The Iraqi EFL University Learners' Abilities in Blended Education at Corona Virus Time

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of daily life notably the educational system in the world including Iraq. Studying the effects of online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction is essential in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic's emergence and expansion as well as the move in education toward online courses. This study is concerned with the Iraqi EFL university learners' abilities in blended education at Corona Virus time. Therefore, the study seeks to find answers for the following questions: 1) what is the effect of blended education on the Iraqi EFL ability? 2) what are differences in effect between online teaching and paper and pencil exam in blended teaching? The aims of this study include analyzing the effect of blended education on the Iraqi EFL ability and stating the differences in effect between online teaching and paper and pencil exam in blended teaching. Documents, which represent a very useful methodological instrument is the data collection method used in this study. The data consists of examinations in years (2020–2021 / 2021–2022) in the department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Thi-Qar. More than 200 Iraqi EFL students are included in the sample for this study. The study concludes that, there are no differences among the results of language, linguistics, literature, educational and non-departmental course in the online teaching /testing in the blended education. Over the course of the three paper-and-pencil exam sessions (2020-2021) the percentage of EFL learners' results began to decline with verification in the type of materials. The percentages of success in online teaching are also very high, and all subjects were taught in a blended learning. Online teaching and learning, whether as pure or in blended education had a negative impact on students' comprehension skills; the students were unable to understand the material when taking classes electronically. It is evident that a considerable percentage of students failed in the three paper and pencil subjects (drama, linguistics, and grammar), which were taught in a face-to-face way. Years of online learning caused the students to lose their capacity for memorization.

Keywords: *Blended Education at corona virus time, Universities Learning.*

Introduction

As result of corona virus, the majority of institutions saw an incredible massive "shifting" from traditional face-to-face sessions to online classrooms then to face-to-face way through blended way of teaching from the early beginning of 2020 due to the widespread spread of the coronavirus illness. The effects and changes that COVID-19 on the educational system are the subject of numerous research and examinations. This study deals with the effect of blended education of online exams and paper and pencil exams at corona virus time on university students' EFL ability.

The following questions are addressed in this study:

- What is the effect of blended education on the Iraqi EFL ability?
- What are differences in effect between online teaching and paper and pencil exam in blended teaching?
- The aims of the study include the following:

Analyzing at the effect of blended education on the Iraqi EFL ability.

Stating the differences in effect between online teaching and paper and pencil exam in blended teaching.

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In this study, it is hypothesized that:

- There are no significant differences among the students' scores in online teaching subjects in limited blended teaching and testing.
- There are no significant differences among the Iraqi EFL students' scores in online teaching / testing and paper and pencil testing in blended teaching.
- There are significant differences among the Iraqi EFL students' scores among the subjects in face-to-face (paper and pencil) exams in the limited blended education

Literature Review

Definition of Coronavirus

Coronavirus is a group of viruses that can cause diseases from mild conditions such as the common cold to more serious diseases such as pneumonia, in relation to Covid-19. These viruses are discovered to be connected to human illness epidemics caused by Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) in 2012 and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002 (Stankovska et al., 2020, p. 35).

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) as a pandemic that causes novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (World Health Organization 2020a). By 14 April 2020, around 1,844,683 confirmed cases with 117,021 deaths were reported from at least 213 countries, areas, or territories (World Health Organization 2020b). SARS-CoV-2 is a novel strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. Phylogenetic analysis suggests that SARS-CoV-2 might have emerged from the zoonotic cycle and rapidly spread by human-to-human transmission (Rezaei, 2021).

Coronaviruses can be divided into four subgroups: alpha, beta, gamma and delta. Before the emergence of the new Covid-19, there are significant similarities with the SARS-CoV virus from a structural and pathological point of view, as it was classified as a beta coronavirus and is called SARS-CoV-2. It spread in animals before being transmitted to humans, where it first appeared in late December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Rezaei, 2021, p. 2)

It is worth to mention, the evidence shows the presence of virus SARS-CoV-2 was proven to be associated with Bat-CoV-RatG13 (SARS-like bat coronavirus). Although the primary host had been indicated, it was imperative to determine the intermediate hosts between bats and humans to control the pandemic. (Rezaei, 2021, p. 5)

However, transmission between humans occurs through close contact with infected persons or through respiratory droplets during coughing or sneezing within a range of about 6 feet. People have been reported to suffer from fever, cough, muscle pain, and shortness of breath, in addition to a low white blood cell count. Severe cases of infection cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure, and death, and even with strict travel restrictions in place, a large number of individuals exposed to SARS-CoV-2 travel undetected, leading to the spread of the virus throughout the world. However, large-scale measures are being worked on globally to limit the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Rezaei, 2021, p. 6).

