STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO LEARN ENGLISH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate Pakistani university students' perceptions of the advantages and challenges they experienced while learning English in a blended learning environment. This qualitative research was conducted at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus. Data was collected from 20 students, including 6 males and 14 females, using a purposive (non-random) sampling technique. To gain in-depth insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted via phone calls. The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word, and thematic patterns were visualized through various tools such as word tag clouds, tree maps, and cluster maps, based on frequency and recurrence of key themes. The findings indicate that while most students held positive attitudes toward the blended learning system, they also encountered several barriers, including internet connectivity issues, weak signals, power outages, and lack of technical training. The study recommends that the government work toward improving internet infrastructure and resolving electricity problems, while universities should offer training sessions and workshops to enhance students' and teachers' proficiency in using educational technologies.

Key words: Perception, blended learning, online learning, ESL learners, barriers.

Introduction:

The year 2020 has brought great changes in every field of life due to COVID-19. Due to the pandemic, educational system changed all over the world. Most of the institutes adopted blended learning as the medium of instruction. Using Google meet or other distance learning platforms changed the possible types of interaction, concentration, and levels of motivation. The advancement in technology introduced a new teaching approach in the education system. Blended learning is also the need of today's world. Blended learning framework joins up close and personal guidance with technology intervened guidance. The current study shows the effectiveness of a blended learning environment and barriers that students faced in this environment. A blended learning environment has a great impact on students learning negatively (Irum, Bhatti, Abbasi, & Dilshad, 2020) or positively. Students showed positive perception towards blended learning. Blended Learning is effective like the traditional learning but at the same time students mentioned some problems of this program like the waste of time and social isolation (Ja'ashan, 2015).

A lot of exploration on blended learning illustrates the fact that its use is expanding in education. A review uncovered that the large number of the employees accept that throughout the following five years a large number of the understudies will be taking something like one online course (Arif, 2017). Students faced many problems during learning in a blended learning environment 1 such as shortage of appropriate time, no capacities and help to apply the correct way, and absence of training. (Irum, Bhatti, Abbasi, & Dilshad, 2020). In the use of blended

learning, some educational institutes are still at the level of awareness and there are required lots of efforts for the effective use of blended learning (Soomro, Bhatti, & Ali, 2018). In the situation of the pandemic in Pakistan, most of the institutes provide hybrid courses that need to take one class physically on campus all through the week and take the remaining classes from home over the internet. The aim of this study is to analyze the impact of blended learning on ESL students specifically those students who are enrolled in the institutes which use blended learning. For the last 10-15 years, there has been a fast increase in computer and technology use. Now in this era of technology, the cellphone has all of the functions of a computer. Now, because of the fast increase in the use of the internet and computer, it is tough to assume that there is any college or university without a computer lab for offering centers to their college with learning management system (LMS) like whiteboards and Moodle. The growing use of computer systems in institutes reduces teacher-centeredness and will increase the interaction in the classroom (Ngoc, 2017).

In the Pakistani context, different barriers can be observed related to the use of technology. To use the Blended Learning program, faculty required to deal with logistics and organizational 3 issues. In this program, students demand that faculty members be available 24/7 (Rizvi, Gulzar, Nicholas, & Nkoroi, 2017). The blended learning program has a few issues like the absence of university support in taking on blended adaptive learning officially, absence of trend setting innovation and framework rules of the university, the legitimacy of learning sources and information, and using time productively (Hussain, Shahzad & Ali, 2019). Students are facing problems in Blended Learning environment e.g. lack of appropriate time, no abilities and help to utilize the appropriate way, absence of training, and inaccessibility of Learning Management Software (LMS) to utilize innovative things for learning goals (Irum S, Bhatti T, Abbasi WA, Dilshad M. 2020).Whereas all these factors have been studied so far, the students' perception through the pure qualitative technique has not been investigated until know. An extensive search of literature provides only limited information on blended learning adoption in the Pakistani context.

1.1. Research Objectives:
Followings are the aims and objectives of the study:
1. To know the students satisfaction regarding blending learning.
2. To illustrate the problems being faced by the Pakistani university students to learn English in the Blended learning environment.

