Research Paper

The Impact of Blended Learning on Iraqi Students' Achievement in English Literature Courses and Their Attitudes towards It

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Abstract

With the advent of technology, blended learning (also known as hybrid learning), as an approach to learning has become a common feature of education across the world. Considering the importance of learners' attitudes toward learning environments, in this study, an attempt was made to investigate the impact of the blended learning model on Iraqi students' achievement in an English literature course as well as their attitudes toward blended learning. In doing so, a total number of 50 English Literature BA participants took part in the study. The participants were subjected to a pre-test and a post-test after their homogeneity was confirmed using the Oxford Placement Test. In the next step, the students were interviewed to help the

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researchers gain a deeper understanding of the learners' perspectives on blended learning. The results of the repeated measures analysis suggested that blended learning could improve EFL learners' literary knowledge, especially in the genres of short fiction and drama. Moreover, it was found that the learners had a positive attitude toward this learning method since they considered it a new form of learning that could heighten their motivation, improve their participation, and provide the chance to be autonomous learners. These findings are discussed and conclusions obtained from the results are put forward.

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1. Introduction

A blended environment has been encouraged with technology development, and instructors benefit from combining face-to-face and online learning. Traditionally, face-to-face learning is based on synchronous human interaction, while online and remote learning is generally asynchronous and is more based on learning independently. As a result, Blended Learning (BL) aims to integrate face-to-face and online mediums to provide an efficient learning environment (Brew, 2008).

This type of learning could provide learners with an opportunity to exchange individual and collective responses and react in some specified domains, such as learner strategies and feedback, as well as alternative assessment in synchronous or asynchronous ways (Badawi, 2009). The synchronous interaction "is commonly utilized to define live, online, and real-time training and the relationship between the teacher and distant learners" (Metcalf, 2003, p. 20). On the other hand, the asynchronous type of education is an education that is on the dot when one needs it (Metcalf, 2003).

Both the online and face-to-face learning/teaching mediums have their own benefits. However, according to Laurillard (1996), a mixture of teaching and learning approaches could have maximum effectiveness and support student learning. Therefore, the contribution of blended learning can be of high importance because it can create a learner-centered environment (Zarei & Khazaie, 2011) and is sufficiently flexible to fulfill individual needs and different learning styles of learners (Carner, 2012).

Moreover, it can improve and broaden the learners' learning skills (Valerie, 2005), contribute to higher rates of school attendance (Oblender, 2002), and fulfill the objectives of the program in less time (McCarthy & Murphy, 2010). Among other potential benefits of BL, Carroll and Hsu (2003) as well as Johnson (2002) emphasized the issues of accessibility, learning efficiency, and the interactive nature. Wingard (2004) found that the issue of accessibility can be a motivating factor for learners since they enjoy having the learning material at their disposal at any given time and place and, this way, they can maintain a balance among their career, education, and family. This versatility in supplying learning materials can facilitate learning at any time and place (Huang et al., 2006). Accordingly, BL could create a more personal learning experience since instructors can assign tasks considering learners' levels and learning style, which is difficult to use in normal classes (Marsh, 2012).

However, despite its benefits, some consider BL difficult to handle since it needs to preserve the integrity of the conventional teaching method while simultaneously enjoying the online learning platforms and resources (Seife, 2000). In this regard, insufficient quantity of the teaching and learning materials, lack of the teacher's solutions to the tasks and the tests, and possible technical problems are among the factors recognized as drawbacks of BL (Szadziewska & Kujawsk, 2017). Therefore, successful

The Impact of …

implementation of BL requires a set of balanced features (Stacey & Gerbic, 2008). According to Darrow et al. (2013), efficient BL could be achieved if acceptable standard for the following are met: responsible management, professional progress, execution of teaching, sustainable roadmaps, educational material, and the technology itself. Faculty members' workload can be minimized by effective faculty development and course development support. This results in courses with improved design, deeper student psychological investment in learning, more accurate and circumstantial assessments, and enhanced student outcomes (Dziuban et al., 2011).

With the advent of technology, there has been a good deal of research investigating how students regard blended learning, how they perform in such a system, and how efficient it actually is. A recent study by Berga et al. (2021) looked at the students' self-efficacy, knowledge, and perceptions about the BL model. The performance of 93 students in the experimental group was compared to that of 94 students in the control one. The results showed no difference in the self-efficacy, knowledge, and perceptions across groups.

