

Blended Learning In Saudi Higher Education Framework, Implications, And Limitations

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ABSTRACT

In the modern era of teaching and learning, the education system witnessed many changes. New methods of teaching and learning are utilised in order to adapt to the growth of technology. Teachers used some teaching methods, such as online teaching, face to face teaching or a combination of both online and face to face known as blended learning (BL) environment. BL has been proven its advantages empirically in many studies. One of the significant advantages is that BL is used as an extended learning environment to reinforce knowledge and make learning more accessible by utilising technology and online resources. However, there are some drawbacks of implementing blended learning, such as the demand of time and teachers' efforts to provide feedback and follow up students. This paper examined the use of BL in higher education. The first part of this paper reviewed some empirical studies in BL. The second part presented the theoretical framework of using BL. Benefits and challenges of implementing BL in higher education regarding Saudi universities are explained. Lastly, the paper concluded with some critical remarks.

Keywords: blended learning; higher education; face to face; challenges; benefits

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid growth of technology, people witnessed changes and transformations in their lives. Everything now is accessible using mobile devices and internet. The teaching and learning landscape are very changing. We live in a modern world which has seen technology being widely incorporated into our society. Currently, generation is used technology to access information; therefore, the classroom should not be any different. Recent developments in teaching practices have heightened the need for change and adapted new teaching and learning methods. The use of technology in teaching and learning is a significant area of interest in education. Thus, many teachers in schools and universities start implementing online teaching materials when they deliver lessons or design their courses. Learners often become active, and the provider of the knowledge instead of only the receiver since online resources including books, journals and magazines are easily available to them through websites. Most Saudi universities' lectures start to cope with technology by blending online materials with face to face interaction. According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008), blended learning models and designs can enhance and improve the

learning experience. This paper focuses on a blended learning approach with an explanation of its theoretical framework. It also sheds light on implementing BL in teaching the English language in higher education and its challenges in Saudi Arabia universities' education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional learning method (face to face) has been used for centuries where the interaction happens between teachers and students in a real environment such as a classroom. However, this teaching method has gradually changed with the use of computers, which allow teachers to demonstrate lessons using a projector. Lately, with the development of technology, teachers blend the use of technology in face to face interaction. Blended learning has been investigated by numerous of different academic educators and practices around the world. According to Rooney (2003) blended learning model has been explained by the American Society for Training and Development as one of the ten top trends to emerge in the (knowledge delivery industry). After it became popular and gained attention in many places such as companies, blended learning was implemented and used in the traditional education system. Researchers attempt to define blended learning in different ways and they consensus that it generally focusses on combining traditional learning (such as tutorials, lectures, and seminars) with the more interactive forms made possible by the use of new technologies (Higgins and Gomez 2014). According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008:5) blended learning is 'the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences' and 'a unique fusion of synchronous and asynchronous, direct and mediated mode of communication' (p.6). They also assert that the primary concern in BL is 'to provide more engaged learning experiences' (p.4). In the same vein, Bourne and Seaman (2005) argue that blended learning is a method to combine the best elements of face to face and online teaching and learning. Thus, BL has changed the traditional teaching approach which was commonly used in Saudi higher education which described teaching as a passive mode as it focuses only on face to face interaction and prevents the opportunity for collaborative participation and leaning. Therefore, the reason for this change is better explained by Swail (2002) who argue that rules are changing, and higher education institutions are constantly under pressure to change, adjust or desist. In Saudi higher education, such a change from traditional teaching to an online environment has its implications and challenges which will be present in this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The basic fundamental purpose of blended learning is to open all the possible ways of teaching and learning through synchronous and asynchronous methods of participation and communication (Garrison and Vaughan 2008). Many higher education institutions adopt a new approach that blends traditional and web-based teaching and learning, and Saudi universities are not an exception to the technological development in the education system. This approach of BL helps to create important communities of enquiry.

The community of inquiry (COI) model was created by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) to provide a theoretical framework to explain and guide online learning and teaching used by many practitioners and educators in an online setting. Arbaugh (2006) asserts that the COI model has shown great success as it involves of two ideas community and inquiry. He explains that the community builds on social nature, including collaboration, interaction and discourse in building knowledge. On the other hand, inquiry represents the procedures of making meaning through personal preference and responsibility.

The COI framework involves three dimensions social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. These presences are vital to guide and to help for designing courses material and enrich the online educational experience. Moreover, the COI model explains the structure and the reasons for understanding the 'nature, purpose, and principles of blended learning.' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008, p.10). However, the challenge that might face teachers is to link the properties of asynchronous online learning with the ability to develop communities of inquiry that incorporate the social, cognitive and teaching presence to fulfil individual needs. The following part focuses on the definition and the key categories of each presence. It also highlights the pedagogical aspect of these dimensions with relation to teaching the English language in an online environment.