1.2. Rationale of the Study
Most of the institutes in Pakistan switched towards blended learning in 2020 due to the pandemic and are still practicing it. These institutes provide hybrid courses that need to take one class physically on campus all through the week and take the remaining classes online from home. In the Pakistani context, some researchers have examined the emergence of blended learning in educational institutes. It is found that teachers saw that instructing through mixed mode was tedious, needs more endeavors. Approval of blended learning was a fundamental barrier in the implementation of blended learning. Instructors' prerequisite staff improvement training in regards to hybrid learning framework and considered the absence of funding was one of the challenges for buying the equipment and programming required for blended learning (Saira Soomro, 2018). Pakistan is struggling hard, like many other developing countries, to adopt and use the proper technology in the field of teaching. Hybrid Learning is being presented almost in every educational institute in Pakistan after the COVID-19, yet, students and instructors are

facing numerous hindrances in the suitable utilization of Blended Learning. 5 Different barriers related to the use of technology faced by students (Rizvi, Gulzar, Nicholas, and Nkoroi, 2017). There is a need to remove the barriers which are faced by the students due to the use of blended learning. Researcher feels the need to get the students' perception to identify these barriers and also there is a need to get their perception of how it can be solved and also the advantages of adopting this system.

1.43 Research Questions

To accomplish the planned targets, the current study examines the following research questions:

1. What are the advantages of learning English in a blended learning environment?
2. What kind of problems Pakistani university students are facing to learn English in a blended learning environment?

Literature Review:

The start of the term blended learning is typically followed back to a 1999 official statement by EPIC learning in Atlanta (Friesen, 2012), which calls attention to that, from the beginning, the term has been upset by vulnerability, and finishes up: ―Blended learning, in other words, is almost any combination of technologies, pedagogies and even job tasks. It includes some of the oldest mechanical media (e.g., film) and theories of learning (e.g. Behaviorism), as well as the newest‖ (Friesen, 2012, p.2). In 2006, Graham complained about the uncertainty of the term in that: ―These positions suffer from the problem that they define blended learning, so broadly that they encompass virtually all learning systems. One would be hard-pressed to find any learning system (or combination of methods) that did not involve multiple instructional methods and multiple delivery media‖ (Graham, 2006, p.4). After an extensive investigation of the various meanings of the term, Friesen states that ―Blended learning' indicates the range of opportunities offered by consolidating internet and 10 digital media with practiced classroom forms that require the physical co-appearance of teacher and students‖ (Friesen, 2012, p.1). In Pakistan, blended learning is at the initial level. Most people know about this term after the COVID-19. The ascent of globalization has put education in a noticeable position both in public and worldwide settings. Universities are currently considered as exploration stages and are assuming a significant part in their public turn of events.

Universities have additionally become fundamental supporters of monetary development through the advancement in the area of science and technology and through the use of present-day innovation. Innovation has opened wide vistas of correspondence and the advanced world. Advanced education foundations are currently in a really provoking situation to acknowledge these progressive changes, so they outfit the understudies with the new difficulties of the computerized world. The emergence of the Blended Learning System has brought a perspective change in education and has left extensive effects on higher education too. In the developed nations the hybrid learning transformation in advanced education is speedier than in contrast with developing nations. This advantages the developed nations in delivering prepared and rich human assets from institutes of educations. In Pakistan, the implementation of hybrid learning in the higher education foundation is an arising trend and confronting obstruction in the complete execution in the universities (Soomro, 2018).

After rise of COVID-19, we saw a fast change in the educational framework all over the world. These evolutions are the brief look at educational reshaping in future for the better or the more awful (A.I. Javed, 2020). The utilization of the hybrid learning mode of teaching in