Al-Qatawneh and Eltahir (2020) examined how blended learning affects students' achievement in a higher diploma in the education program at Ajman University. The results showed that this education model produced better results; especially in terms of cognition, the students in the experimental group scored better. It also showed that the experimental group's learners possessed other positive attitudes toward learning and a meaningful correlation between attitude and cognitive performance.

Li et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis comparing blended learning in undergraduate nursing with the traditional classroom instruction and found that the former had a beneficial influence on students' knowledge and skills. Utami (2018) investigated Indonesian high school learners' performance. The

sample included 63 students attending information and communication technology courses equipped with a blended teaching method. The study concluded that the learners achieved better in such an environment than those learning in normal classes.

Kazu and Demirkol (2014) conducted a study on the performance of 54 high school students of two sexes. They used the pre-test-post-test design for their study. The research concluded that although there was no difference in the students' scores in the experimental and control group on the pre-test, the experimental group scored higher on the post-test. Interestingly, the female participants' performance was better than the male participants. In another study, Demirer and Sahin (2013) examined the influence blended learning could have on the exam performance and knowledge transfer. The subjects, would-be undergraduate teachers, were divided into control and experimental groups. The experimental one had access to virtual and in-person sessionswhile the control group had no access to virtual sessions. While the study showed no difference in the achievement made, the experimental group performed better in the projects, suggesting that blended learning facilitated the application of what had been learned.

Al-Zoghby and Doumy (2012) studied 71 primary school students in math courses. The results suggested that the students engaged in blended learning got higher scores and liked the experience better than those in the control group. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has been done regarding the use of blended learning in Basra university.

2. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the fact that, according to literature reviewed by the researchers, it is the first study of its kind (on the comparison between blended learning and traditional learning) in the field of teaching

The Impact of …

English literature in Iraq. This study is also significant because it attempted to

1. provide successful learning conditions in the view of utilization of blending learning to promote achievement of the learners.
2. help learners to familiarize with and make use of multi-media to enhance learners ' achievement.
3. investigate   the impact of implementing   blending   learning   on Iraqi university students' achievement in English literature courses.
4. shed light on the attitudes of the students in using blending learning in English literature courses.

3. Research Questions
The study addresses the following research questions:
1. What is the effect of using blended learning and traditional learning on the achievement of the Iraqi university students in learning English literature?
2. Do the literary genres (fictional, poetic, dramatic) have any significant role in the impact of the blending or the traditional models in teaching English literature?
3. What are Iraqi students' attitudes toward using blended learning in learning English?

4. Method
4.1 Participants
The initial phase of the study was conducted on 90 research participants studying EFL courses in Basra University, Basra, Iraq, using opportunity sampling. The participants were native Arabic speakers. Before initiating, written informed permission was obtained for the research from the students according to the Declaration of Helsinki, after being ensured of the confidentiality of their responses. Of 90 students, 50 EFL students were selected to investigate the impact of BL on learners' achievement after the placement test, including 24 females and 26 males with the age range of 20-

27 (M = 23.4, SD = 2.1) with Arabic as their first language. The participants were randomly assigned to two groups: experimental and control, each with 25 students. Then, to evaluate the effect of the teaching methods on their knowledge of literary genres, the students were divided into three groups: poetry, drama, and short fiction.

4.2 Instrumentation

4.2.1 Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

Initially, all participants were given the Oxford Placement Test (2015) to ensure their homogeneity. The Oxford Placement Test consisted of 60 questions that tested students' knowledge of vocabulary, sentence comprehension, and grammar. Of 90 students, 50 EFL students were selected.

4.2.2 Pre-test

Before adopting blended learning, the researchers used a t-test to compare the performance of the experimental and control groups on a pre-test of literary knowledge. This reading comprehension test containing five passages of different genres (poetry, short stories, and drama) followed by seven multiple-choice questions was developed by the researchers as the pre-test. Then the participants had to thoroughly read the texts and choose the appropriate answers. The reliability and validity of the designed test were computed to see if they were satisfactory.