Learning Loss During the Pandemic on Students' Cognitive Development

Preventing government agencies, especially those in education, disintegrated due to COVID-19's instability. Virtual learning became more and more common. According to earlier UNICEF research, closing schools during a pandemic greatly lessens learning loss. Because government facilities were inadequate, the substantial impact of school closures resulted in high rates of learning loss. Children's cognitive development was hampered by the epidemic's school closures, which led to learning loss. There are inherited and acquired elements that impact cognitive development, which encompasses intelligence, reasoning, memory, and language development. Lockdowns have immobilized the educational process, and

protracted school closures can have a detrimental effect on students' motivation, academic progress, and cognitive growth. (Suroyo & Putra, 2021, pp. 2-4).

Types of Learning During Covid 19

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of education, leading to a shift from residential-only to online, remote, or hybrid learning environments. This created challenges for students in low- and middle-income countries, as they struggle with low broadband connections. The International Association of Universities reports identified three main challenges to online and distance education: technical infrastructure, distance learning competencies, and the field of study. The pandemic also redefined online teaching and learning, with many faculty and staff struggling to teach effectively. To ensure equitable access, support, and learning for all students, colleges and universities must redirect resources to expand professional development opportunities in virtual teaching and invest in inclusive online learning experiences (Chan, 2022, p. 6).

Online Education

Online learning comes in many forms. Some of the most well-known ones, such synchronous and asynchronous, are listed below. Synchronous online learning is the first type of online learning, in which instruction and learning happen concurrently across a network connection. Students participate in a learning activity simultaneously from various locations across the globe in synchronous online learning, or teaching. Online chats and video conferences are frequently utilized in this type of learning to enable instantaneous communication between students and teachers. An instructor provides students with a sequence of units, each of which may include required readings or uploaded media, online tests, discussion forums, and other activities that they complete on their own schedule. Asynchronous online learning is another type of online learning where students and the instructor interact with the course material at different times and locations. Asynchronous learning environments provide students with easily accessible resources including PowerPoint presentations, handouts, articles, and audio/video lectures. These resources are accessible around-the-time through an online application. Because users can access the resources at any time and plan their study schedule accordingly, asynchronous online learning offers learners greater freedom. For instance, students with rigid schedules may choose to (Farooqi, 2022, p. 2).

Blended Learning

Blended learning is a combination of online and traditional teaching methods, combining different components to create a more informative and engaging experience. This approach can be a simple separation of part of a course into an online component, or a more complex blend of online and traditional learning. The modalities can overlap, but they can still be differentiated. For example, an online program with three consecutive five-week sessions and a collaborative fifteen-week project that overlaps the courses can blur the modalities. The increasing popularity of integrating video conferencing, podcasting, YouTube videos, wikis, blogs, and other media into classwork further complicates the definition of blended learning (Dziuban et al., 2016).

Historically speaking, online and blending learning period in five waves

The 1990s saw the first wave of online and blended learning, influenced by internet technology and collaboration between government, private enterprise, and higher education. Colleges and universities began adopting online learning, primarily through interactive, asynchronous learning networks. By the end of the decade, online education shifted into mainstream higher education (Picciano, 2017, p. 89).

In the early 2000s of the second wave, online and blended learning models emerged, attracting traditional colleges and universities. A meta-analysis by the US Department of Education in 2007 found that online classes produced stronger student outcomes than face-to-face instruction. However, the blended model had the highest positive effects on learning. Social media also gained popularity in higher education (Picciano, 2017, p. 108) .

The third wave of online education, known as the MOOC Phenomenon, the term MOOC (Massive, Open, Online Course) which began in 2008 with a course led by George Siemens and Stephen Downes. Stanford University offered several MOOCs, with one enrolled over 160,000 students. The media praised the model for improving access to higher education and cost-effectiveness. However, by 2013, the media's interest in MOOCs had ended. (Picciano, 2017, p. 129)

The Fourth Wave of online education, from 2014 to 2020, combines the benefits of blended learning and MOOC models. It presents new models and introduces new facilities and approaches. The Fourth Wave focuses on pedagogy driving technology in a sophisticated blended learning environment. Policy issues such as free tuition, the California Community College Online Education Initiative, and student loan discharging were discussed (Picciano, 2017, p. 150).

