

An Investigation of the Perceptions and Experiences of the EFL Teachers and Learners About the Effectiveness of Blended Learning at Taif University

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Abstract

The traditional face-to-face teaching, despite being constantly criticized by the methodologists and ever-emerging modern approaches, has never lost its scope in the (EFL) English as a Foreign Language context. Researchers and pedagogues, in order to get the both ends meet, have converged traditional face-to-face instructions and online activities into the concept of blended learning. By establishing on previous works and contexts, the present study aims at investigating Taif University's EFL teachers and learners' positive and negative perceptions and experiences towards the effectiveness of online (CLMS) Cambridge Learning Management System and on-site learning environments. The work utilized triangulation in the use of research methods, i.e., both qualitative and quantitative methods overlap each other: (i) structured interview of experienced EFL (4 male and 4 female) teachers of Taif University, with maximum open ended questions, exhibit qualitative dimensions of the study; (ii) an opinionnaire developed with closed ended questions by employing Likert's five point scale to collect the data from 100 male and 100 female EFL learners of Taif University, represents quantitative perspective of the work. The opinionnaire includes 22 items and has been developed to measure the four subscales; learners' beliefs and attitudes, promising strands that help develop learners' confidence and language coupled with the perils that impede their creativity and motivation to learn. The findings of the study indicate that the level of strengths of blended learning is higher than its limitations. Learners found themselves satisfied being more exposed to the target language through vivid images, videos, audios, reading texts, chatting and discussion forums and acknowledged that (BLE) blended learning environment enhanced their language proficiency.

Keywords: blended learning environment (BLE), Cambridge Learning Management System (CLMS), experiences, EFL teachers and learners, effectiveness, perceptions

1. Introduction

Computer Assisted Language Learning has a well-established history in the educational institutions of Saudi Arabia and during the last two decades serious measures have been taken to accelerate English language learning through blended instructions to achieve the desired outcomes. The growing interest of Saudi educational institutions and policy makers in Computer Assisted Language Teaching/Learning required a research study to investigate Taif University's EFL teachers and learners' perceptions and experiences of blended learning.

The exploration of several studies indicates that the concept of blended learning has become one of the most popular pedagogical approaches in developed countries (Guzer & Caner, 2014). It mainly relies on the blend of two counterparts that complement each other to enhance the learning process in academic settings. The parallel concepts include traditional face-to-face and online modes of instruction. A traditional face-to-face environment focuses on the instructions that are conducted in educational premises by the teacher. On the other hand, online learning environment facilitates the learners to interact with the course material independently in the absence (or presence) of a teacher and other fellow peers. Neumeier (2005) mentions that EFL researchers called attention towards the best combination of the two modes of learning in blended learning design. In this pretext, Sharma (2010) expresses that an optimum blend of learning modes can provide to the learners more effective language learning experiences. Similarly, Bonk believes that it is more significant to inquire how the promises of blended

learning can be enhanced rather than comparing its effectiveness with other learning modes (Bonk in Zhan, 2009). On the other hand, Ono, Ishihara, and Yamashiro (2015) argue that despite possessing positive outcomes, CALL has its negative impacts in traditional educational settings. They mention that financial burden and the difficulty of adapting CALL according to the current requirements of English language teachers are its main challenges. Learners' beliefs and the level of satisfaction regarding their experiences of blended Learning are important to be investigated in order to ensure more effective learning environment in educational settings.

The studies in the field of blended learning have been carried out for about the last two decades. So, several inquiries have been conducted to investigate effectiveness of blended learning in the EFL classrooms at different universities of Saudi Arabia. The first study was conducted by Cooney et al. (2000), who used the term blended learning in his research paper. Some of the previous studies which have been conducted in the context of Saudi Arabia are given below:

- 1) So far, in Saudi Arabia several studies have been conducted in this field and among them the work of Alseweed (2013) (cited in Alnahdi, 2019) is very significant. His study investigated perceptions and experiences of 37 EFL learners in the context of traditional, blended and virtual modes of delivery at Qassim University.
- 2) Similarly, Alebaikan (2010) (cited in Alaidarous & Madini, 2016) inquired positive and negative impacts of blended learning on the perceptions and experiences of king Saud University's EFL teachers and learners. The findings of the study indicate positive feedback of the teachers and learners.
- 3) By the same token, Al Zumor et al. (2013) (cited in Alnahdi, 2019) explored learners' experiences regarding promises and perils of blended learning at King Khalid University. The results indicate that learners have shown satisfaction with online and onsite modes of instructions. His study also reveals that blended learning provides reading opportunities to the learners and possesses the prospects of enhancing their reading proficiency.
- 4) In a similar vein, Yushau (2006) investigated the impacts of blended learning on learners' computer and mathematic attitude. He explained that two modes of instructions were implemented and the results reveal learners' interest and motivation towards the learning of mathematics and computer.
- 5) Furthermore, the findings of the study of Almalki (2011) reveal that teachers and learners equally valued flexible and accessible features of virtual and physical learning environments. He further added that though participants have given positive responses towards the integration of two channels of learning environments but shown strong reservations regarding the inadequate technical facilities and resources provided by the university.
- 6) Yet, another study was carried out by Al-Jarf (2005), who examined and has strongly convinced that online and onsite channels of instructions help enhance EFL learners' grammar proficiency.