education has quickly expanded in the 21st century. Tools and procedures that at first were utilized in 11 experimental distance instruction courses are today important for standard schooling with blended learning as a continuum between physical and internet-based courses (Peter Mozelius, 2017). There is no unity in the blended learning definition. Blended learning is a combination of physical learning and web based learning. Blended learning, otherwise called cross breed learning, joins the best qualities of conventional training with the strength of web based learning to convey customized, altered instruction across a gathering of students. Understudies in formal blended learning instructive projects learn online piece of the time, yet enjoy the benefit of disconnected guidance and direction to enhance their learning and to best suit their own necessities.
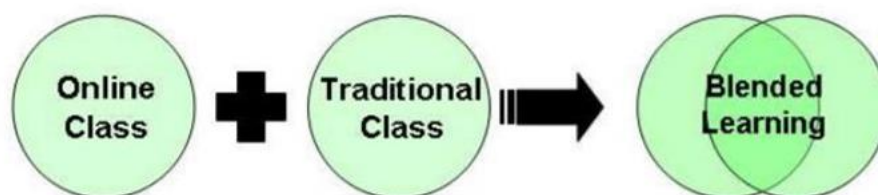

Figure 1.1
Blended Learning Environment

Graham (2006), Garrison and Kanuka (2004) have been referred to 2149 and multiple times individually. As per Graham (2006) "blended learning framework consolidates face to face guidance with personal computer mediated guidance‖ (p. 5). Post and Kanuka (2004) portray blended learning as "the insightful joining of homeroom face to face learning encounters with 12 online learning encounters" (p. 96). By the definitions, we can conclude that blended learning is a combination of online and traditional learning. There are some differences between these two definitions. The first difference is that Graham uses the word computer-mediated on the other hand the second definition uses the term online. However, nowadays computers are rarely used offline. Another difference that needs concentration is that in the first definition the word instruction is used while the second definition uses the word learning experience.

Blended learning is not beneficial without the English language because nowadays English is considered the language of technology and science. Barriers are faced by the learners without proper English language skills because English is not a native language of ESL learners (Mohamed Sayed, 2014). Many institutes are confused about the adoption of the blended learning. There is need of professionals and trainers for the successful implementation of the blended learning (Curtis J. Bonk, 2008).

Methodology

This research is qualitative. In every research, data is collected through two main sources: primary source and secondary source. In this research, data was collected through the primary sources i.e. by conducting semi-structured interviews. All the data was collected by the

researcher herself. The research data was collected from the department of Humanities and Social Sciences students of COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus.

Research Design:

This research follows the qualitative research design. The aim of using this method is to explore students' perceptions and opinions in depth. Guiding interview questions were designed based on research questions and to ensure that these guiding questions thoroughly addressed the research questions. Qualitative research is a probing and in-depth investigation with open-ended questions and is an optimal protocol for opinions and reasons for using blended learning.

The researcher led a pilot test with 4 students, who experience the blended learning environment, to get input on the interview protocol or research configuration overall. These students had the abundance of involvement with blended learning. The reason for leading the pilot test was to guarantee whether the research questions were precisely tended to by the interview questions. The feedback from the pilot test participants was supposed of and acclimations to the interview question were made likewise.

On account of opting out the participants, the researcher would erase the information of that member and send the affirmation mail to that member. All the information related to this research was held in a protected place for the time period of the research. All the transcript information and audios were put away in a laptop with a profoundly defensive secret password and the laptop was in the ownership of the researcher all the time. All the accounts and record information will be destroyed after grant of the degree to the researcher.

In this research, data was collected from 20 students of COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus. The participants of the research study were the English studying in the Humanities and social sciences department of COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore campus. The participants of the study were from both genders (boys and girls) with ages between 18 to 22 years. The sample was not having equal ratio of both genders (males=6, females=14). They had different native languages such as Pashto, Siraiki, Urdu, Punjabi, Shina etc.

Data was collected through a non-random sampling technique. For this purpose, a purposive sampling technique was used. Because the data have been collected from those learners who experienced the study in a blended learning environment and were agreed to be a part of the study and in the researcher's opinion they had the required information, so for a qualitative study, the sample was nonrandom judgmental or purposive. To get information on the students' perception, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Furthermore, WhatsApp and phone call interviews were the only way through which the researcher could connect with the participants

Before starting to gather information, the researcher informed the members about the points regarding the research study and mentioned them to allocate a couple of moments to do this study. The researcher obtained the consent of the respondents. They were informed about the aims of the research study in the following ways:

- The researcher told them the research purpose.
- Their consent was acquired using an informed consent form.