Social Presence

Social presence in online education is the ability for students to feel connected and work collaboratively in a save online environment. In any online learning, students can involve in an online discussion, share opinions, express feelings and emotions and communicate purposefully in a climate of trust. This enables them to share knowledge, ask questions and get feedback from peers and teachers. Higher education researches have shown that social presence has a positive impact on engagement, student success, retention, stronger performance and motivation (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Undergraduate students in Saudi universities enrol in English language course in the preparatory year. Most of them have little exposure to the English language; therefore, students are not confident and hesitate to participate in classroom discussion, nor are they willing to work in groups. Thus, online learning tools such as Blackboard gives students an opportunity and enable them to communicate effectively by providing a social nature of learning where they involve in discussion forum anonymously which allows some lower-level students the courage to practise English in a deeper level, in a secure environment and build relationships with a classmate. Students often show positive attitudes when they work in groups in blended learning environment. It also serves as a community for learners beyond the classroom where students can together communicate openly, negotiate, debate and receive comments from their group members who enhance the educational experience. On the other hand, negative social presence prevents learners from presenting themselves as real people; therefore, the learning experience is diminished. The role of online teacher/tutor is important, which will explain in the following section to minimise the negative experience from happening and enhance the positive ones.

Teaching Presence

Teacher presence is vital in online learning since students' interactions are not enough for an effective online learning environment. The role for teaching presence 'provides the design, facilitation, and direction for a worthwhile educational experience' (Garrison and Vaughan 2008, p.24). The teaching presence was also seen as the power that formed a vital community of inquiry because the organisation of social presence and cognitive presence are based on a teacher's presence (Garrison et al., 2000, p.96)

Teaching presence in online learning involves many activities such as facilitating the course content by providing extra online resources, upload power point slides, and lecture recordings. Teachers also engage and support students in their learning by posting online tasks that stimulate them to participate and self-assess their progress. In English language class, the students need more time to practise English and participate in different activities to improve their English. As a

result, the teacher supports the students with extra supplementary online materials suitable for their level and interests. The teacher facilitates, monitors, guides and gives feedback. The teacher also assigns online homework to direct students to search for the information and be autonomous learners.

Cognitive Presence

In the field of blended learning, cognitive presence is seen as one of the crucial elements of the community of inquiry framework. Cognitive presence is defined as a method of inquiry which consists of sharing ideas, listening, and thinking in the critical thinking process (Garrison, 2017). In addition, Garrison believes that cognitive presence cannot be interpreted in isolation. Instead, it is a collaborative and purposeful process interrelated with the social and teaching process. This emphasises the importance of teacher and student's interaction to activate cognitive learning. In online learning, students have the opportunity to construct meaning, make connections, apply new ideas and make reflections on previous and new experiences. In fact, the process of learning and acquiring knowledge is dynamic and active where students confront new thoughts and exchange ideas in a discussion forum or any other media such as live chat and emails. Burbules (2004) argues that "Outcomes are constituted and reconstituted in active processes of inquiry, not taken as a static endpoint" (p.7). It is worth mentioning that appropriate course and learning materials design are imperative to engage and stimulate students to reach a desirable level of cognitive engagement. McLoughlin and Mynard, (2009) argue that for developing and enhancing higher-order thinking, successful practices such as practical tasks, clear instructions, clear wording of teacher prompt and time limit should be implemented with technology.

Regarding English language learning, teachers can design materials based on different cognitive elements; for example, activities that involve remembering, understanding, evaluating and creating. In Saudi universities, most English classes are big, with more than thirty students. Besides, students have a minimum chance to practice English and reflect on their learning. Therefore, implementing blended learning in English classes enhances students' cognitive ability by raising questions, solving problems and creating new materials such as writing a paragraph. Al Zumor et al. (2013) examined EFL students' perception of blended learning's advantages and challenges using Blackboard at King Khalid University. The findings revealed that the students showed positive perceptions and attitudes for learning English in the blended learning environment as it also contributed to increasing their vocabulary and reading hours. Moreover, BL enhanced their metacognitive, social and affective strategies.

BENEFITS OF BLENDED LEARNING

The effectiveness and the rationale for choosing blended learning by many learners are discussed in many literatures. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the benefits and the advantages of implementing BL in the English language classroom in the Saudi context. Four main benefits will be explained with the elaboration of the writer experience in applying BL when teaching English.