The previous inquiries in the context of blended learning were carried out at different universities of Saudi Arabia but until now no study has been conducted to explore positive and negative impacts of blended learning on Taif University's EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions and experiences.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Tabor (2007) (cited in Shantakumari, 2015, p. 327) reports that blended learning is "not a one-size-fits-all" approach rather it needs to adapt to meet the varied learning styles of the learners. A similar concept can be traced from the study of Hyo-Jeong So (2006), who perceives that learners' dissatisfaction is the major obstacle in the success of blended courses. This reinforces the idea that the successful implementation of blended courses heavily relies on learners' perceptions, attitudes, their choices and satisfaction. In the same backdrop, the findings of the study of Al Fadhli (2008) mentions that learners attached highest preference to the presence of teacher in their success. They allocated great importance to the teacher's role as a motivator and facilitator and show maximum satisfaction in their presence in the classroom. Furthermore, Al Fadhli (2008) highlights that teacher's expertise plays a crucial role in the development of successful discussion and interaction among the learners in e-learning environment. Therefore, an investigation of the feedback of the learners, who are the key stake holders in teaching and learning process, is crucially important to minimize learners' discouragement and maximize their learning outcomes.

1.2 Research Objective

The research objectives of the study are to:

- 1) explore positive and negative perceptions and experiences of Taif University's male and female EFL learners about the effectiveness of blended learning environment through quantitative survey;
- 2) recognize promises and perils of blended learning environment at Taif University from the perspectives of the EFL teachers and learners;

3) investigate perceptions and experiences of Taif University's EFL teachers about the effectiveness of blended learning environment through qualitative research tool.

1.3 Research Questions

The following questions have been envisaged for the present study:

- 1) What are the positive and negative perceptions and experiences of Taif University's male and female EFL learners about the effectiveness of online and onsite learning environments at Taif University?
- 2) What are the promises and perils of (BLE) online and onsite learning environments at Taif University from the perspective of the EFL learners?
- 3) What are the perceptions and experiences of the EFL teachers about the effectiveness of online and onsite learning environments?

1.4 Null Hypotheses

This study is meant to test the following null hypotheses:

- 1) There are no statistically significant differences in the perceptions and experiences of Taif University's male and female EFL learners about the effectiveness of (BLE) online and onsite modes of instructions.
- 2) There are no statistically significant differences in the promises and perils of (BLE) online and onsite modes of instructions at Taif University.
- 3) There are no statistically significant differences in the perceptions and experiences of the EFL teachers about the effectiveness of (BLE) online and onsite modes of instructions.

2. Literature Review

No approach or method alone can ideally serve the purpose or cater to the need of all the learners because of the differences in their learning styles (Wilson & Smilanich, 2004). In this context, it is pertinent to mention that blended learning carries multi-dimensional features to address diverse learning styles through the use of videos, audio tracks, visual images, critical thinking sections and reading texts. Groff (2013, p. 1) notes that today's rapidly changing world poses this question on academicians and educational institutions: "How can today's schools be transformed so as to become environments of teaching and learning that makes individuals lifelong learners and prepare them for the 21st Century?" May be the most suitable answer to this question is the emerging trends of the integration of technology with the traditional onsite classroom environment that could produce the individual's lifelong learners and prepare them for the 21st Century.

Blended learning approach has increasingly been used in educational institutions to deliver course content to a diverse cohort of learners. Castle and McGuire (2010, p. 36) state that blended learning approach is used widely because it possesses a: "potential to provide flexible access to content and instruction at any time, from any place and cost-effectiveness for institutions of higher education". The same blended learning environment is being experienced by the EFL learners at Taif University, where online and onsite counterparts were launched in 2017. This program is implemented as a medium of instruction for all the bachelor degree courses taught at the ELC. For the present study, the data has collected from 100 male and 100 female EFL learners of Taif University, where Cambridge 'UNLCOK' and 'EUSE' are being taught since September, 2017.

2.1 What is Blended Learning?

Blended Learning has been defined in many different ways. The simplest definition of it: "blended learning is the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby, & Higgins, 2012, p. 4). Percy (2009, pp. 4–5) perceives the concept in this way: "learning solution that contains a mix of formats, media, and experiences, including informational and instructional elements, synchronous and asynchronous learning, self-paced and instructor-led learning". However, Fleck (2012, p. 399) defines the term:

The term "blended learning" usually refers to a mix of conventional face-to-face elements combined with on-line elements. However, this is at too general a level for in-depth analysis, while the term "blend" perhaps suggests too homogeneous a mix: in practice, the mix is more "lumpy", more a chunky fruit salad than a blended smoothie.

