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The Effectiveness of Blended Learning in Improving the Vocabulary Range of Postgraduate Students

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Introduction

Technology has brought positive impacts on the learning process and teaching (Azeez & Mustafa, 2019). In recent years, technology and Mohammad, 2021). The invention of the latest technological tools and their utilization helps learners to understand the course content and achieve better results. As the foundation of

Abstract

This research attempted to examine the effects of using blended learning on the vocabulary improvement of English as a foreign language (EFL). A quasi-experimental research design was adopted to answer the research questions through a quantitative research approach. The study involved two tests: pre-test and post-test. The pre-test was carried out before the course, and the post-test was carried out after the implementation of blended learning in order to reveal the effectiveness of blending learning on the vocabulary enhancement of students. The tests were comprised of twenty vocabulary items. The data were collected from postgraduate students in an English language course named Ferkary course for the duration of six weeks. The results revealed that the students performed better in the post-test than in the pre-test. Moreover, at the end of the course the data were collected from a Google Form questionnaire to assess the methods of teaching and the students' attitude to improve English vocabulary through the blended learning. The results showed that blended learning method (BLM) helped the vocabulary improvement of the participants intensively.

education have gone hand in hand in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) universities, especially after the Covid19 pandemic (Nuri &

English, vocabulary is seen to be a crucial component of language learning. Without enough vocabulary knowledge, a Second Language Learner (SLL) will face many problems

employing the four language skills, i.e., reading, listening, speaking, and writing (Gojian, 2014). Therefore, vocabulary is central to English language learning and teaching. Blended learning is an efficient method to improve English vocabulary and provides learners more opportunities to use the language. Without an efficient range of vocabulary, learners are not able to deliver or receive messages effectively; since it supports the four main skill of language.

Each vocabulary that has its own meaning in context is considered as a word. Words have been proved to be powerfully related to second language (L2) acquisition. Many studies support the argument that improving the vocabulary range will support the students to master the language. Several factors should be considered in teaching vocabulary (Wallace, 1982). Firstly, the teacher has to select learning objectives and determine the words to be mastered by learners. Secondly, it is crucial for the teacher to decide on the quantity of vocabulary to be learned in a specific lesson. Thirdly, it is also important for the teacher to provide an opportunity for the learners to use the vocabulary learned in daily conversations inside and outside the classroom. Sahraini (2015) explained that before conducting teaching within the classroom, the teacher should prepare a model of teaching that reflects the syllabus context and the principles of teaching. In designing a model of teaching English vocabulary through interactive activities, an English teacher is expected to make the students enjoy studying English (Ali, Mustafa & Azeez, 2019; Sahraini, 2015). Blended learning method is a combination of online digital media and traditional classroom methods. It is the implementation of two or more different methods of training. Since teaching English vocabulary is very important, and it is more than just presenting and introducing new vocabulary

for the students, they need an interesting method for learning.

The quasi-experimental design was used because it aids to analyze the impact of independent variables on a dependent variable, i.e. the effect of blended learning on postgraduate learners' vocabulary enrichment (Fraenkel, Wallen, Norman, & Hyun, 2012).

Literature Review

The Concept of Blended Learning

Recently, there has been a rapid increase in the application of technology in English Language Teaching (ELT). In particular, the new generation is living in an era where the utilization of technology has dramatically changed the way people communicate with each other (Masita, 2020). Schools and colleges encourage the use of technology, and train educators to use new technological devices and platforms to attract students' attention and get better educational outcomes (Azeez & Mustafa, 2019). The use of these technological tools in combination with other activities is usually referred to as Blended learning.

Blended learning is defined as 'the use of two or more distinct methods of training' (Masita, 2020). Through the use of blended learning, teachers help students better understand their course content (Hicks, Reid, & George, 2001). According to Masita (2020), the use of BLM provides an interactive atmosphere in the classroom and helps learners to improve their knowledge of vocabulary. This method of teaching is student-centered fashion and the learners are part of their learning. In other words, in the blended learning method, learners have an active role in the learning process and become independent learners (Azeez & Mustafa, 2019). Moreover, a study conducted by Nuri and Mohammad (2021) revealed that applying mobile phones and other technologies in varying educational organizations has

effective outcomes for vocabulary enhancement. They further found out that learners' motivation for language learning can alter the environment of teaching and learning.

