

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

EXPLORING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A BLENDED FUNCTIONAL ENGLISH COURSE AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL: A CASE STUDY OF THE WOMEN UNIVERSITY MULTAN

Sara Shahbaz¹, Dr. Qamar Khushi²

¹PhD Scholar: Department of English (Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan)

²Department of English Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan

Corresponding Author's Email: Saras.wum11@gmail.com

gamarkhushi@gmail.com

Sara Shahbaz, Dr. Qamar Khushi. Exploring The Effectiveness Of A Blended Functional English Course At Undergraduate Level: A Case Study Of The Women University Multan-- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 20(1), 142-169. ISSN 1567-214x

Keywords: Blended Learning, Blended Course, Reading Skills, Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Blended learning is the thoughtful combination of online and face-to-face components with the aim of maximizing students' performance. This paper attempts to investigate the effectiveness of a blended course based on basic reading and writing skills. The course was implemented at undergraduate level after needs analysis in the context of The Women University Multan. The research design for the study was quasi-experimental as the participants were randomly added in control and experimental groups. The scores of pre and posttests were the main data collection tools and these tests were conducted before and after the course for each group. ANCOVA was used to analyze the data. The statistical analysis showed that there is a significant difference among the marks of pre and post-test between control and experimental groups. The students of experimental group outperformed the students of control group. Hence, the blended course proved quite effective in improving the reading and writing skills of the targeted learners. Other courses can also be designed and implemented in a blended format for advanced level reading and writing skills along with listening and speaking skills.

INTRODUCTION

The technological advancements in human history have impacted almost all spheres of life (Hussain, Çakir, Ozdemir, & Tahirkheli, 2017) including education & training (Hussain, 2012). However, in Pakistan, despite many benefits of educational technology, its usage has gained momentum in higher

education contexts particularly after year 2000. In our context, some researchers have highlighted various challenges in promoting or implementing e-learning/blended learning which are: technological and institutional infrastructure, computer literacy, English competency, lack of awareness, teacher training and interaction between the student and the teacher (Siddiqui, 2007; Iqbal and Ahmed, 2010; Qureshi et al., 2012; Farid, 2015; Hussain et al., 2019). The present study attempts to implement a blended learning course after a needs analysis procedure at undergraduate level in the context of The Women University Multan.

Online courses are used in higher education due to access of internet and an exponential growth of web 2.0 tools in this contemporary age. The reason for using online courses in the context of higher education is that it has drastically shifted where, when, and how learning occurs (Zhang & Bonk, 2008; Owston et al., 2013 and Larysa & Nataliia, 2021). Another important reason for using online courses is that with the help of technological tools, the instructors can create useful learning activities for their students in order to promote critical thinking, written communication, collaboration and other such skills (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2014). However, online teaching mode is replete with some drawbacks such as a lack of communication or absence of face-to-face interaction between instructors and students, the element of self-discipline in students and lack of motivation and interest in students (Chou & Chou, 2011). Pakistan is one of the countries in which learners need the support of a teacher specially in language learning context. Owing to such drawbacks, a new learning environment namely blended learning has emerged; different scholars considered it as an effective alternative learning approach (Graham, 2006; Wu, Tennyson, & Hsia, 2010); Chou & Chou, 2011). Considering the fact that face-to-face learning cannot be replaced by online education, blended learning offers a better substitute to meet the needs of students in higher education (Hijazi et al., 2006). In this sense, blended learning can be defined as the combination of best features of face-to-face learning with online learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003 & Powell et al. 2015).

Researchers recommend that in developing the curriculum, needs analysis can be a corner stone, in this way, the needs of the particular group of learners would be met. After the identification of needs, it can help in various aspects such as compiling material, designing outlines, and evaluating teaching strategies (Brown, 2001). Keeping this in view, the current research attempts to implement a blended learning course of basic reading and writing skills after a needs analysis procedure.

The following research question is designed to keep the study target oriented:

1. What is the impact of a blended learning course at undergraduate level in terms of students' achievement at The Women University Multan?

Blended learning approaches are emerging and empirical evidence is needed to explore the best practices of this approach particularly in Pakistani higher education context. With the exponential growth of technological tools, the format of course delivery is continuously changing in higher education settings.

The institutions are focused on how technology can be incorporated in order to enrich the teaching and learning experiences. The current research investigation aims to design and implement a blended Functional English course on undergraduate students in The Women University Multan. Technological tools would be infused with face-to-face classes to augment the academic performance of the students. As research shows that blended learning approach has proved beneficial in a wide variety of contexts (Wells et al., 2008; Halverson et al., 2017), the current study would highlight the benefits of blended learning and its practical implications in Pakistani higher education context.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

According to Whittaker (2013), the term blended learning was originally used in the business context in relation with corporate training, then it was utilized in higher education and lastly it came to be used in language teaching and learning. He further asserts that this term became common in ELT after the publication of Sharma and Barrett's book *Blended Learning* in 2007. There is disagreement about the point that whether the blended learning is simply a term coined in business world or can it be considered a real approach to teaching or learning. As Masie (2006: 22) argues that blended learning has always been the major part of training, learning and teaching process and perceived it as the combination of different teaching strategies. However, in the context of ELT, "blended learning means any combination in which face-to-face classes are supplemented by computer technology including both online and offline activities/materials (Whittaker, 2013, p. 12).