There are three definitions of blended learning discussed by Graham, Allen, and Ure (cited in Graham, 2003, p. 4): "(1) combining instructional modalities; (2) combining instructional methods; (3) combining online and face-to-face instruction". Graham (2006) states that the first two definitions are very broad whilst the 3rd definition more precisely represents a historical background of the emergence of blended learning. Koohang and

Durante (2003) mention that now blended learning is no more a novel idea rather a commonly used mode of delivering instructions in educational settings. Thorne (2003) (cited in Pardede, 2012) believes that blended learning is one of the innovative approaches of this century since it provides to the learners unique experiences of learning by developing their ability for reflection and autonomy (Cooner, 2010) and allows them to become more independent learners and control their own learning process (Wang, Shen, Novak, & Pan, 2009).

Greer, Rowland and Smith (2014, p. 1) provide a definition of blended learning as, “A traditional face-to-face class where students complete a portion of their coursework on the computer and another part engaged with their face-to-face teacher or their classmates”. In this backdrop, Young (2002) states that nowadays virtual and face-to-face modes of instructions have been implemented by many universities. He further states that the terms “blended learning” and “hybrid learning” have the same connotations and are used interchangeably by the researchers for the courses that combine both kinds of instructions together. In hybrid/blended classes, a number of activities are moved from face-to-face to online classes that reduced the amount of time spent in the classroom. Some other scholars brought to the fore the concept of blended learning as: “Integrating face-to-face classroom instruction with online activities so that learners can take the advantage of both e-learning and face-to-face instructions” (Behjat, Yamini, & Bagher, 2012, p. 97). Blended learning makes the learners independent and requires them to take responsibility of their own learning. In this context, Singh and Reed (2001) perceive that blended learning has more than one delivery mode and is being utilized with the objective of optimizing the learning outcomes. Singh (2003) reframes the definition of blended learning and believes that this approach aims to optimize learning objectives by utilizing the ‘right’ technology to address the ‘right’ learning styles, to inculcate the ‘right’ skills, in the ‘right person, at the ‘right’ time.

Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p. 42), (cited in Pardede, 2012) explain the purpose of this approach that blended learning is the integration of online and onsite modes of delivery where learners experience written interaction in an online module and spoken in onsite classrooms. Both provide learners a unique learning experience consistent with the context and aims of learning.

2.2 Learners’ Perceptions and Experiences of Blended Learning

Blended Learning is a vast field and there are several sub-areas to probe into it. Investigating learners’ perceptions and experiences are one of the instrumental aspects to look into it. The findings of many studies shown the fact that students have given positive feedback about blended learning environment (Drysdale, Graham, Spring, & Halverson, 2013). However, the idea that how effective is the interplay between traditional face-to-face and online learning is still need to be explored. The study of Owston, York and Murtha (2013) has investigated perceptions and achievement of 577 students about blended learning. They divided their inquiry into four different aspects. The results show that high achievers were very much satisfied and found the course very fitting and engaging. In a similar vein, they liked blended mode over face-to-face learning format more than the low achievers. The study of Smyth, Houghton, Cooney and Casey (2012) also examined these aspects and found numerous promises and perils of blended learning. The results of their study show that the learners appreciated accessibility and flexibility of blended learning, however highlighted that late feedback of the teacher and poor internet connection are some of its crucial draw backs.

Contrary to this, Huang (2016) discusses that two studies found maximum dis-favouring responses against blended learning. Stracke (2007) is one among them who investigates three students’ reason of leaving the blended learning class. After conducting an in-depth enquiry, his study reveals that students withdrew from the course for three reasons: (i) lack of reciprocity between traditional face-to-face and online modes; (ii) no use of printed books for reading and writing; and their disapproval to use a computer as a medium of instruction. Finally, the researcher concludes with a hope that these drawbacks would soon be overcome so that blended learning environment could become more appealing and convenient for the learners to be implemented. The 2nd study is conducted by Fryer, Bovee and Nakao (2014) at Japanese university that focuses on the role of motivation in compulsory e-learning component of a blended learning course. The results of this study reveal two reasons for not being motivated to participate in e-learning studies in the blended course are “low task value and poor ability beliefs”. These findings indicate that poorly planned blended learning environment may lead to dissatisfaction and dropout of the learners from the course (Sagarra & Zapata, 2008).

