current paper took (50) students as pilot samples to check the clarity and management of the test before using it, then required modification applied as preparation to be used for the pretest.

9. Data analysis:

This section presents the analysis of the test data. For statistical analyses, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyze the data. Regarding the control group, two independent samples t-tests were used to compare students' performance before and after receiving the instruction. Also, two other independent samples t-tests were used to measure the students' performance in the experimental group before and after receiving the treatment.

Table (1): Statistical descriptive for Question one (recognition skills)

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Error	Std. deviation
Pretest	Blended	95	6.47	.269	2.628
	Traditional	86	4.87	.304	2.819
Post-test	Blended	91	6.89	.247	2.359
	Traditional	86	6.11	.260	2.417

The first table shows the results of the first question about recognition skills. The findings reveal that the mean or average of students' performance before receiving the instruction is 6.47 and the post-test results of 6.89 show that students' performance has improved in blended

learning. On the other hand, an improvement can be noticed in traditional learning and shows a significant improvement comparing blended learning; students' performance before receiving the instruction is 4.87, and after receiving the instruction is 6.11.

Table (2): Statistical descriptive for Question two (Punctuation and Capitalization skills)

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Error	Std. deviation
Pretest	Blended	95	2.97	.127	1.246
	Traditional	86	2.96	.116	1.078
Post-test	Blended	91	3.85	.195	1.865
	Traditional	86	3.30	.142	1.320

Regarding the second table, which examines students' punctuation and capitalization skills, the results of both groups show students' performance improved. However, the experimental group which received the treatment moved forward more than the control group. The experimental group's mean is 2.97 on the pretest

and 3.85 on the post-test. Meanwhile, the mean in the control group before receiving the treatment was almost the same as the experimental group, which was 2.96, and their performance in the post-test was 3.30, which shows progress in students' performance.

Table (3): Statistical descriptive for Question Three (Transition words/expressions skill)

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Error	Std. deviation
Pretest	Blended	95	4.77	.251	2.454
	Traditional	86	4.08	.228	2.115
Post-test	Blended	91	4.92	.339	3.242
	Traditional	86	4.39	.242	2.250

The above table reveals the results of the third question about assessing students' ability to use transition words/expressions. The results of both groups show that students' have progressed in using the transitional expression, but the students' progress in the control group is more compared to the experimental group. The mean

of students' performance before receiving the treatment is 4.77, and after receiving the instruction is 4.92. Moreover, students' performance in the control group in the pretest evaluation was 4.08, but in the post-test, their performance significantly increased and reached 4.39.

Table (4): Statistical descriptive for Question three (Production skill)

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Error	Std. deviation
Pretest	Blended	95	8.95	.236	2.302
	Traditional	86	8.84	.258	2.393
Post-test	Blended	91	12.09	.380	3.627
	Traditional	86	10.00	.250	2.322

The last question is about students' performance in production. The results in table four reveal that blended treatment positively affects students' performance, while their performance in the pretest is 8.95. Still, in the

post-test, they showed adequate progress and became 12.09. On the other hand, the students' performance in the control group is 8.84 on the pretest and 10.00 on the post-test, respectively.

Table (5): Statistical descriptive for students' overall performance

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Error	Std. deviation
Pretest	Blended	95	23.18	.628	6.124
	Traditional	86	20.77	.652	6.050
Post-test	Blended	91	27.69	.713	6.804
	Traditional	86	23.82	.567	5.261

Descriptive analysis of the pretest shows that students' written performance in both blended and traditional methods, the mean or average for the experimental group is 23.18 and for the control group is 20.77. The findings after receiving the treatment show that both groups show improvement in their written performance; it is 27.69 for the experimental group, which shows progress in students' written performance, and for the control group, it is 23.82, which again indicates improvement. On the other hand, the experimental group who received the treatment and studied in a blended way

performed better than the control group who studied traditionally (See table 5).

10. DISCUSSION

The results of the paper show that students' performance differs from skill to skill in the experimental and control groups. For instance, the control group's recognition the structure of a paragraph and using transitional expression that connect ideas in sentences increased more than the experimental group. The reason could be individual differences, or another reason could be teachers' failure to deliver the instruction.

Further, the other reason could be the effectiveness of teaching those skills traditionally, not the blended method.

On the other hand, the experimental group's performance in punctuation and production developed more than the control group. One of the aims of using technology in classes is self-study; it could be one of the reasons behind the such improvement. Moreover, the blended learning method encourages creativity, which could be a logical reason for students' progress in production skills when required to write about a topic. Then they can use their imagination and write about a specific topic.

As mentioned, the overall students' performance results reveal that the students who studied in a blended way, their written performance developed more compared to those who studied in the traditional method. One reason could be that blended learning is more encouraging and motivates the students to participate. Also, in blended learning, students can experience both online material and sessions and face-to-face sessions. According to Bandos (2006), the combination of technology and face-to-face teaching and learning provides more learning opportunities, which will impact increasing students' learning.

While receiving the treatment, students received various assignments and homework that they could practice online and outside the classroom, showing that learning was not only restricted to the class. Then they could present their work inside the classroom, which means the blended learning way supports students in developing and showing their abilities. Also, students enjoy practicing the authentic materials sent to their Learning Management System (LMS) and submitting their work on LMS. Moreover, LAM allowed teachers to communicate with students continuously and upload required and valuable materials for them during the course.

The finding of the current paper is supported by Tomilson and Whittaker (2013), that claims when there are more ways of learning, students' learning will be increased. Also, the findings match the findings of Setyowati et al. (2021) and Wahyuni (2018), which claimed that the students' written performance in the experimental group developed more and outperformed them compared the control group.

11. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper investigated the impact of blended learning on Kurdish EFL learners' writing performance. The results revealed that learners who received blended instruction during the course outperformed those who received traditional instruction in their writing performance. It shows the benefits and opportunities blended classes can provide students to maximize their learning. Also, the results revealed that one reason behind outperforming the blended group is that providing more opportunities leads them to engage more than the traditional learning method. Based on the results of the study, it can be recommended that combining blends into the learning process will probably increase students' learning opportunities in writing skills, which means blended learning will positively impact their written performance.

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