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**Blended Learning in Foreign Language Education: Pros and Cons**

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**ABSTRACT:**

In the process of teaching, it can be noticed that instructors can use different ways of information delivery methods to achieve the educational goals that they want to achieve. Various paths can be followed by the instructors when they want to present the information to their students. Whether the method of information delivery is a traditional one, an electronic one, or an approach that blends both of the traditional and the electronic type, the final outcome is the development of the knowledge inside the learners. However, the different ways of information delivery bring with them various advantages and disadvantages. This study is an attempt to give brief information about the blended approach of learning. This study is important since it tries to give brief information for the Iraqi EFL college instructors about this approach. It was not possible to conduct the research empirically because it was done in 2020 when blended learning was applied in Iraqi universities for the first time. An empirical study is recommended to examine college students and instructors' attitudes towards blended learning and the obstacles they face in its application. . Furthermore, it also remains important the need to establish various workshops that discuss such approach of learning and how to benefit from it

**Keywords:** blended learning, approach, advantages, disadvantages

**Introduction**

The first thing to consider is the definition of blended learning. Hofmann (2004, p.10) defines blended learning as a term which can be used to give a reference to different methods and technologies of learning. The options of synchronous and also the asynchronous learning made this type of learning increasingly common.

The aim of this study is to provide some information for the Iraqi EFL college instructors about the different approaches that the instructors may follow and the diverse types of the educational courses when it comes to teaching the students. In addition, it tries to explore the different types of learning environments. Moreover, this study also focuses on blended learning and its advantages and the disadvantages.

This study is significant since it tries to focus on the new transition of learning which mixes both of the traditional way and the electronic one.

It is hoped that Iraqi EFL college instructors can gain a better understanding of this type of learning and to increase their background knowledge about it. It is also hoped that Iraqi EFL college students can benefit from the information in this study so as to understand the shifts in learning.

### **1.2 Classroom Energy**

In the traditional way, the learning process happens inside the classroom. As a result, it is important to understand the motivational energy that can be found in the classroom since motivation may be less found in online learning environments. Brown (2001, p.203) says that he uses such kind of term to refer to the force which can be unleashed and only perceived through “a sixth sense” inside the classroom. This energy is something that the teacher reacts to when he leaves from the classroom and when he says to himself that this class was a great one, or that those students in the class were great. This energy can be seen as the electricity that comes out of various minds when these minds are occupied in the circuit of the different activities of writing, talking and thinking. This energy can also be seen as an aura of creativity. This aura can be sparked when the students interact with each other. Such energy makes the students driven to reach a higher attainment. This energy goes with the teacher and the students when they finish and leave the classroom. This energy is also brought back when the students and the teacher return to the classroom on the following day.

Brown (2001, p.204) also says that this energy is sometimes unleashed or released through a focused and quiet teacher. Sometimes, the forces of energy can be gathered when there is a cooperative intensity from students who are focusing or working on mundane tasks. He also says that the teacher is the key. The reason for this thing is that the teacher is the one to whom the students look to so they get the guidance and leadership. It is the teacher that starts and makes these creative sparks flying. Such thing can be done by the teacher through a solid preparation whatever the ways he uses to make these sparks. This thing can also be done when the teacher has a confidence in his teaching ability and a positive belief in his students' learning ability. This thing can also be done when the teacher has a sense of enjoyment in doing what he is doing. This can also be done when the preparation, joy, positive belief, and confidence are overtly manifested by the teacher when he goes into the classroom.

### **1.3 Courses Types**

It can be observed that there are different types of courses that can be used in teaching. Boettcher and Conrad (2016, p.10-11) say that there are four different kinds of courses. The first type is the face-to-face type. It is the course which is considered as the traditional one. This type used not to have digital components, but now such course, frequently, makes a use of digital communications to organize and manage 24/7 communications and to give course documents in a digital form. Many courses which are considered as traditional can also use technology when there is severe weather conditions or different emergencies that make the campus' operations postponed. Boettcher and Conrad (2016, p.11-12) say that the

second type is something known as the “lightly blended or hybrid courses”. They say that this term is used to capture a fact. It is used to show that in this type of course, there is a decrease in the amount of time which is assigned to the traditional face-to-face gatherings and meetings. The experiences of teaching and learning are more given by the usage of digital resources and tools. Such type of course might be given a description of a “flipped” course when there is 24/7 asynchronous availability to lectures that are given in a digital way, and when the traditional face-to-face meetings are made for matters such as collaborative problem-solving and discussion.