Blended language learning BLL is a relatively new approach in language teaching methodologies, yet at the same time can be daunting and challenging for language instructors (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012). Considering the definition of blended learning discussed above, it can be inferred that BLL is the thoughtful consolidation of online, face-to-face teaching and second language acquisition SLA processes to create a meaningful teaching and learning experience, it remained unclear how language teachers design instruction plans to achieve this goal (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012).

In this section, different researches pertaining to designing and implementing a blended learning course would be discussed in a wide variety of context. Hoic-Bozic, et al. (2009) created a blended e-learning model. This model used face to face instruction with learning management system (LMS) named adaptive hypermedia courseware (AHyCo). A survey was administered to assess students' satisfaction at the undergraduate level in a Mathematics and Information Science major (University of Rijeka, Croatia). The results showed that students' satisfaction and achievement increased to a large extent, and the satisfaction was also higher when compared to those students who took the same course in traditional format. Furthermore, the dropout rate was also reduced significantly.

Milad (2017) implemented a blended course based on integrated reading and writing skills in order to improve English academic writing skills in Arab Open University. This research used Web-Quests (WQs) as online tool. The study adopted experimental design in which pre and post-tests were conducted. The

study was focused on Reading Research Skills Inventory (RRSI) and Writing Research Skills Inventory (WRSI) i.e. the reading and writing sub-skills that need to be developed in the targeted students. The findings showed that there were statistically significant differences in the results of pre-tests and post-tests. Further, the academic writing skills improved significantly due to integration of reading and writing skills. The blended course helped the students to approach the writing skills systematically.

Ryabkova (2020) conducted a study in which in person instructions was integrated with Rosetta stone software to maximize the writing skill of the students in the context of Russia. The sample consist of 48 technical first-year students who started this blended language course. Among them, 24 students were put in control and 24 in experimental group. The participants of the experimental group were asked to read the material posted on Rosetta Stone platform and were made to do extra homework several times a week. The findings indicated that the participants of experimental group performed well as compared to control group because students have the accessibility of material as well as the opportunity to study whatever or whenever they want. This study indicated the benefits of blended learning in terms of accessibility and flexibility elements.

Bofill (2013) conducted a qualitative case study by implementing a lesson plan. Although, the study was entirely online through a learning management system (LMS), yet it gives valuable insight about blended learning environment. They asserted that teachers should understand the effective ways of technology integration in lesson development. The findings revealed the positive effects of technology integration when aligned with second language learning theories.

Chin (2016) explored the effectiveness of blended courses on Asian students. This study administered a questionnaire in which data was collected from 210 Asian students who belonged to the four universities and colleges of United States. The findings indicated that Asian students were quite successful in blended courses, along with increased level of satisfaction with blended learning. According to students, this is due to flexibility and availability of good technological resources. Moreover, the students reported that instructors also provided additional support in terms of cooperation and face-to-face contact hours when the issue of cultural conflict was highlighted by the students.

In this section, the studies pertaining to blended learning and e-learning implementation in Pakistani context are reviewed. Farid et al. (2015) conducted a study to investigate the critical issues of implementing e-learning in Pakistan. a mix method approach was used to collect data from the practitioners of e-learning in Pakistani public sector universities. The findings indicate that some problems for example quality in online context, lack of infrastructure, and socio-cultural norms are the main obstacles in the adoption of this teaching and learning approach.

Shahzad et al. (2016), explored the advantages of blended learning in higher education institutes of Pakistan. The study was conducted to assess the motivation and satisfaction of teachers and students after implementing blended

learning model in English language teaching. The findings indicate that interaction, flexibility and freedom were the elements contributed towards motivation and high level satisfaction of both students and teachers in blended learning format. Similarly, Khan (2016) has reviewed different factors related to blended learning. According to this review, the factors such as multimedia, hypermedia, and multimodal presentations should be included to make the learning and teaching more effective in developing countries like Pakistan.

The studies reviewed above in the context of Pakistan show the potential for blended learning as technology infrastructure is growing day by day in the country. However, further research is needed to explore the right blend in different contexts in Higher Education of the country. The present study aims to fill this gap by designing and implementing a blended learning course in a public sector university of Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design for the study is quasi-experimental as the participants were selected non-randomly (Mackey and Gass, 2015). Students/participants were pre-tested and post-tested before and after the project.

Research Site

The research site for the present study is the Women University Multan. This University is the sole women university in Multan region. The university offers various degree programs including BS, Masters, MPhil and Ph.D. in different fields of study. Pertaining to the current research, the university has IT support center which is providing IT related services to the faculty and students.

Participants of the Research

The present sample consisted of 100 undergraduate learners studying in their first semesters. The Functional English courses are offered in the first four semesters of BS program in The Women University Multan. The departments of education, psychology, sociology, political science and history come under the faculty of social sciences. Every year, an average of 200 to 250 students are enrolled in these departments. Out of these students, 100 students were chosen for this sample size. However, this group was representative of the population as a whole, since all the classes have mixed ability students. The pilot study and researcher's own teaching experience also gave this insight to the researcher that all the students of these departments are on the same level in terms of their reading and writing skills.

Moreover, placing students into different classes on the basis of their proficiency level was not the requirement of the study. The first semester students were selected because they are already familiar with different online tools due to COVID-19 pandemic. Further, being digital natives, these students possess the skills and capacity to learn new technological tools quickly. The first

semester course was chosen because on the basis of its insights, recommendations would be possible to make for 2nd, 3rd and 4th semester courses.

DATA COLLECTION TOOL

Pre and Post-Test

According to Cohen et al (2018), in experimental design, the construction and administration of any kind of test is an important step for collecting data. They further asserted that a pre-test and a post-test must be administered for the control and experimental groups. For the present study, a pretest was devised and administered at the start of the course and the same test was administered after the completion of the course.