Despite the wide-spread popularity of blended learning among researchers, pedagogues and methodologists, it doesn’t cater the needs of all the learners owing to the differences in their learning styles, perceptions, expectations and aptitudes (Chandra & Fisher, 2009; Akkoyunlu & Sloylu, 2008; Chen & Jones, 2007). The positive impacts of blended learning neutralize its negative impacts and help support its implementation in different educational institutions (Guzer & Caner, 2014). Several previous studies investigate learners’ aptitudes and preferences for

learning whereas present study probes into the learners' perceptions about the promises and perils of (BLE) online and onsite learning environments coupled with their experiences of both the modules. In addition to this, the study enquires challenges and difficulties encountered by the learners' as well as the level of their satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the utilization of two different modes of delivery.

2.3 Learners' Perspectives on Promises and Perils of Blended Learning

Over the last two decades, there is a growing trend to implement technology-driven teaching and learning models in educational settings to address varied styles of the learners and accomplish desired learning objectives. Askun (2007), states that technology has scored major developments in educational settings and among them is an internet and World Wide Web. Several other studies reported that learners enjoy completing the hybrid nature of online and onsite learning courses, particularly interacting with each other and completing learner-centered activities (Delioglou & Yildirim, 2007). Since the inauguration of computer technology and its use in educational settings the terms blended learning, e-learning and web-based education has been frequently seen and used in the literature. The promises of it have been counted by many researchers by stating that the proper use of computer technology not only enables us to deliver the instructions effectively but also maximizes learning outcomes (Okan, 2001).

In the context of an intensive English Language program, Larsen (2012) inquires the impacts of BL in the teaching of writing skills to English as Second Language (ESL) learners. The results of his study indicate that learners were very involved in their writing skill and appeared to be more autonomous and independent in the classroom. The learners have shown their great satisfaction towards blended learning environment. However, the findings of the study of Neves Seesink (2007) were entirely different from the findings of the work of Larsen (2012). He explores the impacts of blended instructions on the writing skills of six learners and finds their lack of enthusiasm in the completion of online exercises, particularly those which do not affect their grades. He further discusses that learners perceive these exercises as a tool of review and practice instead of compulsory content of the course. His findings reveal that the success of blended learning solely relies on when learners understand the rationale behind the parallel running of both the modes of instructions. Sing and Reed (2001) mention the findings of the research conducted at the University of Tennessee and Stanford that the use of blended learning approach maximizes learning outcomes.

Few studies reported that reading an academic text from a digital display is really hard for most of the learners and these difficulties are multiplied with their lack of interest and knowledge of the digital text (Armitage, Wilson, & Sharp, 2004; Spencer, 2006; Eshet-Alkalai & Geri, 2007, 2009). Similarly, few other studies reported that reading digital text also resulted in learners' lower achievement because of their lack of urge to read the text from a digital display (Ackerman & Goldsmith, 2008; Ackerman, 2009). The findings of several other studies have shown that learners reported feelings of loneliness and social detachment whilst completing online part of the course. The social aloofness creates negative effects on the learners and deteriorates their language learning process. On the other hand, the results indicate that in traditional face-to-face classrooms the teacher may exert an unlimited control and authority and learners receive the information like passive recipients instead of active agents of learning (Lazenby, 2003; Coates, 2006; Bates & Khasawneh, 2007; Kurtz & Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Conn, 2008).

2.4 EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of Blended Learning Environment

In the past, the traditional way of teaching was used by the teachers in the classroom. Since last decade, the exposure of technology in every sphere of life challenges the teachers to quit the conventional style of teaching and find some alternative ways to equip the learners with 21st century's skills. To achieve the desired goals, they combined face-to-face interaction with online learning to maximize the learning objectives. Blended learning environment matches the need of the learners with diverse learning styles and in part provides them control over the place, pace and path in online mode of delivery and teacher guided environment in an onsite mode of instruction. Bailey et al. (2013, p. 4) (cited in Inayatil & Shinta, 2016) observe that: "blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through the online delivery of content and instruction, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace, and at least in part at a supervised brick—and—mortar location away from home". Furthermore, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Melbourne (2012) explains that blended learning is embedded in the idea that learning is not onetime happening of an event rather a continuous and persistent process. Moore and Thompson (1997) (Cited in El Zawaidy, 2014) state that in online modes of instructions, teacher acts as a facilitator and monitors the learners to address their immediate issues. The learners in this context are expected to work creatively and utilize fully all the skills and abilities to achieve the desired goals.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The present empirical study investigated positive and negative perceptions and experiences of EFL teachers and learners of Taif University by administering a 5-point Likert-scale opinionnaire. An opinionnaire with 22 items has been designed with closed ended questions and administered to 100 male and female EFL learners of Taif University. The participants of this survey have responded to a 22-item strongly-agree to strongly-disagree Likert-scale opinionnaire which recorded their perceptions and experiences of blended learning at Taif University. The researchers received eighty-four ($n=84$) valid responses from female EFL learners and eighty-one ($n=81$) from male learners. The aims of developing an interview were not only to gather the data from the participants but also to cross-examine the opinions of the participants with each other. The identity of the eight interviewees (EFL teachers) was not disclosed in order to avoid future complications, thus, assigned different codes to them, as for instance; Instructor-1, Instructor-2, and Instructor-3, so on and so forth.