Shank and Sitze (2004, p.36) say that the term asynchronous is defined as a way of learning in which technologies and instructional materials are introduced to people at different times. In this type, the communication is done between the learners themselves or between the learners and the teacher. The communication is in the form of back-and-forth discussion. This type is different from the synchronous communication which happens in real time. Examples of asynchronous learning are the threaded discussions and also the e-mail. Shank and Sitze (2004, p.46-47) also say that the term synchronous is defined as a way of learning in which instructional materials are introduced to people or learners at the same time. The people may be at different locations. The communication process happens between the learners and the instructor or between the learners themselves in real time. Examples of synchronous learning are the audio or video conferencing.

Boettcher and Conrad (2016, p.12) say that another kind of course is something which is known as “blended or hybrid”. In such kind of course, the experiences of learning and teaching that are synchronous occur in a physical space. In other words, there are two-to three-hour session of traditional face-to-face gatherings that might occur in a real physical space every two or three weeks. However, all of the learning, engagement, discussion, teaching and brainstorming happen digitally. The last type is a one in which most of the educational content or all of it is given online. In this type, there is a heavy reliance on discussions that happen ‘at different times’. These are asynchronous discussions. Also, there are synchronous meetings that happen frequently.

#### **1.4 Learning Environments**

There are different environments for learning. Harmer (2007, p.13) says that the traditional type of language learning involves both the teacher and also the students who gather in a one physical space. However, new environments of learning which are considered as virtual were introduced with the development of the internet with higher speed. With such type of new environments of learning, students who are in faraway locations and students who are in different time zones are now capable to learn from their teacher or learn from their other classmates. However, some of the issues have a similarity for both of these environments. These are the traditional and the virtual. One of the issues is the motivation of the students. Motivation is still needed for the students. It can be seen that online tutors

can be found in some of the virtual learning sites. Those tutors are found so as to communicate through the different ways of communication such as the online chat forums or through the mail with the students. Students who are taking similar learning programs can also have the possibility to communicate in an electronic way and talk with each other through the different groups. However, with all of the interpersonal elements, it can be seen that, for some students, they will have more difficulty in keeping their motivation sustained in such online learning environments.

Harmer (2007, p.13-14) also says that there is a significant difference between the traditional face-to-face classes and the virtual learning. With the virtual learning, students have the ability to attend the lessons at the time which suits them best. However, there must be a schedule for chat forums that occur in real-time. In addition, students can also log on no matter where their location in the world. These advantages may be found with online learning, but some of the advantages that appear with the traditional or real learning environments are less easy to be replicated in learning environments which are electronic. An example of this is the physical presence of both the teachers and the students in the same place of learning and experiencing the expressions. Also, receiving the messages that comes from the tone of voice and the gestures. There is a preference for many learners to have the existence of real people and not to have a screen in front of them. Even though there are different types of communication programs that can make the learners capable of seeing each other while they are in the process of communicating with each other, but such thing is less attractive than a situation in which the students are in a real learning environment where there is a face to face encounter with other students and the teacher.

### **1.5 Blended Learning**

Tucker (2012, p.11) says that blended learning is a term which is shrouded with mystery. The reason for this thing is that blended learning is a term which refers to the new instructional approach that has been used or applied in various kinds of ways in countless educational settings. With blended learning, numerous kinds of instructional mediums are weaved into a cohesive or unified whole. The blended learning term is a broad one that refers to a range of teaching modes in which there is a combination of a traditional type of instruction which is face-to-face and the online component. This type of approach which is integrated borne because of the necessity, and the increasing demands to technological access. Matters such as the growth in the sizes of the classes and the dwindling amount of resources are what making various teachers have a feeling of overwhelming and disillusion with the profession of teaching. This new kind of blended instruction came because of the requirements that are placed on the instructors to do more with less.