Construction of pre and posttest:

The following guidelines are provided by Cohen et al (2018) for devising pre and posttest.

- The questions of pre-test can be slightly different in form or wording from the post-test. However, the contents of both the tests should be the same as they are to test the same groups.
- The pre-test must be the same for the control and experimental groups.
- The post-test must be the same for both groups.
- In the construction of a post-test, extra caution should be taken so that it should not be easier to complete by one group than another.
- The level of difficulty must be the same in both tests.

Keeping this in view, the same test was administered in the present research before and after the completion of the course, so that both the groups (control and experimental) can be tested on the same level of difficulty. The test is divided into following parts (see appendix A)

- Reading
- Writing
- Grammar

The first part consists of reading in which the students were tested on various skills such as skimming, guessing the meanings of an unknown words and reading comprehension level. The second part consist of writing in which the students were tested on writing skills such as construction of a paragraph in terms of topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence along with grammatical accuracy in their writing. In the third part, the grammatical knowledge of the students was tested in order to measure the overall knowledge of the students related to grammatical aspects. In the present research, a blended learning course was designed and implemented to improve the reading and writing skills of the students, so this test was divided in the above mentioned

three parts. Furthermore, as mentioned above, this test was necessary in experimental model of research in order to find out the effectiveness of any intervention.

Independent and Dependent Variable

The following section lists and describes the meaning of depended and independent variables used for data analysis.

Independent variables:

In this study, the independent variable is teaching method or the blended format in which the complete course is taught. As Stockemer (2019) opined that independent variable is assumed to explain variation in the dependent variable. Since they explain changes in the dependent variable, so they can be called explanatory variables

Dependent variables:

The dependent variable of this study is the posttest scores of control and experimental groups. As Stockemer (2019) points out that it is the primary variable which the researcher is trying to explain. Further, it depends on other variables.

All of the independent variables and dependent variables were used to test the effectiveness of the blended course in the current study.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

The collected data was analyzed by using SPSS Software and ANCOVA was used to analyze and interpret the data.

Reasons for Choosing ANCOVA

Overall, the independent variable in this study is the implementation of a Functional English course in blended format as measured by pretest. The dependent variables in this study are the scores of posttests obtained from control and experimental groups after the implementation of the course. ANCOVA was used to explore the effectiveness of a blended learning course. ANCOVA was considered to be best for this analysis based on the following reasons:

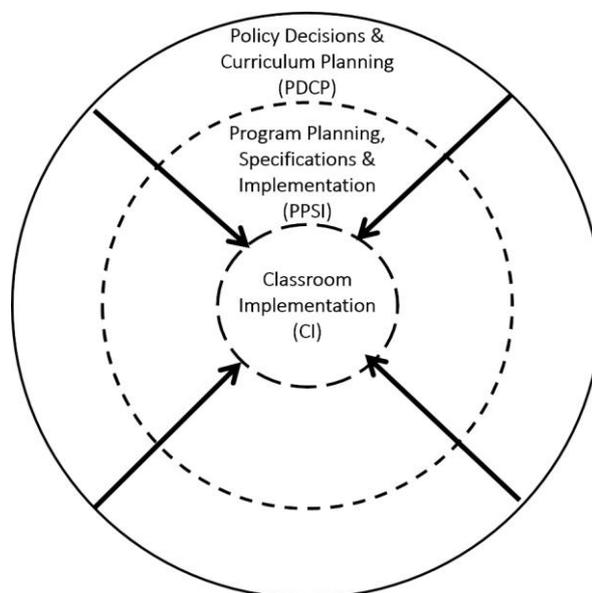
First, in ANCOVA, the post-tests means would be adjusted on the basis of pre-test means, and then a comparison is made to investigate if they differed significantly or not. Second, causality can be inferred when significance occurs, especially in experimental studies that use ANCOVA. It means that the independent variable can significantly change or influence the dependent variable in some ways, however there can be some uncontrolled and external variables which can affect the results. Third, the pre-test scores as a covariate also provides a more sophisticated statistical analysis.

Framework

Approaches for curriculum development:

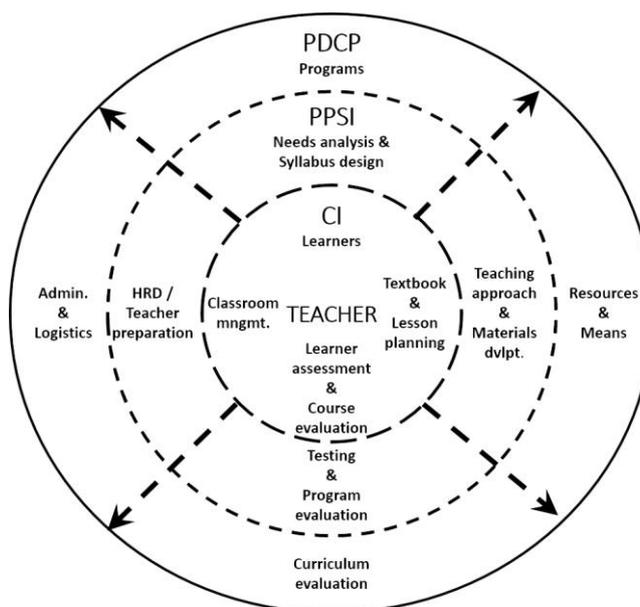
According to Daoud (2019), there are two main approaches for curriculum development/ course design and they are discussed below in detail.