3.2 Instrumentation

The researchers have reviewed several similar studies to develop an appropriate instrument to record the perceptions of the participants of this survey (See for example Kahyalar, 2016; Huang, 2016; Kenney & Newcombe, 2011; Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008; Larsen, 2012). The initial version of the questionnaire had four sections in accordance with the four research questions set forth for this empirical study. The initial version of the questionnaire was sent to six senior instructors of Taif University for the sake of face validity. The feedback received from these experts has been incorporated in the relevant sections of the questionnaire and the final questionnaire consisted of 22 items. Furthermore, an interview with open ended questions has constructed to collect responses from four male and female EFL teachers working at ELC, Taif University that represents qualitative dimensions of the work. The interview was conducted to cross-examine the perceptions and experiences of EFL learners. All the interviewees have been selected from Taif University, English Language Centre (TUELC) but variations have been observed in terms of differences in gender, nationality and their experiences with the Arab learners to add the variety of opinions and suggestions.

3.3 Reliability and Validity

After reviewing the previous studies, an initial version of the questionnaire was developed by the researchers to identify participants' perceptions and experiences about the four areas narrowed down in the research questions. That initial version was sent to the three experts in the field and their suggestions were incorporated to achieve face validity. The questionnaire was then pilot tested with 17 English language teachers from the same context. The data generated through the pilot test was entered manually and Cronbach's Alpha reliability test was run to determine reliability of the instrument.

Table 1. Reliability coefficient

Number of Cases	17
Number of Items	22
Alpha	.961

The results have indicated an acceptable level of reliability of .961. The final version of the questionnaire was administered to the participants to present the results and findings.

3.4 Data Collection

After following the standardized procedure to determine the validity and reliability of the instrument, the final version of 22-item strongly-agree to strongly-disagree Likert-scale opinionnaire was administered to the randomly selected 100 male and 100 female EFL learners of Taif university. In addition to this, the researchers have administered Arabic version of this empirical study to the participants.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data generated from the opinionnaire was coded, manually entered and descriptive statistics in terms of means, range and standard deviations of the responses of the participants were calculated using version 20 of SPSS. The items with higher the mean value mean higher the preference given by the participants. The data was tabulated to analyze and discuss with the help of the previous studies in the section of "results and discussion".

4. Results and Discussion

This section details the results and discussion related to the data generated from the participants' responses to the four sections of the survey.

Table 2. Learners' beliefs and perceptions about blended learning environment

No	Statements	Gr.	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
I believe blended learning environment/activities:								
1.	give(s) enormous opportunities for effective interaction between teacher and students in and beyond the classroom.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.58	1.28477
		F	84					
2.	effectively cater(s) learners' interest and motivation.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.47	1.29978
		F	84					
3.	make(s) my English language skills better.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.64	1.35964
		F	84					
4.	are interactive and collaborative.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.52	1.27906
		F	84					
5.	enhanced my confidence and knowledge as I access the course contents through two different channels.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.48	1.34387
		F	84					
6.	enable(s) learners to watch and listen native speakers more frequently.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.65	1.33993
		F	84					

The 2nd section of the opinionnaire was meant to elicit learners' beliefs and perceptions about the blended learning environment at Taif University. In line with the previous research findings the participants of this survey have allocated highest mean value to the 3rd and 6th items with a mean value of 3.6436 and 3.6497, respectively. These two items reinforce the idea that BLE provides an opportunity to the learners to watch and listen to native speakers more as well as it helps in improving learners' English language skills. The findings are in line with the findings of the study of Banditvilai (2016), who expresses that the students in the experimental group report that e-learning enhanced their language skills. In this context, Instructor-3 has explained his opinion on the promises of BLE: "I see, in the presence of digital gadgets accessible almost to all the students at TU, blended learning approach is very effective and promising in achieving the desired outcomes and shaping future of the learning at Taif university."

The participants of this study have assigned 2nd highest preference to the 1st item with a mean value of 3.5842, which reveals that blended learning activities enhance interaction between the teacher and the learners. The findings are in agreement with the results of the study of Leventidis et al. (2005) and Georgouli et al. (2005), who contend that incorporation of e-Learning tools and open source e-Learning platform have opened the new threshold at educational settings and strengthened the traditional teaching approach by encouraging interaction among teachers, students and educational resources. Similarly, the study of Shantakumari and Sajith (2014) shows that learners believe that BL improve their interaction with the teacher and the classmates at the Global Medical University.