Learning and Teaching Vocabulary

Teaching a foreign language, vocabulary in particular, is generally claimed to be a challenge for teachers. Vocabulary is considered a crucial part of language learning and teaching because it is the major component of phrases and sentences (Masita, 2020). Learners with higher ranges of vocabulary can construct more complex sentences than learners with a low range of vocabulary. Vocabulary also plays a vital role in the acquisition of language. Knowing words is not only memorizing them, but the learner needs to understand the meaning of the word in context and how the words are used in real situations (Sahraini, 2015). A research presented by Tryanti & Noni (2019) found out that studying English outside of the class lacks motivation, as result of the lack of vocabulary knowledge.

Improving Vocabulary Range through Blended Learning Method

The traditional approach to language learning has been criticized for the lack of engaging learners in the classroom and for giving the full authority to teachers, without considering the learners' needs (Boumová, 2008). Apart from books, texts, and tests, the traditional method of teaching neither promotes learner autonomy nor does it take learners' interests into account (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010). Albrecht (2006) and Nuri, (2021) claim that BLM is an alternative to the traditional method of teaching in the way that it provides learners with enough exposure, engagement, and the language use in real-life situations. The use of an effective teaching method is believed to provide better learning outcomes and ensure students' progress in the long run (Klimova, 2009). This claim is supported

by Alpala and Flórez (2011), as cited in Masita (2020), in which they have claimed that BLM provides an opportunity for students to be active in the learning process, feel technologically empowered and learn at their comfort without wasting time and energy. Other researchers have suggested that learners need to be engaged in the classroom through active learning, including classroom activities and participation, as well as engaging learners in the teaching platforms adopted by teachers during courses (Masita, 2020). Research has also found that blended learning is very effective in teaching vocabulary. Blended learning is believed to be a great alternative to the traditional approach of language teaching because it combines the traditional face-to-face method with online instructions, materials, tools, and electronic learning activities, such as videos and visual aids. For instance, Abdulrahman & Basalama (2019) conducted a case study to examine the benefits of videos and visual aids to improving learners' vocabulary range through the use of collaborative video Projects. In the study twenty-five, EFL learners participated in the Vocabulary Building Course (VBC).

In addition, Indah (2015) conducted a research on teaching vocabulary through computer-assisted tools. She found out that learners' vocabulary range can be greatly improved through computer-assisted media. The combination of classroom interaction with online language materials makes classrooms more entertaining, enjoyable and efficient in vocabulary acquisition (Albrecht, 2006; Masita, 2020; Indah, 2015). Furthermore, in their research conducted on the use of online platforms for teaching, Azeez and Mustafa (2019) found out that the majority of learners including the younger generation and senior ones (people aged over 30 years) wanted to

have online teaching materials included in their English language courses and learning journey.

Assessment of Learners' Vocabulary Range

In order to assess learners progress in a given course, teachers can either assess learners formally or informally, as claimed by Masita (2020). Learners progress can be monitored indirectly in the classroom or through conducting tests. According to Masita (2020), there are some factors to be considered while teaching vocabulary to learners. For instance, she suggests that the range of vocabulary in a given class or course should be selected in order to be mastered by the learners. She also pinpoints the importance of selecting vocabulary that target the learners' needs. This means that learners should be exposed to vocabulary that they can use in their real-life situations monitored by the teacher. Before starting the course, it should be a clear framework to follow in order to have effective outcomes. This includes the curriculum and a clear teaching methodology (Sahraini, 2015). Following and Monitoring the process of teaching and learning is very important.