In a top-down curriculum, as diagrammatically shown in Figure below, teachers are limited to the inner circle (classroom implementation, or CI). They are instructed to teach a particular textbook and then they are supposed to test their students on the basis of pre-determined criterion. Thus, in this approach, teachers are limited to the inner circle. They have to remain confined to teach pre decided content, thus having a lack of control over the curriculum and assessment policies. They have little opportunity for innovation, coordination with colleagues and reaching out to the outer circles ((program planning, specifications and implementation, PPSI, and policy decisions and curriculum planning, PDCP).



A better alternative to this top-down approach, which creates limitations for the teachers, would be a bottom-up approach, as shown in figure below. In this approach, the teachers are performing their jobs with all its complexities along with the effort to reach out various dimensions of curriculum to improve learning outcomes. They would do so for three main reasons: understanding whole curriculum, placing themselves as properly as possible in the teaching and learning process and to be more effective for optimizing the learning outcomes. This is the reasonable alternative for curriculum development and implementation which is teacher oriented. In this framework, all the circles presented in the figure connect with each other in order to give a sense of ownership to the teachers. This framework neither negates the importance of student-centered curriculum nor it is against the traditional approach to teaching. It is quite significant to understand that a true empowered teacher would be able to Implement a learner-centered curriculum (Benson 2013). At the CI level, teachers take learners as the major stakeholders in the curriculum.

They have to use textbooks/ materials to promote learning in the classrooms. However, teaching textbooks and materials without careful planning is not beneficial for students as discussed above. Finally, CI level can be achieved by the teachers through good time management techniques and sequencing of tasks. After CI level, the teacher would reach to the PPSI level that would ultimately serve the students in the best possible way. These needs would then be translated into a syllabus. Subsequently, teachers can try to understand PDCP level; it means they would try to understand the language program in which they are contributing significantly.



Daoud (2019) also talked about some obstacles of bottom-up approach which include policy considerations and common misconceptions about ELT. Experience around the world has shown that governments are not allocating adequate resources for language teaching. The prospects for funding special ELT programs are not so bright in public sector universities of Pakistan. Furthermore, the policymakers are not aware of the importance of English as an international language. Another major obstacle was the misconception and belief held by language teachers and curriculum developers that supports structural view of language instead of communicative view. It means that they give emphasis on correctness rather than appropriateness in language teaching and learning context giving little attention to effectiveness, motivation and authentic language use in realistic situations.

Blended course design

Hockly (2011) proposed a set of questions that should be taken into account while designing a blended learning course:

1. Outcomes: what should be the outcomes of the course? How the integration of technology can be related to outcomes? And how it can enhance the learning outcomes?

2. Added value: how the technological tools are enhancing the activities in the course?
3. Time and effort: ensure that the tool used is not going to take enough time and energy. Decide whether the tool will be long term or short term.
4. Syllabus and materials: what materials should be added in your syllabus? Does it need revision?
5. Skills: what skills teachers and students should possess in terms of technical expertise?
6. Location: where the technological tools will be actually used, in the computer lab or at home? Where the mobile devices will be used?
7. Role: are the students going to consume or produce? There should be a balance between technology use and roles of the students across the syllabus.
8. Resources: what tools are available in the context of implementation. At the time of need, think about some alternative tools and techniques.

DATA ANALYSIS

Steps for implementing the Blended Learning Course

The steps to implement this study are as follows:

1. 100 students were randomly selected and assigned to two groups – one experimental group (50) and one control group (50).
2. Before the treatment, all participants were given pre-tests containing three major portions: reading skills, writing skills and grammar (see appendix A).
3. The experimental group was taught with blended format which includes basic training for online tool, explicit explanation of reading and writing skills and scaffolding of student learning the reading and writing skills. The participants practiced the reading and writing skills which are taught to them and with the help of different techniques they themselves used those skills in various tasks.
4. The core of this course was practicing basic reading and writing skills such as:
5. Skimming, scanning, prediction and Inference
 - Identify Main Idea / Topic sentences
 - Distinguish Between Fact and Opinion
 - Guessing the Meanings of Unfamiliar Words Using Context Clues
 - Parts of Speech

- Phrase, clause and sentence structure
- Tenses: meaning and use
- Paragraph writing with topic sentence
- Summary writing

In addition, the course also contained interactive group activities that invited the participants to practice different skills they use and discussed with their peers. In order to give necessary motivation to the students, they were made to read reading material uploaded on the online tools. Then this material was discussed in the class with reference to different reading skills and their application on the text. In case of writing skills, different topics such as paragraph writing, parts of speech and tenses are discussed in the face-to-face classes. Different exercises and quizzes related to them were uploaded on google classroom and students were supposed to solve them.

6. The control group followed the normal Functional English course in which different reading and writing skills were taught along with grammar drills but without any online component. The participants of control group were taught with the same outline and material but blended format was not emphasized.

7. The experiment lasted for 16 weeks with 3 credit hours per week and 2 weeks for mid and final term exams. The control and experimental groups were taught with equal number of credit hours.