The last wave discusses the impact of new digital technologies on human endeavors, including higher education, in 2030 and beyond. It highlights Ray Kurzweil's work on the singularity, where machine technology will outperform human brain functions. Technology to augment the human brain, such as neural implants and brainiest, is expected to evolve post 2030. Concerns arise about losing control to technology (Picciano, 2017, p. 180).

The Challenges of Teaching English Worldwide

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the education sector globally, with schools, colleges, and universities shutting down in 185 countries in April 2020. It affected 89.4% of enrolled students, particularly those from low-income groups. Governments introduced various solutions to mitigate the impact of closures, including digital modes of learning. However, access to the internet was a significant obstacle, particularly for rural learners. The pandemic also led to increased unemployment and financial strain on households, leading to a drop in enrolments and families struggling to fund higher education. Public institutions also face reduced funding, particularly for student scholarships and research & development. Despite these challenges, the pandemic fostered a virtual learning culture and ensured the continuity of teaching-learning processes (Unni et al., 2023, p. 3).

Longevity, anxiety, and isolation were significant contributors to poor student wellbeing. The lived environment evolved significantly, with access to friends and family practically ceased due to nationwide restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19. The digital era offers online methods of sustaining regular contact with social networks, but early research suggested that increased engagement with the internet could exacerbate feelings of loneliness and depression (Unni et al., 2023, p. 5)

The sudden shift to online learning presented numerous challenges for teachers and students. Students with different learning styles, such as auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and mixed, face difficulties in online learning. Integrating computers in teaching subjects like grammar requires active teacher presence for explanation and interaction. Listening and speaking skills also face challenges, as not all students can practice independently without the teacher's presence. The sudden shift from face-to-face to online learning was a significant transformation for both teachers and students, highlighting the need for more experience and resources (Kılıçkaya et al., 2022, p 21).

The shift from conventional to online learning presents challenges for teachers in applying appropriate methods, particularly in English. Huang et al (2020:2) described three main challenges in online learning during the pandemic. The first is the limited time, in preparing and adjusting the materials. Second is the lack of direct interaction which results in barrier the learning process. The third one is the use of pedagogy which is effective in motivating and luring students to be active in participating in online learning. Febrianto et al. (2020) found that online learning is not effective due to internet access difficulties and signal factors. In this regard, Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) found that students often lack smartphones, internet connections are unstable, and they cannot meet the internet quota (Rohayati, 2022, p. 3).

During the pandemic period, online English courses face challenges due to inadequate learning facilities, including unstable internet networks and limited internet data packages. This results in students' inability to

participate in video conferencing via Google Meet or Zoom applications regularly. The pandemic has further exacerbated these issues, as students return to their hometowns and struggle to obtain stable internet networks. The large file sizes of instructional videos also cause slow download times, hindering the learning process. Additionally, students struggle to afford expensive internet data packages, which affects their participation in online learning. State universities receive more subsidies for internet data packages, limiting students' ability to fully engage in learning activities (Purnama et al., 2021, p. 8).

A Comparison of Language Teaching and Learning During and After COVID-19

Face-To-Face Classes

The most popular benefits of face to face learning English instruction prior to COVID-19, when considering the advantages of face-to-face learning English language instruction, include that the great majority of students believe that receiving this kind of education improves their ability to communicate with peers as well as their teachers. The majority of opinions imply that class activities are more meaningful and that the target language is practiced more successfully. There is better focus, engagement and classroom management. (Femanddez & Fernandez, 2023, p. 7) .

This type of instruction does not rely on technology, and thus is better for our eyesight, voids plagiarism, provides a more positive emotional learning atmosphere, and networking opportunities. It also stresses the significance of the teacher's presence in the language learning process. Since the lecturer is watching over us at all times in a face-to-face session, students feel somewhat under pressure to communicate in English. Every task must be completed in accordance with the teacher's instructions and decisions. It is also simpler to interact with and get to know your classmates than in an online course (Femanddez & Fernandez, 2023, p. 8).

One additional benefit of in face-to-face instruction is the instructor's monitoring of student participation in group activities. Additionally, students can engage in meaningful and dynamic peer interactions, and the teacher's demeanor is more relaxed. They can converse with friends and debate any class-related subject, compare answers, or exchange views. Additionally, they get the chance to experience real-world tasks that will help you advance students' professional abilities in addition to making new acquaintances that will broaden their network in the future. Teachers discussed their real-world experiences and places of employment in more authentic ways during in face-to-face lessons (Femanddez & Fernandez, 2023, p. 9).