Shank and Sitze (2004, p.38) define blended learning as a type of learning in which various learning methods are combined. In other words, this type of learning includes, but not limited to, the instruction that is considered 'face-to-face' and also the online type of instruction. In this type

of learning, segments such as the basics are learnt by the students in an online module. The concepts which were learned online, then, can be saved for an in-depth discussion by the students when they meet each other in person. The advantage that is brought by this type of learning is that it combines the best characteristics that the different methods of delivery offer. In other words, this type of learning benefits from the immediate feedback which can appear in classroom learning. From online learning, this type of learning can benefit from the self-paced exploration which is available in such environment.

Tucker (2012, p.12) also says that an active role can be played by the teachers who use this type of mode of instruction. The degree of how much technology, computers and the online educational platforms are integrated with the curriculum are decided by the teacher. With blended learning instruction, flexibility is provided for both the teacher and the students. Lessons can be designed by the teachers so as to make the students achieve the best outcomes of learning. With blended learning, teachers are freed from the continuous race against the bell. With blended learning, instead of pouring an enormous amount of the curriculum in one period of class, teachers can give the instruction in the class and support it with the use the online component. As a result, the lesson can start in the class and finish online, or it can start online and finish in the class. The usage of these two mediums of instructions can be weaved by the instructor.

Tucker (2012, p.12) also says that blended learning is a model of learning which can be shaped by instructors however they want so as to complement the curriculum. This model of instruction can be tailored by the instructors so as the various needs of the students are best met by this model of instruction. The students who often have a feeling of shyness or anxiety in talking in front of the other students can benefit from the asynchronous group work, the asynchronous online discussions and the asynchronous activities. With such thing, an amount of time is given to the students to think of a topic or a question, examine the other comments from the other students and create an answer or a response. As a result, an equal voice is given to many of the students in the discussions without having the pressure that they are required to talk in front of the other students in the class.

### **1.6 Advantages and Disadvantages**

There are several benefits and drawbacks that come from the diverse types of delivery methods. Hofmann (2004, p.9) says that the advantage that can be seen with the traditional classroom is that the learning happens in an environment which is comfortable for most of the people. One is not required to explain how the participants should behave, learn, and interact. In such environment, questions can be asked immediately by the participants. In such type of environment, there is a possibility for the development of a sense of a community. In such environment, one can benefit from the body language and eye contact to direct and also to pace communication.



As for asynchronous instruction, Hofmann (2004, p.9-10) says that “asynchronous” is a term which can be defined as a type of instruction which is not restricted by matters such as time and geography. The advantage of such type of instruction is its convenience. In other words, assignments can be completed by the participants at the time they want and at the place they want. However, the disadvantage of this type of instruction is that of motivation. Having the motivation can be difficult for the participants who find a difficulty in getting themselves to be motivated.

Shank and Sitze (2004, p.36) say that the accessibility, convenience, and the sufficient period of time which is available for the students to think before replying are among some of the advantages of this type of learning. As for the disadvantages, the lack of immediate responses and the lack of visual cues are the disadvantages of this type of learning.

Also, Hofmann (2004, p.10) says that “synchronous” is a term which can be defined as an instruction which happens at real time and led by a facilitator. Such type of instruction has features. An example is that participants can collaborate and interact together as a group. Various methods can be used to manage discussions and problem-solving. In addition, people from different cultures can participate at the same time from wherever they choose. However, the disadvantage is that synchronous instruction can often encounter problems which is related to technology. A negative impression can appear on participants that begin the experience for the first time if there are problems with the process of installation. Also, some people find that it is difficult to believe that this type of instruction can have the same efficiency as the traditional type of classroom instruction. As a result, they will not be fully committed in their participation.

Shank and Sitze (2004, p.47) say that the visual cues and the immediate feedback are the advantages of such type of learning. As for the disadvantages, this type of learning has the disadvantage of logistics and also the inconvenience. The reason for this thing is that everyone is required to attend at the same time. Such thing can be difficult for the students who live at different time zones.