8. After the treatment, all the participants took the same posttest administered earlier.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Post-test for control and experimental group:

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Controlled	16.06	2.3854	50
Experimental	22.70	1.1294	50
Total	19.38	3.8186	100

The descriptive results from ANCOVA shows the mean and standard deviation of Post-test marks for control group (N=50, M=16.06, SD=2.3854) while for experimental group (N=50, M=22.70, SD=1.1294)

4.3 Levene’s Test of Equality of Error Variances:

F	df1	df2	Sig.
1.456	1	98	0.230

The Levene’s test of equality of error variances shows that the results are statistically non-significant which means that the error variance of the Post-test is equal for both groups, it means, both control and experimental groups have equal error variance.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1229.116	2	614.558	277.984	0.000***	0.851
	855.491	1	855.491	386.965	0.000***	0.800
Pretest	126.876	1	126.876	57.390	0.000***	0.372
Group	1142.362	1	1142.362	516.727	0.000***	0.842
Error	214.444	97	2.211			
Total	39002.000	100				
Corrected Total	1443.560	99				

R Squared = 0.851 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.848)
 ***p < 0.01

The above table shows that whether the interventions were statistically significant or not. Further, the differences were adjusted by using pre-test marks as a covariate. The aim is to investigate whether there is overall statistically significant difference in post-intervention marks between control and experimental group, once their means had been adjusted for pre-test. Since p-value of pre-test is less than 0.05 level of significance, it means that the pre-test adjusts the association between the predictor group variable (control and experimental) and post-tests.

The results are statistically significant, differences are there between the groups (the independent variable) adjusted for pre-test as (p-value <0.05) for group variable. Since the covariate (pre-test) and the group variable are statistically significant it means that there was a statistically significant difference between control and experimental groups when controlling for the covariate (pre-test). The explained variation due to group variable and Pre-test marks on post-test marks is about 85.1%.

4.5 Group Statistics:

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			LL	UL
Controlled	15.994	.210	15.577	16.412
Experimental	22.766	.210	22.348	23.183

The above table shows the average post-test marks for control group are 15.994 (95% CI: 15.577 to 16.412) and for experimental group the average post-test marks are 22.766 (95% CI: 22.2348 to 23.183).

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Approach to curriculum development/ course design:

There are two major approaches of curriculum development/ course design: top down and bottom up as discussed above.

The researcher adopted bottom-up approach for syllabus designing and course planning for the current study. The Programme Planning, Specification and Implementation (PPSI) level was given a greater focus. It means that the needs of the students were translated into blended course. The researcher then moved from PPSI level to classroom implementation (CI). At this stage, the teacher has to take into account many factors such as classroom management, textbook and lesson planning, learner assessment and course evaluation. All these aspects except course evaluation were being made the essential part of the blended course as course evaluation is beyond the scope of the study. The classroom management aspect was incorporated by aligning the face-to-face components with online component in order to achieve the objective of the course. Further, lesson planning and textbook/ material development was chosen in such a way that it can maximize the reading and writing skills of the students who were attending the course. Moreover, the assessment part contains 20 marks for sessional which were given on the basis of online and face to face activities completed by the students along with 30 marks for mid-term and 50 for final in sit-in exams.

Discussion of Results of Pre and Posttests:

The findings of the needs analysis were taken into consideration before implementing the course. The developed course was implemented by dividing the participants randomly into two groups: control and experimental. The outline and the detailed week plan of the blended course is given in Appendix B and C.

The analysis shows that there is statistical significance between the results of control and experimental groups for pre and posttests marks. This is shown by p-value which is <0.05 . ANCOVA was used to perform this statistical analysis. The reasons for using ANCOVA were: adjustment of posttests means on the basis of pretests means and to measure the change of dependent variable caused by independent variable. As research suggested that there is not a particular method for designing blended learning course. The course should be designed according to the context of implementation, so the course designed for the present study followed supplemental model in which technology oriented out of class activities such as online quizzes and instructional video lectures were integrated into traditional environment (Twigg, 2003).

Hockly (2011) proposed a set of questions that should be taken into account while designing a blended learning course:

9. Outcomes: what should be the outcomes of the course? How the integration of technology can be related to outcomes? And how it can enhance the learning outcomes?

10. Added value: how the technological tools are enhancing the activities in the course?

11. Time and effort: ensure that the tool used is not going to take enough time and energy. Decide whether the tool will be long term or short term.
12. Syllabus and materials: what materials should be added in your syllabus? Does it need revision?
13. Skills: what skills teachers and students should possess in terms of technical expertise?
14. Location: where the technological tools will be actually used, in the computer lab or at home? Where the mobile devices will be used?
15. Role: are the students going to consume or produce? There should be a balance between technology use and roles of the students across the syllabus.
16. Resources: what tools are available in the context of implementation? Have a range of tools and techniques to be used at the time of need.

The researcher considered all the above-mentioned factors while designing a blended learning course, as far as the first question is concerned, there are following outcomes of the course:

- To enable students to use effective reading strategies while reading any kind of texts
- To enable students to write correct grammatical sentences
- To enable students to write proper paragraphs and summaries

The technological tools used in this course are google classroom and WhatsApp. The course proceeds in such a way that the skills are taught in detail in the face-to-face classes and the related activities are done online by using the aforementioned tools. In this way, the technology helped in achieving the course learning outcomes.

As far as the second question is concerned, the technology helped in the activity as it provides the learners the flexibility and opportunity to learn at their own time and pace (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007, p. 3). The activities were enhanced by the use of technology as the learners felt somewhat autonomous and motivated to complete the online assignments.

The google classroom and WhatsApp are the tools which don't require much time and effort in terms of technical expertise on the part of teachers as well as on the part of students. Furthermore, the researcher also conducted training for students on google classrooms for 2 credit hours in the first week of the course. Moreover, this tool was short term and it will not be used for the subsequent courses.

