

TURKISH EFL TEACHERS' VIEWS ON BLENDED LEARNING: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The present study was undertaken in order to investigate the blended learning application utilized in a state university in Turkish context. The study investigates blended learning in terms of the *extent of blended aspect, content, activities, effectiveness, and problems as well as suggestions*. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to collect data. Some interviews were conducted physically, while some were conducted through skype or other online teleconferencing methods. Purposeful sampling method was resorted to in the data collection process. Instructors who have been engaged in the blended teaching practice were selected on the premise that they can produce more valuable data. A total of 14 instructors were selected as the participant group in the study. Results indicate that there are considerable variations in the implementation and practitioners' ideas on effectiveness.

Key words: blended learning, content in blended learning, effectiveness, L2 instructors

1. INTRODUCTION

Different researchers define blended learning differently. Ellis and Calvo (2006), for example, view blended learning as a “systematic mix of e-learning and learning in face-to-face contexts, in which coherence across the two contexts from a student perspective is achieved by focusing on the same intended learning outcomes”. According to Lynch and Dembo (2004), blended education is a form of distributed education, and “distributed education represents an eclectic blend of technologies and modalities to enable both synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (anytime) teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions in a single course or program” (p.1). For Thorne (2002), blended learning “is a mixture of traditional classroom teaching and online learning, virtual classes, voice messages, e-mail, tele-conferencing, online written texts and videos” (p. 80).

Blended learning was also viewed differently by some scholars. According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008) for example, blended learning is a student-centered, self-paced, flexible and multi-modal approach to learning. As pointed out by Picciano and Dziuban (2007, p. 11) “there are many forms of blended...[but] a generally accepted taxonomy does not exist. One school's blended is another school's hybrid, or another school's mixed-mode”. Nonetheless, the most common definition refers to a combination of physical classroom learning and virtual environment. Thus, blended learning could be defined as a teaching and learning approach that integrates Web-based teaching and learning mode and face-to-face interaction.

Recent studies have demonstrated that student learning takes places in online environments as successfully as traditional face-to-face classroom setting (Donnelly, 2010; Woltering, et. al, 2009). Yet, there is wide agreement among researchers and scholars that online learning may not meet the expectations alone. Thus, for the

purpose of promoting active, self-directed learning opportunities flexibly, practitioners combine bring together aspects of face-to-face education and online teaching management tools in a blended learning format (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002).

Blended learning is inserted to the programs of Schools of Foreign Languages at varying degrees and types. There is no uniform application of blended learning. Therefore, there is a need to investigate different applications in order to shed light on the current situation.

Now that there are various implementation types as regards blended learning depending on the percentage of face-to-face and online delivery, studying them would shed light on the current situation. Different researchers categorize blended learning environments differently. Alammy, et. al. (2014), for example, talk about three different types: low-impact blend, medium impact blend, and high impact blend.

From the literature, we understand that there are a number of different models of implementing blended learning. They range from adding extra online activities to a traditional face-to-face course, to building the whole blended learning course from scratch. The variety in the definition and implementation of the term blended learning lead language practitioners to view it differently and design their activities based on their understanding of blended learning (Graham, 2012b; Lee, et. al., 2013). The existing large number of blended learning models makes it difficult to select the appropriate design; particularly in the case of higher education contexts (Huang & Zhou, 2005).

In literature, various blended learning designs received considerable attention in the literature; nevertheless, there are few studies that focus on classifying these designs and comparing them in an attempt to specify their benefits and challenges (Graham, 2009, 2012a; Twigg, 2003). Moreover, the best knowledge of the researcher, there are very few or no studies that concentrate on the implementation of blended learning practices in language teaching at higher education. Hence, the present study attempts to compare several blended learning environments from the viewpoint of instructors.

2. Literature Review

Blended learning has been studied extensively in relation to different aspects and perspectives. One important line of research focuses on students' or teachers' views and attitudes on blended learning. Chui (2004) examined the effectiveness of blended learning environment in learning English and found out that the attitudes and perceptions of participants were positive toward the usage of CALL while learning English. Salazar (2016) conducted a study about students' perception of blended learning in an English course at Cuenca University and found that blended learning environment helped the students to learn better and more effectively and they were eager to practice and communicate. Tselios et. al, (2011) investigated students' attitudes toward blended learning in Greek universities and the study showed that easier to use and perceived usefulness are two important parameters students have.