Tucker (2012, p.16) says that the first benefit of this type of learning is that it saves time. Matters such as activity sheets and assignments require from the teachers to give an amount of their time each week to create, copy, and staple these activity sheets and assignments. By making the transition to the online platform, much of the time which is given for these things will be eliminated. The second benefit is that this type of learning will save money. Annually, matters such as papers, ink, copy machines and repairs cost a great amount of money. In addition, some teachers find themselves required to supply resources for the classroom by themselves. By using this type of learning, money can be saved since teachers can put reading materials, assignments, and notes online. Such thing helps the students who misplace or lose these things and helps them in organizing these things. The reason for this is that all of these things will be found in one place.

Tucker (2012, p.16-17) says that the third benefit of this type of learning is that the grading time will be less. With online work, teachers will be freed from being as the only ones that provide feedback and information. By engaging in a collaborative group work and in online discussions, students can turn out to be valued and significant resources inside the classroom. With such thing, questions can be asked for clarification, strong ideas can be complimented, suggestions can be provided for improvement by the students. In other words, an active participation from the students will be found in this type of learning.

Thorne (2003, p.18) says that this type of learning is significant and its significance are found its potential. A real opportunity is represented by this type of learning. Every individual can get a learning experience in which he learns at the right time. Learning can also be experienced at the right place by every individual. Therefore, this type of learning can be universal. Boundaries can be crossed by this type of learning and learners' groups from different time zones and different cultures can be brought together.

Tucker (2012, p.17) says that the fourth benefit is that this type of learning increases the time, in the class, for the teachers to do what they love. When a less time is given by the teacher for paperwork grading and copying, there can be a focus on creating learning opportunities which are innovative. The classroom can be transformed into an environment which is more student-centered. The reason for this thing is that there will not be much pressure to take all the content inside the physical classroom. Information can be introduced and discussed about in the online space. As a result, there will be an increase in the flexibility for the students who can give more of their time engaging in collaborative groups to do tasks which relate to the subject-matter. The fifth benefit is that there can be a usage of the online tools to create conversations. Some of the anxious or shy students can also benefit. Such type of students will benefit from the online discussions in talking with the other students or with the teacher. The sixth benefit is that opportunities will be given to the students who can benefit from practicing standardized exam online. Some teachers will not have the ability to give precious amount of the time on test preparation activities. For the students, the collaborative online platforms which is used in learning can be used in facilitating test practices. With students' collaboration, stronger test taking skills and strategies will be developed.

Tucker (2012, p.18) says that the seventh benefit is that a flexibility will be given for the students by the online collaborative group to do asynchronous participation. In other words, a participation in the time that suit them best. With such thing, the amount of the wasted time in the class will be eliminated. The teacher can benefit from the technology since it gives him a transparency in seeing who of the students did the work. The eighth benefit is that there will be more effective communications with the students. The teachers can communicate by message systems -which are built-in- that many online platforms of learning provide. As a result, Announcements can be made, assignments can be modified and dates can

be changed by the teachers without the need to wait for another school day to come. The ninth benefit is that online space can be used by the teachers to build relationships and a community between the students. The last benefit is that the process of learning will be more fun since teachers can use most of the online platforms of learning which allow the incorporation of different types of multimedia and educational resources to give them in a fun way. Such resources can be presented to the students in a safe online platform of learning.

As for the disadvantages, Thorne (2003, p.17) says that in theory there should not be any disadvantages or drawbacks to such type of learning. However, the drawback of such type of learning can be perceived as real in reality. In other words, if one tried to ask his colleagues about their thoughts about this type of learning, he would get various answers. From these answers, one may say that he has never heard about such phrase and that he does not know about it. Another one may say that he has heard about it, but he has no obvious idea about the meaning such type of learning. Another one may say that it is basically an electronic type of learning with the additions of other things. An obvious definition or an enthusiasm about the potential that such learning may provide are rarely heard.