4.2.3 Post-test

The researchers used a text for reading comprehension to evaluate the learners' literary ability. The test containing five passages of different genres (poetry, short stories, and drama) followed by five multiple-choice questions was developed by the researchers as the post-test. The participants had to thoroughly read the texts and choose the appropriate answers. After the students had studied the literary texts, the test was administered. The

reliability and validity of the designed test were computed to see if they were satisfactory. This study used Cronbach's Alpha to assess the test's reliability, and item p-values were obtained to identify its internal validity. That is, the total number of responses was divided by the number of correct answers given to each item and discrimination indices. The results obtained from evaluating the internal validity and reliability of the reading comprehension post-test revealed that they were satisfactory.

To evaluate the face and content validity of the reading comprehension test designed by the researchers, two English language professors with more than 15 years of experience in English literature were asked to read and revise the designed questions.

4.2.4 Interview

The researchers used a semi-structured interview to get a deeper understanding of the learners' perspectives on BL. The researchers developed the questions, and two professors confirmed content validity of the interview questions. The reliability of the interview questions was examined by administering them to three learners in a pilot mode. The interviews with students were fully transcribed and analyzed. The interview questions were about the advantages and disadvantages of BL from learners' point of view (Appendix I). To analyze the interview data, thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis is a kind of qualitative analysis that emphasizes recognizing, evaluating, and interpreting meaning patterns (or "themes") in qualitative data.

4.3 Study materials

The course materials were divided into three major genres, including poetry, short fiction and drama. As for poetry, the famous poem "The Sick Rose" by William Blake, and the sonnet "Leave Me, O Love" by Sir Philip Sidney were taught to the learners. Regarding short fiction, *The Old Man* and *the*

Sea, a novella by Ernest Hemingway and "Miss Brill," a short story by Katherine Mansfield, were the materials taught. Finally, Christopher Marlowe's tragedy *Doctor Faustus* was taught for the drama genre.

4.4 Procedure

To analyze the data, descriptive (i.e., means, maximum, minimum scores, and standard deviations) and inferential statistics were used. To see whether there were differences in the Iraqi students' achievement attributed to the teaching methods (BL and traditional method) in learning English literature, an independent-samples t-test was run, followed by Levene's test to locate the areas of differences. Finally, the implementation of repeated one-way measures ANOVA aimed to investigate the effects of the literary genre on Iraqi learners' knowledge of literature in the blended and traditional model. In this regard, the participants were exposed to texts from the literary genres of short fiction, drama, and poetry. To explore the role of BLL in learning English literary texts from the standpoint of learners, a request for an interview was sent by the researchers to the participants, and then researchers made arrangements for the face-to-face interviews in the participants' native language. After 15 interviews, the researchers were certain of the data saturation. The obtained data from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. For this purpose, all of the transcripts were reviewed, reread, and inspected to get a basic sense of the participants' reports. The researchers then looked for emergent themes in the texts, which were then coded to provide cases for each theme.

5. Results

To homogenize the initial participants, the OPT was applied. The results of the homogeneity test are shown in Table 1.

The Impact of …

Table 1
The Descriptive Statistics Related to the Homogeneity Test

N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
90	39.00	56.00	44.78	6.69

The OPT has a mean value of 43.718 and a standard deviation of 6.69, respectively. According to the test guidelines, intermediate EFL learners are defined as those with scores in the range of 30-47. As a result, 50 learners were selected as the main learners of the study.

5.1 Blended Learning and Achievement

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was used to determine the normality of the scores on the pretest and posttest since the first step in data analysis in quantitative research is to check the normality assumption (Table 2).

Table 2
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test to Determine the Normality of the Pretest and Post-test Scores

	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Pretest	.104	99	.200
Posttest	.096	99	.200

The first null research hypothesis assumed no statistically significant difference in the Iraqi students' achievement attributed to the teaching method (BL and traditional method) in learning English literature. For the purpose of examining the hypothesis, an independent-samples t-test was conducted since the distributions of both the pre-test and post-test data were normal, a parametric test was permitted.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 show the inferential statistics results for testing H1. Through using the formula below, the magnitude of the difference (effect size) was also measured:

Eta squared = t2 / t2 + (N1 + N2 – 2)

Table 3
Results of the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances on the Pretest

F	Sig.
5.09	.025

According to Table 4, the assumption of the variance equality, although Leven's test value is significant (p =.025), in order to compare the groups, the second line of the t-test table (Equal variances not assumed) could be employed to interpret the results.