Online Classes

There are three challenges faced by the EFL teachers in assessing students during online teaching :

- *Academic Dishonesty*

 Evaluation of student learning during COVID-19 is thought of to be less successful because an instructor cannot closely assess a student's progress in grasping the topic while they are learning it online. When pupils take an exam, the teacher cannot watch over them personally. There is a good chance that they will work dishonestly, consulting a dictionary or conducting Google searches, or working with pals. The delivery of material that is not optimal during the online period affects how much material is mastered by students, the assessment of learning during the COVID-19 situation must be very different from expectations and present many challenges. As a result, the assessment did not proceed well.

- *Selecting The Best Platform to Evaluate the Learning Outcomes of Students.*

 Selecting the right platform for evaluating students' learning outcomes presents another difficulty for EFL teachers when conducting remote assessments of their students' performance. The challenge lies in the fact that the instructor can only evaluate students' reading and writing abilities because there is not a platform available to evaluate speaking and listening.

- *Including Pupils in The Evaluation Procedure*

Choosing the wrong platform and instances of academic dishonesty is another issue that faces students in the evaluation process. It is challenging to motivate students to participate actively in the evaluation and to acquire their commitment to completing it. When it comes to their work, students often take assessments for granted and don't really mean it. Since students are typically more resistant to direction when they are at home, teachers find it challenging to provide instructions to them during that time (Laily, 2022, p. 3).

Methodology

In order to check the effect of blended education of the teaching of EFL, the students' scores are taken as data. The data consists of examinations in years (2020–2021 / 2021–2022) in the department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Thi-Qar. More than 200 Iraqi EFL students are included in the sample for this study. Those students are enrolled in the academic year in their second and third stages. The rationale for selecting these students is that they are exposed to blended learning. That is, the scores of the same students are considered for comparison.

To identify the effect of online teaching at coronavirus pandemic time on Iraqi EFL learners' abilities at the university level in linguistics courses, the language areas, literature courses, educational courses and non-departmental courses in the University of Thi-Qar, College of Education for Human Sciences, department of English, the data used in this study consists of Iraq EFL students' scores in two years of education at the university level during corona virus pandemic (2020-2021 / 2021-2022) blended learning. Data collection is done by percentage of success, i.e. by knowing the number of successful students for each of the students participating in the final exams for blended education (face-to-face exams and online exams) through the mathematical equation. Furthermore, it describes the degree to which appropriate and valid test results are used as the foundation for judgments, conclusions, and inferences.

Blended Teaching (2020-2021) and (2020-2021)

In this section, the data is taken from the students' achievement in which we have a mixture of online and face-to-face(paper and pencil exam). Two academic years are taken for comparison (2020-2021) and

(2021-2022) respectively:

Blended Teaching (2020-2021)

The data is taken from second stage students who are 252 in number (male and female) (2020-2021) in the English Department, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Thi-Qar. This data belongs to linguistics courses, language courses, literature courses, educational courses and non-departmental courses. In addition, three subjects are taken as paper and pencil exams (Grammar, Phonetics and phonology, and drama). All the other subjects are taken of online subjects as shown in Table (1).

Table (1): The percentages of the Iraqi EFL Learners' Scores in the Blended Teaching, Second Stage (2020-2021) /Department of English Subjects.

	Subjects	**Percentage**
Linguistics courses	Grammar	74%
	Phonetics and phonology	93%
Language Courses	Listening and Speaking	93%
	Writing	99%
	Reading	100%
Literature Courses	Literature	98%
	Short Stories	99%
	Drama	98%
Educational Courses	ELT	100%
Non departmental	General psychology	100%

In the above table, there are three paper and pencil exams which are Grammar, Phonetics and Phonology, and Drama, and all the other subjects are online ones. As clear in Table (1) above, the percentages of success

in the online teaching subjects are very high and there are no significant differences among the students' scores in online teaching subjects in limited face-to-face teaching and testing. Thus, hypothesis 1 is accepted.

Likewise, as clear in Table (1) the mean percentage of the EFL learners' scores of the three paper and pencil exams is low compared with the online subjects. The effect of online teaching on EFL learners' ability is very clear in the low percentages of the paper and pencil exams. This is because all the students were taught by an online teaching way because of the circumstance of corona virus. As a consequence, there are significant differences among the Iraqi EFL students' scores in online teaching / testing and paper and pencil testing in blended teaching. Thus, hypothesis (2) is rejected and the alternative one is accepted.