Literature indicates that there is a huge number of studies that point to positive influences of blended learning on student per (a) student performance (Ladyshevsky, 2004; Motteram, 2006); (b) student participation and motivation (DeGeorge-Walker & Keeffe, 2010; Lopez-Perez, et. al, 2011), (c) increased access and flexibility (Macedo-Rouet, et. al, 2009), (d) cost-effectiveness (Herman & Banister, 2007); and (d) more active and deeper learning (Bonk, Kim & Zeng, 2006; Cooner, 2010) in comparison with traditional classes (Donnelly, 2010; Woltering, et.al, 2009).

Blended learning was also investigated in relation to its effectiveness in vocabulary learning. In a sample study, Zhang, et. al, (2011) worked on the effectiveness of vocabulary learning via mobile phones and found that students can learn vocabulary more effectively short-term via mobile phones than with paper material. In another comparative study, Khazaei & Dastjerdi (2011) focused on the impact of traditional and blended teaching on EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. The study revealed that the students who received the learning content through blended teaching approach had better test results than the group of students who received the learning content in the traditional way. It can be concluded that blended learning has a positive influence on vocabulary learning.

Blended learning has also been studied extensively in Turkish context. Kahyalar (2016), for example, tried to find out how much blended learning environment is effective in learning English and the study showed that its effectiveness changes from student to student and it is recommended that the variables of attitudes, abilities and preferences of students should be taken in account to satisfy students and to make blended learning process more effective. Cepik et al. (2016) carried out a study about the attitudes of language instructors toward blended learning at Zirve University and found that even though blended learning was appreciated by most of the instructors, there were three main challenges they came across in the process: short of teacher and student training, infrastructural problems, and lack of technologic knowledge. Basal (2015) investigated the perceptions of English language teachers at a state university in Turkey on flipped classrooms, a kind of blended learning. Results of the study showed that they had positive perceptions and stated flipped classrooms' useful sides: personalization, advance student preparation, increasing participation and flexible time.

3. Blended Learning Application at Karabuk University

Karabuk University is one of the universities implementing blended learning in Turkey. Although blended learning is implemented more or less in all the faculties, School of Foreign Languages (SFL) is the only faculty trying to use blended learning approach intensively while giving language education. As it is known, there are 6 models of blended learning: face to face driver, rotation, flex, labs, self-blend and online driver. Online driver, labs and face to face driver are used effectively.

Online driver is the model that students complete an entire course through an online platform with possible teacher check-ins. It is a kind of internet-based distance education. Freshmen studying in Turkish departments take online English lessons for 2 hours every week. These students have to be online in the given time, but they can join the online lesson wherever they want. These lessons are given by the instructors of SFL and the whole schedule and exams are prepared by the commission whose members are also instructors in SFL. Even though the lessons are given through the online platform, midterm and final exams are held on papers because there are thousands of students but there aren't enough labs.

Furthermore, students of SFL take 2-hour lessons in labs every week. Although they get extra online exercises about listening, reading and writing skills, they need to be in consistent physical locations which are the labs in SFL building in contrast to online driver model. At that model, teachers just supervise. The students study on both a website supplied by the contractual publishing house and a programmed created by the staff of SFL. Some parts of these tools can be reached out of campus, so the students can learn or practice according to their own paces and get faster feedback.

In SFL, instructors are free to apply any method they want in the classes even though they have the same curriculum and pacing, so it is easy to implement face to face driver model for them. Teachers use technology alongside traditional teaching to increase success in educational outcomes. They can integrate technology at will and effectually. In every class, there is a smartboard and thanks to that video lessons are implemented easily and effectively, and some useful internet-based programmers can be used during the lesson. To make the students play a simple online game can even motivate them. In addition, prep school students take proficiency and placement exams online in the labs, so assessment process becomes fast and instructors do not spend time to mark.

4. Methodology

Participants

The study group consists of 14 lecturers. Purposeful sampling method was used in order to determine the participants. Instructors that have at least two years of experience were selected so that they could provide sufficient and valuable data. All the participants have at least five years of teaching experience.