The Concept of Postgraduate Students

This research focuses on the effectiveness of the blended learning method in teaching vocabulary to post graduate students in a Ferkary Course. The participants of this study were among the PhD, MSc and MA candidates of different disciplines and majors who were required to have the English language certificate as a pre-requisite of their higher education degrees. For this purpose, The Ministry of Higher Education has urged the Universities of Kurdistan Region to open English language courses for these candidates. These courses are called the Ferkary Courses and are continuously opened for the candidates in order to be assessed for English language proficiency. No candidate can enter PhD and master degree

programs without taking these courses, with the exception of IELTS, PTE and TOEFL test holders. In this research, the researchers wanted to investigate the effectiveness and efficiency of this courses in improving the candidates' knowledge of vocabulary.

Methodology

Research Design

The current study is conducted among the participants of the Ferkary course at the language center of Erbil Polytechnic University (EPU). Ferkary courses designed and implemented by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research at all the language centers of public universities across the Kurdistan Region. Ferkary courses are taken periodically at some of the public language centers of the representative universities.

This research adopted a mixed-method to collect data. Data were collected from a Google form questionnaire designed to assess the method of teaching and their perceptions of the English language program named Ferkary Course. Participants of the study were also monitored under a test experiment done before and after the test. The researchers did Pre-test and Post-test on the participants during the course to assess their progress in literacy and validate the questionnaire results. The questionnaire conducted to assess the perceptions and opinions of the participants on the BLM espoused by teachers during the six-weeks course.

On the other hand, the tests were conducted to estimate the effectiveness of blended learning method (BLM) and see if the participants' performance enhanced during the course. Experimental design can be conducted as a study exploration tool that "directly attempt to impact a specific variable" (Fraenkel, Wallen, Norman, & Hyun, 2012).

The design of the testing, technically, followed a pre-post-test designed. Pre-testing was conducted before the start of the course, and post-test was conducted after the implementation of blended learning twenty vocabularies multiple questions. The same test was applied for the post-test to demonstrate the applicability and learners' progress through the course. The study was executed in the third Ferkary course in the academic year (2021-2022), which lasted for six weeks. Participants included were in elementary and pre-intermediate levels.

Sample of the Study

Participants of study consisted of thirty-four postgraduate learners whom participated in that English course as a requirement for their higher education applications and promotions at the Language center of Erbil Polytechnic University (EPU). Participants were of both genders (male and female) who voluntarily took part and were native Kurdish speakers learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). As for the age, the participants were ranging between thirty-one to fifty-two years old. The researcher used the appropriate sampling method which is "a type of non-probability or non-random sampling in which individualities from the target population who meet certain practical criteria, similar as ease of access, geographic proximity, availability at a particular time, or willingness to participate in the study" (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016).

Data Collection

The study contained a pre- and post-test and used a Google form questionnaire. At the conclusion of the course, the researchers used eleven item questionnaires. However, if a student needed assistance understanding a concept or a word, the instructor was available to them. The format of the Questionnaires were organized on a 5-point forced-choice Likert-type item. The Likert scale, being ordinal in nature,

ranged from (strongly disagree =1) to (strongly agree = 5). It consisted of two components, including the factual component that required participants to provide demographic information about themselves and the attitudinal or perceptual component, i.e. students' perceptions towards the BLM in order to improve the vocabulary range. The objective of the questionnaire was to investigate the attitudes of the learners towards the BLM. Furthermore, the study employing pre and post-test during the course and the same questions were used. It contained twenty questions covering key vocabulary.

Finally, the third edition of Cutting Edge (Pre-intermediate Level) was employed as the major textbook taught in the course for six weeks. The vocabulary was used as the major instrumental content of study. The objective of pre-test was to know learners' English proficiency level prior to the start of the course. Post-test was also conducted after completing the course to verify the effectiveness of blended learning on vocabulary learning. The data of both the pre-test and post-test, and the Google form questionnaires were analyzed by the (SPSS) version 24 program.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of this research show that the learners are generally satisfied with the use of the BLM in the specified course (see Table 1). More than %70 of the learners has reported that they are satisfied with the BLM and think that it is an effective way of teaching. In addition, based on the data analysis, about %60 percent of the learners have improved their vocabulary range. The content of the materials has also helped learners to improve learners' vocabulary range through the use and interaction of videos, pictures and signs, as reported by the learners. Over %76 of the research population has stated that such videos and visual aids were helpful for

them and boosted their vocabulary during the learning process. The results of the current research match the finding as Abdulrahman & Basalama (2019) investigated that effectiveness of videos and visuals to improve learners' vocabulary range.