Thorne (2003, p.17-18) points to additional drawbacks. For example, there is not much information about this thing and one may not know where to search to find about this thing. In addition, it is noticed that the companies who are giving a focus on such type of technology are springing up. However, one can face an issue when he wants to provide such services to his organization. The issue is who will provide the right services. Furthermore, it is also significant to have the right infrastructure to support this type of learning. Therefore, identifying the right organization that will deliver or provide the program is not sufficient. In other words, a coherent and integrated plan will be needed to be available.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, this study was directed to examine the blended type of learning. It must be noticed that this study was conducted at the beginning of 2020. At this year blended learning was introduced for the first time and Iraqi instructors at different universities were asked to follow it. As a result, this is a theoretical investigation of this matter. Therefore, this study is highly recommended to be followed by empirical studies to observe the effectiveness of this type of learning on the ground. In addition a comparative studies may also be conducted to test the effectiveness of such learning against traditional way of learning. As it can be noticed, instructors can take different and various paths when it comes to delivering the information to the students. Variations in the delivery ways of the educational courses can be observed. In other words, the method of delivery can be a traditional one, a method that totally depends on an online environment, or a method that makes a balance and creates a mixture between the traditional 'face to face' meetings and the online meetings between the instructors and the students as a way to deliver the information.



It is also crucial to understand that the traditional and the online methods of the course delivery both have their strengths and drawbacks. The traditional way is something that makes the students capable of communicating with each other and also of social interaction in a real physical classroom setting. Also, students are more accustomed with the physical environment of the class. However, matters such as the sizes of the classes and the limited time which is given to each class period are things that make this way of course delivery a little bit difficult. As for online learning, information can be delivered to a large number of students by the instructors either synchronously or asynchronously.

Also, a large number of educational materials can be available online to be delivered by the instructors to the students so they can benefit from. However, in an online learning environment, students may feel less motivated, isolated, lack the real social communicative interaction, and lack being in the real physical environment of the class. A blended type of learning may be seen as an effective balance for the students who want to make a stability between their education and their other duties.

From what has been mentioned, the importance of such topic can be observed. One can see that additional researches are needed in this area. The reason for this thing is that the requirements have increased for such type of learning. The researches can be extended and this topic can be furtherly explored by doing more researches. Furthermore, making various workshops that discuss the matter of the different ways of the course delivery is something that is really significant to Iraqi EFL college instructors. Such workshops would be really helpful to make those instructors have more understanding and also increase their background knowledge about this topic.

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## التعليم المدمج في تدريس اللغات الاجنبية: ايجابياته وسلبياته

### المستخلص

في عملية التدريس، يمكن ملاحظة ان الأساتذة يمكنهم استخدام طرق مختلفة من طرق تقديم المعلومات لتحقيق الأهداف التعليمية التي يريدون تحقيقها. مسارات مختلفة يمكن اتباعها من قبل الاساتذة عندما يرغبون في تقديم المعلومات لطلابهم. سواء كانت طريقة تقديم المعلومات تقليدية، الكترونية، او نهجاً يمزج بين النوع التقليدي والالكتروني، فأن النتيجة النهائية هي تطوير المعرفة في داخل المتعلمين. ومع ذلك، فأن طرق تقديم المعلومات المختلفة تجلب معها مزايا وسلبيات متعددة. هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لإعطاء معلومات مختصرة عن نهج التعلم المدمج. هذه الدراسة مهمة وذلك لأنها تحاول ان تعطي معلومات موجزة لأساتذة الجامعة العراقيين -الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنكليزية- عن هذا النهج. لم يكن من الممكن إجراء البحث تجريبياً لأنه تم في عام ٢٠٢٠ عندما تم تطبيق التعلم المدمج في الجامعات العراقية لأول مرة. يوصى بإجراء دراسة تجريبية لفحص مواقف طلاب الجامعات والمدرسين تجاه التعلم المدمج والعقبات التي يواجهونها في تطبيقه. . إضافة الى ذلك، يبقى من المهم ايضاً الحاجة الى اقامة ورش عمل متعددة تناقش مثل هكذا نهج للتعلم وكيفية الاستفادة منه.

كلمات دلالية: التعليم المدمج، نهج، المزايا، العيوب