The 3rd highest importance has been allocated to the 4th item with a mean value of 3.5212, which states that blended learning activities are interactive and collaborative. The findings of this survey are in agreement with the findings of the study of Shantakumari and Sajith (2014) which notes that blended learning course is easy to follow and accelerate their learning. In addition to this, it mentions that online activities increase learners' interaction and address needs of the learners and learning objectives.

The 4th highest importance has been attached to the 5th item with a mean value of 3.4842, which signifies that blended learning enhances learners' knowledge and confidence because they complete the same course content through two different channels. In the study of Banditvilai (2016), most of the learners were very satisfied and believe that learning is being reinforced through two modes of instructions. Similar kind of results has been found in the study of Ajide and Tik, (2009) with a mean value of 2.53 and standard deviation .706. The researchers maintain that blended learning substantiates knowledge of the learners. In a similar vein, Kenney and Newcombe (2011) discuss the results of an exam and are of the view that learners of blended section secured slightly higher score (47.46 out of 60) than the non-blended cohort (44.34) and small sections (47.40), respectively.

In this section, the least preference has been assigned to the 2nd item with a mean value of 3.4733, which mentions that blended learning effectively cater(s) learners' interest and motivation. The learners' opinion contradicts with

the statement extended by the instructor-2: “Learning happens in proportion to the learners’ level of interest. Classroom instruction coupled with the online practice positively triggers learners’ interest and engages them in learning the English language skills.” The results of the present study correspond to the findings of the study of Banditvilai (2016), which states that 59% of the students felt increased in their interest in the course content, 75% came to the point that blended learning helped them to learn more in-depth on the topic. In a similar vein, in the study of Kenney and Newcombe (2011), 64% of the students felt more motivated to complete the course content in blended learning environment.

Table 3. Learners’ positive and negative experiences of completing online module on CLMS

No	Statements	Gr.	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
7.	I found it easy to create my account after scratching off the coating and using hidden access code given on the Cambridge print book.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.72	1.43656
		F	84					
8.	I always found it easy to login to Cambridge Learning Management System (CLMS).	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.70	1.48491
		F	84					
9.	I always completed online exercises and activities smoothly and comfortably.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.30	1.42377
		F	84					
10.	I found instant technical help and support, whenever I stuck on Cambridge Learning Management System (CLMS).	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.17	1.32805
		F	84					
11.	I faced technical problems when CLMS doesn’t upgrade my grades and progress after completing the relevant activities.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.35	1.52481
		F	84					

This subcategory of the opinionnaire seeks to elicit the participants’ responses towards their positive and negative experiences of completing online module. The highest preference, with a mean value of 3.72, has been attached by the participants of this study to the 1st item of this category; stating learners have found no difficulties in creating an account on CLMS.

The second highest preference has been allocated to the 2nd item with a mean value of 3.70, which signifies that learners found easy to log in to CLMS. Contrary to this are the findings of the study of Mtebe and Raphael (2017), in which 68% participants observe that they encountered technical difficulties when participating in blended learning whereas 32% of the participants can easily access the CLMS. The 3rd maximum favouring responses, with a mean value of 3.35, allocated to the last item of this category where learners express that they encountered technical difficulties when system did not upgrade their progress. In this backdrop, Instructor-6 suggests: “I see students positively smart with the use of CLMS but in rare cases, CLMS does not respond towards the selected choice of particular questions of some units. Certain bug fixes are required. To keep abreast with pacing, poses a challenge. In case a student does not attend onsite class then completion of an online workbook exercise becomes challenging for them.”

The participants have allocated 4th highest preference with a mean value of 3.30 to the item 9 of this section, which shows that learners completed online activities smoothly. The findings of this survey are in line with the results of the study of Ajide and Tik, (2009), which has shown that learners were satisfied with the knowledge gained through blended learning with the mean value of 2.24 and standard deviation .606. In this pretext, Instructor-7 expresses: “In the presence of pacing schedule classroom instructions can easily be synchronized with online workbook; therefore, I personally see blended learning approach a big success in my classroom context.”

The 5th highest importance has been attached to the item 10 of this category with a mean value of 3.1703, which reflects that learners received instant assistance whenever they stuck on CLMS. The findings of the study of Shantakumari and Sajith (2014) correspond to the results of the present study where learners have shown satisfaction on the provision of adequate support and facilities for the online course content.