The researcher designed a semi-structured interview to get the data in-depth about learning English in a Blended learning environment.

According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), ―In qualitative research, the interview is more commonly used than questionnaires because it permits open-ended exploration of topics and elicits responses that are couched in the unique words of the respondents‖ (p.229).

The accompanying eight open-ended interview items were utilized for this reason:

Q: 1- Have you any idea about blended learning?

Q: 2- Does this program fulfill your subject objectives?

Q: 3- What kind of technology/applications you are using for this purpose? (Like zoom, Google meets, etc.)

Q: 4- How much is this program effective?

Q: 5- Are you facing any kind of barrier? If yes what kind of barrier are you facing?

Q: 6- What is your opinion about blended learning?

Q: 7- What sort of medium do you think suits you the most: blended learning or physical learning?

Q: 8- What are your recommendations to improve the implementation of blended learning?

DATA ANALYSIS

Researcher transcribed the interviews in Microsoft office Word files. A word tag cloud was developed that exhibit roots of different themes in different sizes according to frequency of their occurrence and repetition. The results were analyzed through the different analysis techniques e.g. word tag cloud, tree map and cluster map.

Figure 4.1

WORD TAG CLOUD REGARDING OVERALL RESPOSES

Word Tag Cloud The word tag cloud presents the overall responses of the students regarding the different questions that are considered in the interviews. The different responses coded during the data analysis. The above figure indicated that mostly students used the learning, blended, English, use, interview, physical, yes, zoom, protocol, like, questions, recommendations, documentations, barriers, class, lectures, quality, quantity, mediums, instructions, learn, laptop, classroom, program, Electronic learning, computer, provide, face, environment, technology, purposes, effectives, meet, aspects, tools, types, kinds, teacher, effective learning etc. The other figures toward overall word tag cloud below

Figure 4.2
TREE MAP- AMOUNT OF CODING REFERENCES

4.1. Barriers Faced by the Students:

Barriers‖ used as one of the most important theme in this following study. Students mentioned some barriers that they faced in the hybrid mode of learning that are:

- Internet issue
- Signal problem
- Electricity issue
- Kills creativity
- Lack of training
- Lack of proper teacher student interactions

As one of the students mentioned that ―Yes I am facing Internet issues as well as not the availability of right kind of technology. Because we are in online mode and we did not feel confident in online mode. In physical classes, we interacted with teachers but online we are bound to technology that creates difficulty. In a pandemic, teachers must cooperate with students because we belong to different regions and facing Internet issues. It is important that university must give certain kinds of favors to the students in this difficult time‖ furthermore students said that ―Most commonly the proper teacher-student interactions, confidence, etc. just new to learning this taking me in confidence that I can do it‖ however from the other department students said that ―Yes, we do face many barriers in online learning like WIFI signals, timing issues, Sometimes due to bad weather light went down or internet signals are gone that's why we face these barriers. Some barriers are those in which we have to come up with but for the internet, we cannot‖ the other students from the department of media studies argue that ―Sometimes it is the issue of network and also electricity. And I had faced this many times along with internet issues due to any reason. Due to the internet and electricity there comes distortion and the result is that I have to face difficulty in comprehending the lecture. We can overcome it by using strong and high-quality internet. Moreover, it is a phenomenal issue and can be resolved when there the end of blended learning‖. Using technology kills creativity as one student argue that ―Students don't think or try to find stuff on their own about any topic rather

they just go online and get it. Though it makes things easy, it also kills the creativity of one's mind. You start getting used to copying stuff online without even trying to research about it.