Data Collection

Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews. One of the main data collection tools in phenomenology studies is interview (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2012; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011). The interviews were conducted with lecturers. The interviews lasted for nearly twenty minutes. Semi-structured interview forms allow people included in an interview to express themselves (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç-Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz and Demirel, 2012). At the stage of preparing the interview form, (i) national literature and international literature were reviewed, and a question

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis and content analysis were used for data analysis. The recorded interviews were and notes taken down during interviews were transcribed. Then, the related files were deciphered by the researchers. To ensure a correct and precise decoding, the interview process was followed through the written documentation while audio records were being listened. As a next step, the data were grouped based on themes, and content analysis was conducted. The themes were determined based on the related literature, and codes were identified. Accordingly, an attempt was made to make a content analysis suitable for the research purpose.

Coding was attained as a result of the content analysis and are shown in tables. To ensure the internal validity of the study, it was examined whether the data were meaningful, the findings were consistent, and the findings were compatible with the previous conceptual framework. To increase the reliability, enough time was spent together with the participants to feel themselves comfortable. Expert opinions were taken during the stage of creating data collection tools.

5. Findings

Research question 1: What are your views on blended learning in general?

Table 1. Participant views on blended learning in general

Codes	n
technology integration	4
implementation / effective use	4
physical conditions	3
autonomy	3
methods / materials	2
motivation	2
collaboration	2
anxiety	2
interest	1

The views of participants on blended learning:

I find blended learning in terms of abolishing classroom rules and giving students a sense of autonomy.

Traditional classroom methods or online digital media is itself insufficient. Therefore, they must be combined.

I believe that it is possible to decrease foreign language learning anxiety with the help of cooperative learning.

I see it as a useful application. New generations are more and more technology literate and we must activate this potential.

I am of the opinion that if applied properly blended teaching may be helpful. Students must be encouraged to work on the language outside the class as well. This way, learner autonomy can be fostered.

Research question 2: In your opinion, what are the strengths of blended learning?

Table 2. Participant views on the strengths of blended learning

codes	n
pace of learning	4
quick feedback	4
interest	4
learner autonomy	4
student collaboration / peer learning	3
creativity	3
project based learning	2
self confidence	2
visualization	2
motivation	2
teaching of culture	1
learner centered	1
reducing anxiety	1

The views of participants on the strengths of blended learning:

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Students find a chance to learn at their own pace. Immediate feedback is made possible. The learning process can become more enjoyable. It appeals to all students. Introvert students, for example, may find a chance to practice language.

It is more effective. It catches students' attention. In addition, it facilitates student learning, communicative ideas, demonstrates an interest in learning, organizes effectively, shows respect for students, and lastly assesses progress fairly.

To me, the strengths of blended learning are fostering learner autonomy, making portfolio and project-based teaching possible, and fostering cooperative learning.

Blended learning makes it possible for students to work on language at their own pace. Students can work on any material that they want to study and thus become more autonomous. Besides this, learner motivation can be increased.

By enhancing cooperative learning, blended learning paves the way for peer learning.

The strengths of blended teaching are being up-to-date and student-centered prioritizing creativity, besides increasing productivity.

Students can be more creative and comfortable since what they speak or what they write are not seen by their classmates and immediate feedback is provided by their teachers.

Research question 3: What are the problems related to blended learning?

Table 3. Participant views on the problems related to blended learning

codes	n
technical issues	10
copy-paste problems	8
financial shortages	3

As is expected, one of the most cited problems is technical problems (n=10). Among technical problems, we have connectivity problems, difficulty of using the program, or lecturers' lack of sufficient competence in the use of the online program. The second most rated problems is that students copy-paste from the Internet instead of doing their assignments themselves (n=8).

Sample views of participants on problems related to blended learning:

Some lecturers do not have sufficient knowledge about how to use the program. Some software or programs are not easy to use.

Depending on my own experience, I can say that finding and implementing the appropriate methods and materials is a demanding task on the part of lecturers. On the part of student, some of them do not record their own work and instead copy-past from the Internet.

Students' existing addiction and competency on the use of smart phones may cause them to cheat. In the same way, crowded classes may be difficult to handle.

For effective use of blended learning, the institution need to have a powerful Internet connection. In addition, teachers must have a good command of technology.