Table 4. Learners' perspective on the promises of blended learning environment

No	Statements	Gr.	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
12.	Face-to-face instructions and Cambridge Learning Management System (CLMS) complement each other.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.46	1.20138
		F	84					
13.	I learn “the course content” more effectively and engaging way through face-to-face instructions and on CLMS.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.37	1.35163
		F	84					
14.	I enjoy social gatherings in face-to-face classroom and online interaction on CLMS with my fellow peers.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.23	1.35605
		F	84					
15.	I learn through discussions with my fellow peers in face-to-face classroom and revise the important points during online sessions.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.20	1.31721
		F	84					
16.	CLMS allows me to work in my own comfort zone whereas face-to-face instructions expose me to diverse social situations.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.32	1.25332
		F	84					
17.	I like instant spoken feedback of my teacher in face-to-face instructions and written feedback on CLMS.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.26	1.31201
		F	84					

The 4th subcategory of the opinionnaire was meant to understand participants' perspectives about the promises of blended learning. The participants have ranked high to the 1st item with a mean value of 3.46, stating that both the channel of instructions complements each other. The findings are in line with the results of the study of Shantakumari and Sajith (2014), which mentions that in order to ensure a connection between the two modes of instruction, the intended learning objectives should correspond to the online activities. In a similar vein instructor-1, responded to this statement in these words: “I strongly believe that both the aspects (onsite and online) of teaching and learning move along in an integrated and unified way and positively contribute towards maximizing the learning outcomes.” The participants have allocated the 2nd highest preference to the item 13th with a mean value of 3.37 and SD 1.35, which is in agreement with the results of the study of Ajide and Tik (2009) with a mean value of 1.21 and SD .407, manifests that CLMS ignites learning process and accelerates blended learning environment. Instructor-1 retorted to this statement in this way: “Since the launching of blended learning approach, a positive shift has been observed in the attitude and behavior of the learners towards the learning of the English language. There receptive and productive skills with reference to their respective CEFR level have taken a positive jump.” The 3rd highest preference has been assigned to the item 16th with a mean value of 3.32, stating that on CLMS learners enjoy working in their own comfort zone whereas in face-to-face classrooms they get expose to diverse social settings.

The participants have entrusted 4th highest importance to 17th item with a mean value of 3.26 and SD 1.31 stating learners' satisfaction on receiving teacher's spoken and written feedback through both the channels, alternatively. Contrary to this, findings of the study of Banditvilai (2016) reflect that respondents have indicated the absence of instructors in most of the online discussions. However, the findings of her survey reveal that maximum respondents i.e., 68% showed presence of the instructor in the asynchronous discussion and their prompt feedback whereas 32% denied the point in question and asserted the absence of instructor in online discussions.

The 5th highest preference has been attached to the item 14th with a mean value of 3.23, stating that online activities enhance interaction between the teacher and the learners and the resource material. It implies that this item plays a vital role in enhancing learners' interaction and communication with their peers on CLMS and in face-to-face classroom. The findings are in correspondence with the results of the study of DeLacey and Leonard (2002). So and Brush (2008) report that the addition of online sessions with the traditional classes not only accelerate students learning process but also improve their interaction and satisfaction. Male and female EFL learners represented by the participants of this study are of the opinion that face-to-face and online sessions help develop their interaction with fellow peers and reinforce understanding of the course content. The participants have designated lowest mean value to the item 15th, with a mean value of 3.20 and SD 1.31, which states that both online and onsite channels add-on to each other. Instructor-8 thinks that: “Right after the end of each unit, content learnt in the classroom is practiced and reinforced through CLMS for further consolidation. CLMS exercises are locked after a specific time to keep them in similar pace with the classroom content. Time aspect helps students for better learning.”

Table 5. Learners' perspective on the Perils of blended learning environment

No	Statements	Gr.	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
18.	I feel slow internet connection causes problem in working on Cambridge Learning Management System (CLMS) so I prefer to concentrate more on "course content" during face-to-face instructions.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	4.55	1.43329
		F	84					
19.	I do not receive real time feedback from my teacher in all the activities on Cambridge Learning Management System (CLMS).	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	4.9997	1.30862
		F	84					
20.	I believe blended learning provides an opportunity to the learners to cheat and plagiarize.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	4.8000	1.44070
		F	84					
21.	I assume blended learning may make the learners bored as well as socially isolated.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	4.9993	1.32777
		F	84					
22.	I feel blended learning may lead some of the learners to waste time by getting engaged on other social media networking sites.	M	81	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.19	1.35065
		F	84					

The last section of this opinionnaire sought responses of the participants on the perils of blended learning environment. In this category, the participants of the study allocated 1st highest preference to the item 19 with a mean value of 4.99 stating that learners don't receive real-time feedback from the teacher in online activities. The findings are in agreement with the study of Mtebe and Raphael (2017), stating that unavailability of the teacher in live discussions via Moodle is really a challenge in blended learning. Similarly, the study of Bhalalusesa, Lukwaro and Clemence (2013) (cited in Mtebe & Raphael, 2017) argue that instructors are too busy to participate in live sessions on a daily basis as they have many responsibilities to work on. However, the study of Ssekakubo et al. (2011) (cited in Mtebe & Raphael, 2017) explains same idea in a different way that in developing countries many teachers do not have an enough exposure to technology, and therefore, their level of confidence and comfort in using technology is weak. In this backdrop, Instructor -4 claims that: "Every approach has got its downsides too. I see perils in an imbalance of preferring online mode over onsite by the students, unconsciously. Blended learning is not just digitalizing the traditional content but also inculcating innovation and integration that serve the learning process in achieving specific objectives."