BLM has been reported to be efficient in regards to time consumption, therefore, learners have recommended its usage in their future courses. Learners have also reported that BLM works well in engaging learners in the classroom and provides more interesting class activities than the traditional method of teaching.

Table No. (1) "Learners' Attitudes Towards BLM when Learning Vocabulary"

Items	#	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Sd. Deviation
1- I think the blended learning Method was effective for learning English language vocabulary.	N	0	3	7	20	4	3.74	0.79
	%	0.00%	8.82%	20.59%	58.82%	11.76%		
2- I improved my English vocabulary a lot through the BLM in this course.	N	0	3	11	16	4	3.62	0.82
	%	0.00%	8.82%	32.38%	47.06%	11.76%		
3- The videos in units helped me to improve my vocabulary during the course.	N	1	1	10	17	5	3.71	0.87
	%	2.94%	2.94%	29.41%	50.00%	14.71%		
4- I enjoyed using the Blended Learning Method (BLM) during the course.	N	1	1	10	20	2	3.62	0.78
	%	2.94%	2.94%	29.41%	58.82%	5.88%		
5- I recommend the BLM for my future courses.	N	1	6	7	14	6	3.53	1.08
	%	2.94%	17.65%	20.59%	41.18%	17.65%		
6- I think employing BLM in class carries too much time.	N	2	15	8	7	2	2.76	1.05
	%	5.88%	44.12%	23.53%	20.59%	5.88%		
7- Visual aids (photos, videos and signs) used in BLM were interesting.	N	1	1	6	20	6	3.85	0.86
	%	2.94%	2.94%	17.65%	58.82%	17.65%		
8- BLM prepares students well for the final exam.	N	1	6	6	20	1	3.41	0.92
	%	2.94%	17.65%	17.65%	58.82%	2.94%		
9- BLM promotes classroom interaction and collaboration between students.	N	2	4	9	19	0	3.32	0.91
	%	5.88%	11.76%	26.47%	55.88%	0.00%		
10- BLM provides more attractive class activities.	N	0	4	10	15	5	3.62	0.89
	%	0.00%	11.76%	29.41%	44.12%	14.71%		
11- BLM engages students in the learning process.	N	0	3	5	21	5	3.82	0.80
	%	0.00%	8.82%	14.71%	61.76%	14.71%		

In regards to four language skills, learners were asked to state the skill that they mostly improved during the course. As shown in the first pie chart, the results indicated that approximately (38%) of the participants improved their range of vocabulary through the listening skill. Whereas, 35.29% reported to have improved their reading skill. This data

supports the argument that BLM is effective in boosting and developing the vocabulary of learners.

Interestingly, the researchers of the study found out that listening was the most important source of improvement in the learners' vocabulary range. This indicates that, listening, as a source of input (receptive skill) has helped learners to improve their vocabulary acquisition. As shown in Fig 1. This might be due to the fact that the course book provides enough audio tracks for learners that have positive impact on the vocabulary acquisition which is very important for teaching implications in the field of ELT.

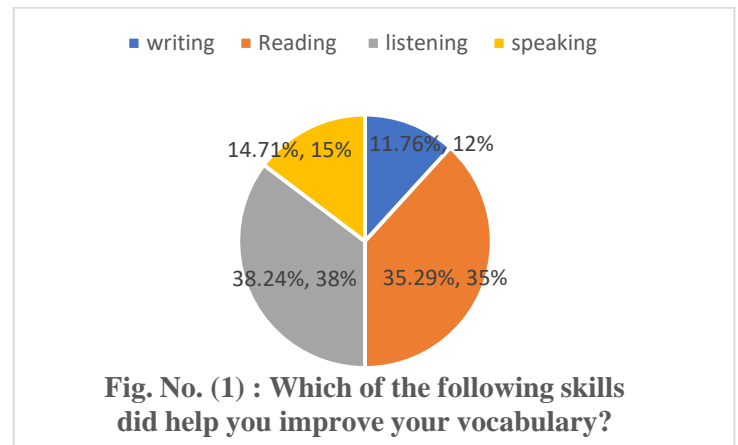


Fig. No. (1) : Which of the following skills did help you improve your vocabulary?