4.2. Effectiveness of Blended Learning:

Knowing about the effectiveness of blended learning is also one of the main objectives of this study. Therefore —advantages of blended learningǁ is one of the important themes of the study. The researcher found following advantages through analysis:

- Enhance the learning ability
- More chances to learn through the technology
- Provide the chance to cope with international students
- Helping in solving the knowledge explosion problem

Different students argue that —This is very much effective because it gives us the chance to cope with international students and provide exposure to understand its importance. Yes, it's very important to use technology in learning because it provides us different options to search and find out the solutions. Hence technology gives us broad exposure in making great understanding of the English languageǁ the other students argue that —Using technology is effective in learning. It provides you with more information about a topic and you can learn things better with different references and videos. Furthermore, the student said that —This is very much effective because it gives us the chance to cope with international students and provide exposure to understand its importance. Yes, it's very important to use technology in learning because it provides us different options to search and find out the solutions. Hence technology gives us broad exposure in making great understanding of the English languageǁ the students of social sciences department argue that —Blended learning is one of the most modern methods of learning to help in solving the knowledge explosion problem, the growing demand for education and the problem of overcrowded lectures if used in distance learning, expanding the acceptance opportunities in education being able to train educate and rehabilitate.

Conclusion

The overall understanding that is exuded from this study is that in most cases, the students are satisfied with the Blended Learning environment as this program fulfills all their English subject objectives and it allows them to learn more through different modes and using advanced technologies. But, on the other hand, they also mentioned some barriers that they faced in this environment. The interview items give answers to all the research questions. These interview items were designed keeping in mind the research questions.

Research Question 1:

What are the advantages of learning English in a blended learning environment?

This study shows that students are in this environment after COVID-19 and it is a new term for many students.

Interview item 1: Have you any idea about blended learning? All the participants said that they had an idea because they were in this environment for 1.5 years after the COVID-19.

Most of the students said that it was a widely used method.

Interview item 2: Does this program fulfill your English subject objectives? All the students agree that this system fulfills all the subject objectives. Most students are satisfied with this environment. Students said that teachers used different technologies to improve their English.

Interview item 3: What kind of technology/applications you are using for this purpose? (Like zoom, Google meets, etc.) Students mentioned different technology tools that they used during their blended learning environment. They used MS Word for their assignments and

Google meet and zoom for their online classes. Most of the students used cell phones for the online class and also laptops, but no one used the tab for this purpose.

Interview item 4: How much is this program effective? Most students are of the opinion that this program is very much effective. It gives the chance to cope with international students and provides exposure to understand its importance. The other advantage that students have mentioned of this program is that it provides them the opportunity to search for different things and find out the solutions. Another advantage mentioned was of Blended Learning environment that the technology gave a broad exposure in making great understanding of the English language.

Research question 2: What kind of problems Pakistani University students are facing to learning English in a blended learning environment?

Although most students were satisfied with this program and said this program was more effective than the online method or physical method. But they also mentioned some barriers that they faced during this environment of Blended Learning and they agreed that if these barriers could be overcome, then Blended Learning would be the most effective method. When the researcher asked about the barriers faced by the students, they answered this research question in the following ways:

Interview item 5: Are you facing any kind of barrier? If yes, what kind of barrier are you facing? Most students were facing signal problems and load shedding problems. Some students who belong to the backward areas face the signal issue more. Some say they faced WIFI signals issue and timing issues. Sometimes, bad weather results in electricity breakdown and/or absence of internet signals.

Interview item 6: What is your opinion about blended learning? Most of the students said that this program was effective in the situation of a pandemic but this program had been a little bit challenging. Some students said that they used video calls for online classes but that did not give them the feel of having clarity in their concepts about the English language. They also mentioned that as it is new for them, they have no proper idea of using technology.

Interview item 7: What sort of medium do you think suits you the most to learn English: blended learning or physical learning? Students said that effectiveness of Blended or physical learning both depended on the situation or course that they had been learning. Some students said that this program was better in the situation of the pandemic. But most of the students agreed that physical learning was much better.

Interview item 8: What are your recommendations to improve the implementation of blended learning and its sub-factors? The respondents came with different suggestions. No doubt this program is effective, but if the barriers that students are facing are taken care of then blended learning is the best option as in a blended learning environment students can listen to the recorded lectures again and again. Internet facility should be free. Problem of load shedding should be overcome. ―Research related to blended learning is restively undeveloped as compared to the research in traditional and distance learning environments‖ (Graham, 2013, p338). Less research has been conducted on this topic that is related to second language learning

in the Pakistani context. Response from the students made it clear that there is a need to collect more information on blended learning.

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