Blended Teaching (2021-2022)

The data obtained in 2021 – 2022 consists of the scores of the second stage Iraqi EFL students, who are 249 male and female students of the English department, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of the Thi-Qar. The types of courses were divided into two parts, namely the three face-to-face (paper and pencil) subjects (grammar, linguistics, drama) and the online subjects, as shown in Table (2) below:

Table (2): The percentages of the Iraqi EFL learners' Scores in Blended Teaching, Third Stage (2021-2022) / Department of English Subjects

	Subjects	Percentage
Linguistics courses	Grammar	59
	Linguistics	41
Language courses	Listening and Speaking	100
	Writing	100
Literature Courses	Novel	17
	Drama	57
Educational Courses	ELT	100
Non departmental English	General Psychology	100

As clear in Table (2) there are significant differences among the Iraqi EFL students' scores among the subjects in face-to-face (paper and pencil) exams in the limited blended education. So, hypothesis 3 is refused and the alternative one is accepted.

Checking the success rate in Table (2), it is seen that 100% success rates are obscured for the online subjects, while it is clearly noticed that a considerable percent of the students failed the face-to-face (paper and pencil) subjects (grammar (59%), linguistics (41%), and drama (57%). The success for all students in online subjects is interpreted in the inability of the instructor to observe the students in person as they take an exam. It is possible that the students will collaborate with partners or work dishonestly, using dictionaries or Google searches, in addition, all the types of questions in the online are objective.

 One the other hand, we saw a noticeable decrease in face-to-face (paper and pencil exam) subjects, and this is due to several reasons. Most students faced many difficulties when returning partially to face-to-face teaching and testing due to the negative results of electronic study, the ability of students to comprehend the material being negatively impacted by online teaching and learning. While taking classes remotely, students were unable to comprehend the content. The reason why students found it difficult to understand the courses taught in online classrooms was because the content was given in an electronic format, While the final exam for these subjects is face-to-face.

The problems with the instructional methods used also affect teachers of EFL. They include the absence of critical thinking and active learning abilities in students, as well as their incapacity to articulate and discuss their ideas, as clearly noticed the students' failure in linguistics courses that including grammar and phonetics and phonology. In addition, the students lost their ability to memorize information due to years of online learning a side from the direct impact of corona virus. This loss has a big influence on language development, reasoning, memory. Put in another way, the students become less capable of expressing themselves through impromptu comments, group discussions, attention swings, activity switches, etc.

Similarly, students rely on pre-prepared knowledge instead of conducting their own study or being ready for class discussions with the instructor and other students, as clear in the students' failure in literature courses which consist of novel, drama and poetry.

The issue of teaching objectives way was also impacted by the challenges they faced in determining the true comprehension level of the students based on their performance in the online classroom. Moreover, it was very difficult to meet the learning objectives for distant learning classes since it is challenging for teachers and lecturers to assess students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills using an online platform. As previously indicated, taking classes remotely hindered the students' ability to fully comprehend the subject. Subsequently, the inattentive students and their comprehension level were the reasons for contributing the students' comprehension issue.

Conclusions

Based on the results obtained from the present study, the conclusions of the present study are shown as follows:

1. There are no differences in students' scores in language, linguistics, literature, educational and non-departmental course in the online teaching /testing in the blended education.

2. Over the course of the three paper-and-pencil exam sessions (2020-2021) the percentage of EFL learners' results began to decline with verification in the type of materials. The percentages of success in online teaching are also very high, and all subjects were taught in a blended learning.

3. Online teaching and learning, whether as pure or in blended education have a negative impact on students' comprehension skills; the students were unable to understand the materials when taking classes electronically.

4. Because the final exams for these subjects are paper and pencil ones, the electronic format of the course materials leading to students' difficulty in understanding the material presented in online classrooms.

5. It is evident that a considerable percentage of students failed in the three paper and pencil subjects (drama, linguistics, and grammar), which were taught in a face-to-face. way

6. It is found the students who take online courses succeed 100% of the time because they rely on pre-prepared materials rather than doing independent study or preparing for class discussions with the teacher and other students.

7. Years of online learning caused the students to lose their capacity for memorization. This loss has a significant impact on memory, thinking, and language development.

8. In online teaching, the loss of critical foreign language teaching abilities including listening, speaking, reading and writing resulted from online learning.

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