In the research, learners were also asked to report their techniques of learning vocabulary during the course. As illustrated in figure 2, the questionnaire indicated that most of the learners improved their vocabulary through the input from their teachers with a total of %47, whereas using online dictionaries came the second respectively recording a total rate of %41. Overall, the findings of the study show that BLM is an effective method of improving vocabulary range of learners.

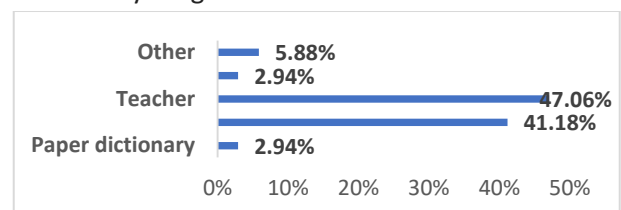


Fig. No. (2) : Which of the following skills did you depend on while learning vocabulary?

Table 2 presents the data regarding the results of the pre-test and post-test administered in this study. A total of 25 learners participated in the pretest and posttest of the vocabulary development test containing 20 question items. As illustrated, the results of the tests show that learners' vocabulary knowledge has improved gradually from a total mean score of 7.16 to 10, and the standard deviation score of (SD 3.60) to (SD: 4.69). This indicates that the implementation of BLM was somehow effective in the development vocabulary when used the BLM.

Regarding the table 3, which represents the results, the T-test illustrated that there is a statistically significant difference between learners' grades before, and after applying blended learning. Based on the results mentioned in table 2, we noted there are statistically significant differences among students before and then depending on the moral level. Where they were worth less than the statistical significance (0.05). By indicating the value of the T test, it can be determined whether the application of the method applied by the researcher was positive (raising the level of scientific for the student) to the contrary, where we find that it was positive, i.e. the application of the scientific method to students has positively affected the raising of their scientific levels and therefore can adopt the scientific method adopted by the researcher in the future.

Table No. (3) :T-test between pre-test and post-test

	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Upper			
posttest - pretest	2.84	2.925	0.585	4.047	4.854	24	0,000

Conclusions and Recommendations

The investigation of the findings and the results showed that blended learning is an up-to-date method in teaching vocabulary of English language. In reference to the findings of the examination, blended learning has a significant impact on the academic skills of learners. The BLM helped to improve learners' vocabulary knowledge. The results also indicate that learners prefer the use of BLM in their future courses. In addition, teaching English vocabulary is very important and it is more than just presenting and introducing new vocabulary to scholars. Knowing words is not only about learning them, but the learner needs to

Table No. (2): Pretest and Posttest Results

Groups	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Post-test	10	25	4.69
Pre-test	7.16	25	3.602

comprehend the meaning of the vocabulary in the context and how the vocabulary is used. This can be accomplished through the correct vocabulary instruction which should involve vocabulary selection, vocabulary knowledge, and methods. Taking into account the results attained and the conclusions, several recommendations can be made for both the utilization of technology and acquiring vocabulary for daily conversations among learners.

1. Although the results cannot be generalized and more learns need to be conducted, the present study, grounded on the results attained, recommends EFL preceptors in general and Kurdish preceptors, in particular, to integrate and familiarize technology into their classes.
2. Nowadays, learners are digital natives and might use their mobile for out-task behavior. Though, the addition of technology into classes might reduce out-task deeds and distractions.

3. Also, it is recommended for Kurdish teachers to devote further grades to learn vocabulary through a technological tool because vocabulary is veritably important to learn and how to use outside and inside classroom situations.

By means of suggestions for farther exploration, it is suggested that farther studies be conducted to determine the belongings of BLM on academic vocabulary performance.

Lastly, the present study was limited to a rather slight number of participants in the Kurdish framework. It is suggested that the upcoming investigation should focus on learning vocabulary through BLM with a larger sample size of participants to produce reliable findings and represent postgraduate scholars in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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