The 2nd highest preference has been attached to the item 21 with a mean value of 4.99, stating that while working on CLMS learners feel bored and socially isolated. Contrary to this are the findings of the study of So and Brush (2008) who declare that integration of online and onsite learning environments improves learners' interaction and satisfaction. Similar kinds of finding can be traced in the study of Shantakumari and Sajith (2014), who acknowledge that online activities enhance interaction among the learners and help them in achieving the determined learning objectives.

The 3rd highest significance has been allocated to the item 20 with a mean value of 4.80, indicating that completion of workbook on CLMS provides an opportunity to the learners to get answers from their peers or from other networking sites. Contrary to this, Banditvilai (2016) was of the view that blended learning enhances learners' motivation and helps them in understanding the course content through the use of supplementary material. In addition to this, learners of the present study have shown their satisfaction that online classes facilitate their language learning experience and enhance their language proficiency.

The 4th highest importance has been attached to the item 18 with a mean value of 4.55, stating that slow internet connection causes problem in completing online activities. The findings of the study of Mtebe and Raphael (2017) show that learners feel uncomfortable, when they use animation and video clips. Their study highlights that only those learners face the problem, who use internet or broadband connections in their offices. Unlike this, Instructor-5 comments that: "Majority of my students prefers balance of input. Classroom learning allows them to share and understand the content in the presence of teacher and application of that learning is practiced through online workbook."

The last item of this category has been allocated very low preference by the participants with a mean value of 3.19 stating that blended learning may lead the learners to waste time on other social media networking sites. This item received less importance from the learners, which indicates that they don't agree that while completing online module they waste their time on other social media networking sites.

5. Recommendations

Considering the fact that integration of the virtual and physical landscapes provides flexible opportunities for learning to the teachers and learners. The findings of the study of Meyer, Wohlers and Marshall (2014), lay emphasis that in blended learning teachers should be given more training specifically on how to use technology in their teaching practices. It is recommended that there should be continuous professional development programs for the faculty. In qualitative research tool, Instructor-1 recommends that: "I suggest online aspect of the blended learning must not be exclusively for home assignments. CLMS workbook exercises sometimes should be practiced in the classroom." After analyzing the data collected to understand EFL learners' perceptions and experiences of blended learning at Taif University, few recommendations have been extended. The university should:

- 1) provide continuous training to the faculty members including instructors and administrative staff on necessary skills needed to continuously enhance the effectiveness of onsite and online modes of instructions.
- 2) encourage instructors to work collaboratively with each other by setting up a networking system for them to share ideas and/or best practices.
- 3) create a support system for the instructors and students to deal with the technical faults and issues in order to promote smooth delivery of the program. The findings indicate that learners allocated highest significance to the item 11 that mentions, "I faced technical problems when CLMS doesn't upgrade my grades and progress after completing the relevant activities".
- 4) develop a reward system for the teachers and the learners that encourage innovation in teaching and learning process of BLE, particularly the teachers who provide prompt feedback on learners' online activities.
- 5) take measures to control the off shoots of cheating and plagiarism by either providing individual IP addresses to each learner separately or any other sensitive system to observe learners' activities so that nobody could operate their CLMS account and complete the activities.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that Taif University's EFL learners have shown great satisfaction towards blended learning and attached highest preferences to the maximum items of the survey about the effectiveness of online and onsite learning environments. In this context, Osguthorpe and Graham (2003, p. 231) listed six goals that might be expected when developing blended learning environment: "pedagogical richness, access to knowledge, social interaction, personal agency, cost effectiveness and ease of revision". Several other studies conducted in Saudi Arabia to investigate the effects of blended learning have also received positive feedback from the learners (Sait et al., 2003; Yushau, 2006; Al-Jarf, 2005; Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). Blucic (2007) establishes that blended learning is a flexible approach and provides enormous opportunities of learning to the teachers and learners through virtual and physical modes of instructions. In the context of present inquiry, learners expressed that both the channels of instructions complement each other as they learn through discussions in on-site classrooms and revised the important points through the virtual platform. However, they reiterated one of the crucial perils of blended learning that they feel socially isolated and alone while working on CLMS. They also informed that blended learning occasionally led them to get engage on other social media networking sites. These challenges can be resolved by hiring experienced instructors who could give maximum time to the learners on Cambridge Learning Management System by answering to their queries and fixing the technical issues instantly. In nutshell, present inquiry was undertaken to address the difficulties and challenges faced by the learners at Taif University and to make the blended learning approach more promising, more effective, more interactive and more outcomes-oriented.

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