To compare the pretest scores of the BL group with those of the traditional technique group, an independent-samples t-test was also applied. The results showed there was no significant difference in the pretest scores of the BL group (M = 19.48, SD = 3.52) and the pretest scores of the traditional learning method group (M = 19.68, SD = 2.41; t (42.41) =.23, p = .816, two-tailed). Moreover, a minimal magnitude of the differences was observed in the means (mean difference =.20, 95% CI: –1.52 to 1.92, eta squared = .001). The learners' literature knowledge level was not different before the instruction, and thus, the results of another independent-samples t-test indicated the effect of the instruction on their literary knowledge.

Table 4
Independent Samples t-Test to Compare the Pretest Scores

	T	Sig	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.23	.816	.20	.85	-1.51	1.91
Equal variances not assumed	.23	.816	.20	.85	-1.52	1.92

Eta squared =$.23^2$ / $.23^2$ + (25 + 25 – 2) = .001

The Impact of …

Table 5
Results of the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances on the Posttest

F	Sig.
.018	.894

As it can be observed in Table 6, the equal variance assumption is not violated since Leven's test value is nonsignificant (p = .894); thus, the first line of the t-test table (Equal variances assumed) could be used to interpret the results in order to compare the groups.

Table 6
Independent Samples t-Test to Compare the Posttest Scores

	T	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	-7.8	.000	-7.52	.95	-9.43	-5.60
Equal variances not assumed	-7.8	.000	-7.52	.95	-9.43	-5.60

Eta squared = $-7.88^2 / -7.88^2 + (25 + 25 - 2) = .56$

An independent-samples t-test was used to compare the posttest scores of the BL and the traditional learning groups. According to the results, a significant difference was noted in the scores of the BL group (M = 35.00, SD = 3.21) and the traditional learning method group (M = 27.48, SD = 3.52; t (48) = -7.88, p = .000, two-tailed). Moreover, an immense magnitude of the differences was observed in the mean scores (mean difference =.20, 95% CI: −1.52 to 1.92, eta squared = .56). As a result, a statistically significant difference was noted between the BL and the traditional learning groups in developing literary knowledge. The BL group outperformed the traditional learning group in developing literary knowledge.

5.2 The Effect of Literary Genre on Literary Knowledge Regarding Blended Language Learning

The second null hypothesis assumed that the literary genre had no significant effect on Iraqi EFL learners' knowledge of English literature in the blended and traditional model. The experimental group's scores on the pretest

(before treatment) and posttest (after treatment) were compared employing a one-way repeated measures ANOVA.

Table 7
Multivariate test results for the blended group

Effect	Value	F	df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Wilks' Lambda	.254	55.682ᵃ	1.000	19.000	.000	.746

a. Exact statistic

According to the above-mentioned, the intervention had a significant impact on the literary knowledge of the blended group. Nonetheless, to obtain more accurate results and to check the effect of the literary genre, the same statistical tests were utilized to compare the traditional group's scores on the pretest and posttest separately. It is worth mentioning that the test can identify the role of the literary genre in literary knowledge among the learners.

A post hoc Scheffe test was applied to investigate where the difference lies. Table8 shows the Scheffe Post Hoc Test of the mean scores obtained from the posttest based on the literary genres (poetry, short fiction, drama).

Table 8
Scheffe Post Hoc Test of the Mean Scores Obtained on the Post-test

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Poetry	Drama	-4.76190*	1.41768	.006	-8.3205	-1.2033
	Short fiction	-4.95238*	1.41768	.004	-8.5110	-1.3938
Drama	Poetry	4.76190*	1.41768	.006	1.2033	8.3205
	Short fiction	-.19048	1.41768	.991	-3.7491	3.3681
Short fiction	Poetry	4.95238*	1.41768	.004	1.3938	8.5110
	Drama	.19048	1.41768	.991	-3.3681	3.7491

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The Impact of …

As shown in Table 9, the mean score of the poetry group is significantly lower than the other two groups. The Scheffe Post Hoc Test revealed a significant difference between the poetry and the short fiction groups ($p<.05$). Additionally, there was a significant difference between the mean score of the poetry group and that of the drama group ($p<.05$). However, the short fiction and drama groups did not significantly differ ($p>.05$). Employing BLL can likely improve the learners' literary knowledge in terms of different genres, especially short fiction and drama.