The syllabus was revised in the light of needs analysis prior to the implementation of the course. The tools of google classroom and WhatsApp

were the most appropriate tools keeping in view the course content and infrastructure available in the context of course implementation.

The skills needed for the blended course were the usage of different applications such as google classroom and WhatsApp. The researcher equipped herself with the skills of using google classroom and as discussed earlier she also conducted a short-term training for the students in this regard. Before the beginning of the course, both teacher and students possessed required technical skills.

In this course, the tool was used at home as the computer labs are not available in the context of implementation. The mobile devices were used outside of the classrooms as the students were to complete assignments online but outside of the classroom.

As far as question 7 is concerned, the students performed the role of both consumers and producers simultaneously. The course proceeds in such a way that students had to consume/ grasp the material taught in face-to-face mode, but they had to upload assignment related to the face-to-face content as producers. The balance was maintained during the implementation phase as the students had to consume and produce at the same time. Further, the technological tools helped them in their roles as producers.

The Women University Multan has its own learning management system (LMS); however, this tool is fraught with difficulties such as login issue and downloading and uploading the files. So, the researcher used WhatsApp and google classroom as these tools are user friendly and a number of helpful tutorials are available on YouTube for google classroom. The university also has a Wi-Fi connection which provides internet to both students and teachers.

There were some challenges which the researcher had to face while designing and implementing this blended learning course. At first, the students were somewhat reluctant to adopt this learning approach and they were also reluctant to use technology. The researcher conducted a short-term training for the students in the first week of the course to overcome this challenge. As Jokinen and Mikkonen (2013) suggested that while designing and implementing a blended learning course, the teachers must be aware of the challenges, such as, reluctance of the students for this approach and technological expertise. The researcher also ensured that the content of the course should be suitable in order to achieve the course learning outcomes.

Another important challenge was the role of active learners that the students had to adopt for this learning approach. They were somewhat unwilling to adopt this role. The researcher overcame this challenge by motivating the learners and she tried to create interesting assignments and quizzes for online activities. As Tang (2013) explored the use of Moodle in blended learning environment for ESL students. The results of the study identified some challenges of blended learning such as students' reluctance for their time as active learners and instructors' commitment to monitor students in online as well as classroom environments. Another problem is that the researcher had to monitor the activities of the students both face to face and online.

Ocak (2011) suggested that decision about technological tools should be taken in advance so that there can be acceptance and ease for both students and teachers. As mentioned earlier, the researcher conducted a short-term training regarding the use of technological tools in the first week of the course so that the students can use technology without anxiety or frustration.

In Pakistani context, various researches have been carried out regarding blended learning and its implementation, however, these researches were limited in some respect for example critical issues of implementing e-learning in Pakistan Farid et al. (2015), perceptions of the teachers, students and administrators about the nature and roles of eTeaching, eLearning and eEducation (Nawaz and Kundi, 2010), advantages of blended learning in higher education institutes of Pakistan (Shahzad et al., 2016), review regarding different factors of blended learning (Khan 2016), challenges of implementing e-learning in higher education institutions of Pakistan (Qureshi, 2012), effectiveness of a computer mediated communication CMC blended model for English language education (Farooq et al., 2012).

☉ To the best of researcher's knowledge, no study has conducted needs analysis prior to the implementation of a blended learning course. The present study has tried to fill this gap by designing and implementing a blended learning course in the light of needs analysis, especially in the context of general English language teaching as this area is somewhat unexplored as compared to ESP (Onder Ozdemir, 2018).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations can be made:

- The contents of the course should be designed in such a way that these become more engaging for students. For this purpose, some freedom should be given to the teachers so that they can start and proceed in the course keeping in view the level and needs of the learners.
- While there is a need for improving the students' language proficiency in all four basic English skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), the outlines of Functional English should be more focused on writing and speaking as these two language skills are very much important for students in their academic and professional lives. Furthermore, grammar and vocabulary should be taught in the context of four language skills and in an integrated way.
- The vocabulary should be taught in a systematic way thereby drawing attention of the students to the vocabulary items. Thus, the students should be taught in a way that they would be able to infer meaning from the context. In this way, their dictionary skills would also be improved.
- Special focus should be given to grammar teaching and correct construction of sentences; the grammar structures should be taught in an integrated way so as to give an idea to students about their usage.

- Authentic materials should be used to teach language so that learners should be prepared for the real-world situations they will face or are already facing. The choice of any language teaching materials must be made with the proper context in which the materials will be used. The learning experience would enhance many folds for the learners if they see a close connection between the content of the course and the real life situations they will face.
- Other Functional courses should be designed based on advance writing skills, listening and speaking skills so that the students can excel in their academic as well as professional lives. Different blended courses can be designed for those purposes.
- Creativity in activities should be there in language classrooms in order for meaningful involvement of students.
- In the contemporary age, the students must be made to think critically and to use both oral and written forms of communication. It is a fact that the mature students can learn from lecture methods, but it is difficult for all types of students to sit in a lecture for a longer period of time, so different engaging activities can prove useful for teaching different skills.
- A short-term training should be conducted on priority basis for students regarding the use of technological tools that would be the part of the blended course and first week of the course should be allotted for that purpose. This would reduce the anxiety and reluctance of the students for technological tools.
- Blended courses should be promoted on administrative level in universities. The universities can incentivize these courses by many ways such as hiring teaching assistants and reducing the workload of the faculty members who are delivering the contents in blended formats.
- Regular and hands on trainings and workshops should be conducted for both teachers and students on technical expertise related to different technological tools so that both the stakeholders can use technology for teaching and learning purposes without any frustration and anxiety.
- The universities should be focused on constructing and maintenance of necessary infrastructure such as language labs, availability of computers and laptops, uninterrupted power supply and stable internet connection. Special budgetary allocation should be made for this purpose.
- An IT center should be established in the universities to provide technical assistance to teachers and students. Similarly, professional development courses can be introduced for faculty members to provide them necessary training and confidence for designing and implementing blended courses.