Research question 4: Do you think blended learning is beneficial in language teaching?

The fourth research question was related to whether the participants view blended learning as beneficial, and if so, in what way it is beneficial. The findings are

presented in Table 4. As we can understand from the table, 12 of the participants stated that it was effective, and 3 of them stated it fosters language skills.

Table 4. Participant views on the potential benefits of blended learning in language teaching

codes	n
effective	12
fosters language skills	3
abundance of materials	2
motivation	2
feedback	2

Sample views of participants on the benefits of blended learning are as follows:

It is effective, especially with the listening skill. It may also enrich vocabulary lessons through in-built games.

It is definitely beneficial in language teaching. Our students come into contact with technology at very early ages and are brought up with technology-integrated methods which enhance critical thinking and creativity.

Research question 5: What are your suggestions to solve problems encountered in blended learning?

Table 5. Participants' suggestions to solve problems encountered in blended learning

Codes	n
Awareness	6
grading issues	3
learner autonomy	3
Planning	1
encouragement	1

The last question in the interview was "What are your suggestions to solve problems encountered in blended learning?". For this question, the most rated item was "awareness" (n=6). With regard to awareness, the lecturers touched upon on the fact that students are not aware of what they are doing and they do not have a full grasp of the objectives of blended learning. The participants suggested that students' awareness should be raised for betterment in blended learning. Blended learning should not be viewed as an in-class application. Instead, students must be encouraged to continue their learning outside class as well. The second most suggested item is related to "grading issues" (n=3). The participants state that if students' work in language laboratories is not graded, they are reluctant to study. Hence, laboratory courses should also be included in the grading system. The next important item in terms of suggestions is "learner autonomy" (n=3). The participants converge on the point that blended teaching fosters learner autonomy. The next two items are "planning" (n=1) and "encouragement" (n=1).

The suggestions of participants for betterment of blended learning:

Students must be guided properly. For this, teachers or lecturers must be given in-service training on the application of blended learning.

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Students may not be able to grasp the purposes of blended learning. They think that it is a waste of time. Therefore, students' awareness must be raised on the objectives of blended learning.

Lecturers should always have a contingency plan in case computers do not work.

Most students expect traditional teaching environments. However, when they are exposed to technology-enhanced environments they believe that they are not learning. They remark that they haven't learned anything. Therefore, they must be informed on the benefits of blended learning and the methods should be clarified to students.

In our country, learner autonomy needs to be enhanced. Thus, I believe that the necessary guidance must be given to students.

Discussion and conclusion

The present study was intended to get an understanding of the views of language instructors in terms of blended learning practices. In particular, the study focused on blended learning in terms of instructors' views about blended learning in general, the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning, problems associated with blended learning, and suggestions for the betterment of blended learning practices.

As for the general views about blended learning, the study unearthed that blended learning provides a sense of learner autonomy on account of the fact that students are supposed to follow their learning process and get their evaluation by themselves. In general, the participants accentuated the positive sides of blended learning. One common theme, for example, was that blended learning decreases learner anxiety, promotes cooperative learning, and fosters the technological skills of learners.

Another focus in the study was related to the strengths of blended learning. Most of the participants stated that the strengths of blended learning practices are *pace of learning, quick feedback, interest learner autonomy, student collaboration / peer learning, creativity, and project-based learning*. As for the problems associated with the implementation of blended learning, three codes emerged. They are technical problems, copy-paste problems, and inadequacy of lecturers.

Finally, when it comes to participants suggestions for the betterment in blended learning practices, the following themes emerged from the interviews: *awareness, grading issues, learner autonomy, planning, and encouragement*. In this context, awareness was voiced by the participants on the premise that students do not have sufficient awareness as to the benefits of blended learning and thus their awareness must be raised. Another suggestion is to include blended learning practices into the grading process so that students can take it more seriously.

The present study along with many other studies emphasize the positive aspects of blended learning as a useful, enjoyable, supportive, flexible and motivating teacher strategy. Nevertheless, as is put forward by Gözer and Caner (2014), these are not enough unless a supportive atmosphere is created in the class and participation and collaboration are ensured. In addition, it is also suggested that precise planning is a must in the blending process of face to face and online learning environments. Future studies should focus on how to create environments that are conducive to the implementation of blended learning.

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