Accessibility and Flexibility

The main benefit of adopting BL is that it is more flexible and accessible for learners than in traditional face-to-face classrooms. Graham (2006) sought to explain the reason why students enjoy blended learning. First, it gives students greater flexibility since some of the learning occurs

in planned face-to-face periods, while other learning takes place online at their preference and convenience. It is evident that in BL students have the right to access and engage with resources and authentic online materials anytime and anywhere. Furthermore, portions of online learning would be offered as being synchronous or asynchronous. Online synchronous parts could be video-conferencing, chat, and meeting. Whilst asynchronous forms could be online tutorials, emails, online discussion boards, and collaborative documents such as wikis.

Diversity and variety are the main characteristics of higher education since classes involve many different learning preferences and language abilities. Technology supports variation as some online programs allow individual students to access and choose the online materials convenient for their need, which, as a result, motivate them and influence English language learning. For example, some students prefer synchronous classes as they want to feel engaged with the class experience in real-time. They may find it helpful to comment or ask a question and receive advice and feedback. For other students, learning asynchronous would be a better choice. Some students need to get more time to think before offering opinions and thoughts (Tomlinson and Whittaker, 2013). Almalki (2011), in his study of blended learning in higher education in Saudi Arabia, reveals that BL increases student's interaction with the teacher and facilitate class communication. Additionally, the study confirms that teacher and students valued blended learning design benefits because of its accessibility and flexibility.

In English language courses, many activities with different levels and targets are available online for students to access. The students choose the appropriate task to their level and interest, which significantly impacts their language. Young (2002) argues that students are different and are not learning the same way, so the traditional method is not appropriate for all students. In the same vein, Al-Jarf (2005), demonstrates the importance of blended learning in developing English. The study reveals that online activities enhance and support second language learning English. Moreover, the study illustrated that students appreciate and welcome integrating online learning, which allows for interaction with the teacher and flexibility with online tasks.

Autonomy and Motivation

Working Collaboratively in blended learning strengthens students' autonomy. Their capability to perform individual and shared activities and their responsibility to self-learning become higher in BL (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011). Technology paves the way for learners to be autonomous and to self-access to the knowledge. Students are more responsible for managing their studying and learning activities.

The blended learning approach is often appropriate in an environment where exploration, questioning and participation are discouraged (Lotherington and Jenson, 2011). In Saudi universities, most of the classes are teacher-centred, so students are not encouraged to ask questions. Moreover, some students with a low level of English are hesitated to participate in the classroom. Consequently, the use of blended learning motivates students who fear making mistakes and lack of confidence. Also, correction and feedback might cause anxiety and tension to students, affecting their learning and acquiring the English language. As a result, the blended learning environment provides a space for learners and engage them to communicate with their teacher and peers to get academic help and advice.

CHALLENGES WHEN IMPLEMENTING BLENDED LEARNING

Time and Effort

The challenges and the limitations of blended learning method in Saudi universities are various. In this paper, I will highlight two major difficulties teachers and students may face. First, teaching blended courses demand time. Supporting this view, Graham *et al.* (2003) assert that teachers will need to modify their timetables to accommodate more regular interactions with students as more frequent and immediate feedback are required in online environments. Teachers may refuse to teach blended courses to avoid this requirement.

Moreover, some online materials need adjustment to accommodate the students' needs and culture. From my experience with blended courses, I have spent several hours a day monitoring my students' posts, answering their queries, and assessing their work. To overcome this issue, it is suggested that orientation workshops be offered for both teachers and students to highlight online teaching and learning techniques. Also, offering time- management sessions for teachers will facilitate their online responsibilities and reduce the time required for online moderation.

Technical Awareness

Another key challenge to adopting blended learning can be the technical awareness and ability level of students and teachers. Since students in Saudi universities have not had online learning before, many students might find it harder to acquire the essential skills to perform effectively in blended learning environment. Additionally, Sait *et al.* (2003) asserted that teachers with inadequate Internet use skills were unwilling to use technology in their teaching. To address and solve this issue, helpdesk and support services, extensive workshops are required for both teachers and students. Organisational support is essential to encourage the adaption of blended learning among faculties. This might increase the teachers' confidence in using technology appropriately in blended courses that affect students' learning experience.

CONCLUSION

While there are measures showing the growing need for technology to be incorporated into face-to-face language classrooms, there are some other drawbacks. The students now are empowered with digital background information; hence, a blended learning strategy can be beneficial as it enhances the quality of learning and increases access to information for students. Integrating technology with the traditional method of teaching face-to-face method can lead to more interaction and encourage collaborative learning. The increasing popularity of community of inquiry model, through various technologies, demonstrates that group-based learning remains valuable and vital. It also considers the most common method in which young learners are engaged in formal and informal learning environments. (Anderson, 2017). In Saudi context, the teachers' role is crucial to raise the students' awareness of blended learning approaches and its benefits as most classes are teacher-centred and some students might not accept the transformation as a student-centred approach.

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