- Those teachers should specially design blended learning courses who has had a relatively lack of experience in building and teaching a blended learning environment. This would not only help to explore newer practices of design and implementing blended courses, but also the concomitant challenges such as organizational or planning problems and technology related problems would be highlighted. Then, all the stakeholders should work on overcoming these challenges.
- Teachers should adopt the role of facilitator or counselors for creating an enabling environment in which students can practice with the target language in meaningful contexts.
- New technological tools should be incorporated to find out their effectiveness for blended learning environments. The tools chosen for the current study depended upon many factors such as objectives of the course, background of the instructor, characteristics of the students and technical assistance available in order to create effectiveness in the course. However, the use of emerging technologies in designing and implementing blended courses would give insights about the impact of using them in this context.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to create an optimal blended learning course after a rigorous needs analysis procedure in order to explore its impact on the achievement of students in the context of The Women University Multan. Based on the insights of Daoud (2019) and Hockly (2011), a blended learning course was designed and implemented.

The pre and post-tests were the main data collection tools for the study. The statistical analysis showed that the course proved effective as it not only improved reading and writing skills of the students, but also it made them motivated learners of English Language. However, it should be kept in mind that formal exploration of students' motivation was beyond the scope of the study. Thus, this study showed that blended learning courses have the potential to increase the quality of learning in terms of pedagogical richness and "improved access and flexibility" (Graham, 2006, p. 9) with the help of technological resources, interactive and collaborative activities among students, and appropriate selection of course material. Those technological resources were employed in the current study which were best suited to students in terms of their expertise/needs, background of the instructor and context of implementation.

Lastly, this study also threw light on some potential challenges during the implementation phase. However, these challenges can be overcome by putting concerted efforts on the part of teachers who are designing and implementing the blended courses. The aim should be to find out a better way of integrating face-to-face and online learning which will improve the learning outcomes of the course.

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APPENDIX A

Pre and Post Test

Q1: Get skimming!

Give yourself 60 seconds to skim through the ‘Size matters’ paragraph below. When you are finished, cover the paragraph up before moving onto the questions.

Part I: Size matters

Here’s something to think about the next time you go shopping. Have you ever noticed how many trolleys are available when you go to the supermarket? In my experience, it seems like hundreds! But how about the number of hand baskets? Invariably I struggle to find even one, especially when I only need a few items. Why might this be the case? Well it seems to be a tactic used to encourage us to buy more. If you are walking around with an empty trolley, you are more tempted to fill it, so if you are planning on only doing a quick shop, always try to find a basket. It will be lighter, easier to use and is sure to save you money!

Part II: Write in 1-2 sentences regarding what the paragraph is all about?

Q2: Now read the above paragraph carefully and answer the following questions.

1. What can you find in large numbers at a supermarket?
 2. Why can this be a problem?
 3. How can you avoid spending more than you planned?
 4. Why is it a good idea to use a basket instead of a trolley?
 5. Based on the context, try to guess the meaning of ‘invariably’?
- At all times
 - Not always
 - Never
 - Frequently

Q3: Write a paragraph on How to save our planet from the adverse effects of climate change?

Q4: Identify the topic sentence in the following paragraph.

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) has taken a brute-force approach to screening species for cancer-suppressing chemicals. NCI scientists receive frozen samples of organisms from around the world, chop them up, and separate them into a number of extracts, each probably containing hundreds of components. These extracts are tested against up to 60 different types of cancer cells for their efficacy in stopping or slowing growth of the cancer. Promising extracts are then further analyzed to determine their chemical nature, and chemicals in the extract are tested singly to find the effective compound. This approach is often referred to as the “grind ’em and find ’em” strategy.

Q5: Choose the correct option.

1: Identify the type of noun (in bold) used in the following sentence.

“Your indifference is not acceptable.”

- a) Proper noun
- b) Countable noun
- c) Collective noun
- d) Abstract noun

2: The foolish crow opened his mouth to sing. Here foolish is an ----

- a) adjective of quantity
- b) adjective of number
- c) adjective of quality

3: I went to the market in the morning. The underlined word is;

- a) Adverb of time
- b) Adverb of manner
- c) Adverb of place

4: It is extremely hot today. The underlined word is;

- a) Adverb of place
- b) Adverb of manner
- c) Adverb of degree

5: My parents have been married _____ forty years.

- a) For
- b) Till
- c) After

6: It's been snowing _____ Christmas morning.

- a) Since
- b) For
- c) Till

7: It was a hot day, so I ---- to prepare salad for lunch.

- a) Decide
- b) Decided
- c) Decides
- d) Deciding

8: When I was living in London, a strange thing —to me.

- a) Happens
- b) Happened
- c) Happening
- d) Happen

9: I ----hit you if you say that word again.

- a) Will be
- b) Will
- c) Will have been
- d) Will have

10: By next Christmas we ---- lived in this city for twenty-five years.

- a) Will have
- b) Will have been
- c) Will
- d) Will be
- e)

APPENDIX B

Course Title: English I: Reading & Writing Skills

Level: BS 1st

Course Objectives:

Develop awareness of different reading strategies (e.g., skimming, scanning, evaluating, inferencing, anticipating, deducing, etc).

- Understand the general features of a text.
- Organize thoughts in a logical manner.
- Produce grammatically correct sentences.
- Use appropriate cohesive devices.
- Punctuate according to standard rules.
- Write paragraphs and summaries.
- Proof read accurately, applying the rules for correct grammar, punctuation and spellings.
- to enable students to feel confident in the use of parts of speech, tenses, subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, articles, spelling and punctuation.
- Understanding techniques of word formation through roots, affixation, derivations etc.
- Acquisition of vocabulary used in everyday life.

Course Contents:

1. Reading Skills
2. • Identify Main Idea / Topic sentences
3. • Skimming, Scanning, and Inference / Find Specific and General Information Quickly
4. • Distinguish Between Relevant and Irrelevant Information According to Purpose for Reading

5. • Recognize and Interpret Cohesive Devices
6. • Distinguish Between Fact and Opinion
7. • Guess the Meanings of Unfamiliar Words Using Context Clues
8. • Use the Dictionary for Finding out Meanings and Use of Unfamiliar Words
9. • Practice Exercises with Every Above Mentioned Aspect of Reading
10. Writing Skills
11. • Parts of Speech
12. • Phrase, clause and sentence structure
13. • Combining sentences
14. • Tenses: meaning and use
15. • Modals
16. • Use of active and passive voice
17. • Reported Speech
18. • Writing good sentences
19. • Error Free writing
20. • Paragraph writing with topic sentence
21. • Summary writing

Note: Teachers need to include practice activities, exercises and worksheets on the provided topics.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- Howe, D. H, Kirkpatrick, T. A., & Kirkpatrick, D. L. (2004). Oxford English for undergraduates. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
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APPENDIX C

Blended learning course

Functional English 1 reading and writing skills

This is a blended-learning course. This means that students will need to work on tasks outside of class and come prepared to class to participate and work in small groups. The tasks that students will need to do online and outside of class time are set up here in this course. We will look at the tools that you will need to use, and the technology that students are comfortable with to successfully complete this course.

Credits

This course has 3 credit hours per week. According to academic calendars, there are average 7-8 weeks before midterms and final terms, which means that students have to complete 42-45 credit hours. In this course, however, students will have to work online as well, so they will need to work 45-50 credit hours to successfully complete the course.

Technology

Students must have smart phones and they should install some applications to participate in the course. This includes google classroom, WhatsApp and CamScanner.

Resources

Students will have to purchase the printed material/ handouts that is available on the photocopy shop of university.

Evaluation

We will use continuous evaluation for this course. That means students will be evaluated for every task and activity that they do, online and in the classroom. Some of the sessional marks i.e 3-4 will be allocated out of 20 sessional marks for each task. This means that it will be impossible to pass this by only doing a final exam and that class participation and students' involvement in the course is essential.

Week	Topic	Online activity	In class activity
Week 1	Introduction to course and introduction to technological tools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading skills • Identifying main idea and topic sentences 	Posted reading material on google classroom.	Work with online tools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face to face discussion on reading skills
Week 2	Skimming, Scanning and inference Find the specific and general information quickly	Reading material related to motivational text assigned for practice that was uploaded on google classroom	Face to face discussion on how and when to use skimming, scanning and inference <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion to find and differentiate between general and specific information
Week 3	22. Distinguish Between Relevant and Irrelevant Information According to Purpose for Reading 23. Recognize and Interpret Cohesive Devices	Practice for distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information that was uploaded on google classroom	A detailed discussion about distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information according to the purpose of reading. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A detailed discussion on cohesive devices, its

			recognition and usage.
Week 4	1. Distinguish Between Fact and Opinion 2. Guess the Meanings of Unfamiliar Words Using Context Clues	Reading material related to motivational text assigned for identifying facts from the opinion and guessing the meanings of unknown words from the context	A detailed discussion on the skills mentioned in the topic section
Week 5	Use the Dictionary for Finding out Meanings and Use of Unfamiliar Words	Reading practice for guessing unfamiliar words	A detailed discussion on dictionary skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of book/pocket dictionary
Week 6	Writing Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parts of Speech 	Multiple choice questions uploaded for identifying different parts of speech	A detailed discussion on parts of speech
Week 7	Phrase, clause and sentence structure	Multiple choice questions uploaded for phrase, clause and sentence structure	A detailed discussion on the topics of phrase, clause and sentence structure
Week 8	Mid term	Mid term	Mid term
Week 9	Combining sentences Modals	Practice of using cohesive devices for combining sentences Multiple choice questions on modals	A detailed discussion about combining sentences and modals
Week 10	Tenses: meaning and use	Fill in the blanks and multiple-choice questions for using appropriate tenses	A detailed discussion on all tenses
Week 11	Continued	Continued	Continued

Week 12	Use of active and passive voice	Practice assigned for changing the voice on google classroom	A detailed discussion on active and passive voice and its rules
Week 13	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reported Speech 2. Writing good sentences 3. Error Free writing 	Practice for reported speech and writing good and error free sentences	A detailed discussion on reported speech and its rules <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to write good and error free sentences
Week 14	Paragraph writing with topic sentence	Submission of a paragraph with topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentences	Detailed discussion on paragraph writing and its rules <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom practice for paragraph writing
Week 15	Summary writing	Submission of summary of the material uploaded	Detailed discussion on summary writing, its rules and benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom practice for summarizing
Week 16	Final term	Final term	Final term