Table 9
Multivariate test results for the traditional method group

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Wilks' Lambda	.817	4.253[a]	1.000	19.000	.053	.183

a. Exact statistic

The scores of the traditional method group on the pretest (prior to the treatment) and posttest (after the treatment) were compared using a one-way repeated measures ANOVA. According to the results of the above-mentioned test, it can be stated that literary genre cannot remarkably affect how the EFL learners learn about English literature. The second null research hypothesis assuming the literary genre has no significant effect on Iraqi EFL learners' literary knowledge in the blended and traditional models is rejected. Therefore, the result indicated the significant effect of literary genre on the achievement of learners in the BL group.

5.3 Results of the Interviews

From the BLL group, 15 students randomly took part in the interview sessions. The main themes were as follows:

5.3.1 New form of learning

Out of 15, 12 the participants believed that BLL is a new form of learning and is very helpful in improving their literary knowledge. They noted that it allows them to finish the educational materials they learned in the traditional way of teaching at home, allowing them to devote more time to studying at home. One of the participants stated that

> It is advantageous since nowadays students are addicted to the internet. They may use their free time to study at home. Instead of only studying in class, students now have the time and opportunity to learn at home as well. In class, they learn about the subject, and they have online homework at home as well. So, this kind of learning can be a complementary method to the traditional learning method.

5.3.2 Improving students' participation

As 10 interviewees mentioned, BLL could improve their participation in class activities; as a result, it could enhance their learning. One of the participants noted that

> this kind of method is very facilitative since we can surf the net to find the related answers and materials to respond to the teacher's questions and related issues; therefore, we can participate in the class activities more and more. So in my opinion, it can be the best form of teaching and learning in the age of technology.

He maintained that BLL is a state-of-the-art method for teaching and learning English materials, developing EFL students' participation.

5.3.3 Promoting learners' motivation

Participants also stated that BLL increased their motivation to complete tasks and assignments during the class. They noted that BLL is a flexible method that allows doing the tasks in different ways due to having enough time to reflect on the tasks and search about the topics. One of the learners pointed out:

> We had enough time to think about the tasks and at
> the same time, search the net to find the   related
> solutions   for   the   instructional   issues;   as   a
> consequence,   it   increased   our   motivation   for
> learning.

Thus, BLL can boost students' motivation in the class to accomplish the tasks
and assignments and enhance their learning.

5.3.4 Autonomous learning

Of the participants, 13 noted that BLL could enhance their autonomy in
which they could learn new things without the help of an instructor or a
proficient person. The interviewees believed that blended learning could
boost their control and regulation over the learning process. One of the
learners stated that "students can be more autonomous in blended learning
since they take responsibility for their own learning and can learn at their
own pace. Therefore, it increases the rate of learning, and it can result in
better comprehension."

All in all, the interviewees held a significantly positive view about
implementing BLL. They believed that BLL is a valuable and modern
method for language teaching and learning.

6. Discussion

Blended learning benefits from integration of innovative technology-based
strategies into the classroom (Soler, Soler, & Araya, 2017) to enhance
learning process (Sheninger, 2016). Therefore, the present study aimed to
investigated the effect of BL on the literary knowledge of Iraqi EFL learners,
and more specifically its effect on literary genres of poetry, short stories, and
drama. The findings of the current study indicated a statistically significant
difference between the BL and traditional learning groups in developing
literary knowledge. The blended learning method group outperformed the
traditional learning group in developing a knowledge of English literature,

which confirmed the findings of previous studies like that of Sheninger (2016). Moreover, the findings indicated the positive effect of the literary genre on increasing the literary competence of learners in the BL group. The results of interviews showed that the participants displayed a strong preference for BL in teaching English literature. Therefore, both quantitative and qualitative findings obtained from the current study strongly support the effective role of BL as it was already confirmed in the literature (Al-Qatawneh & Eltahir, 2020; Al-Zoghby & Doumy, 2012; Demirer & Sahin, 2013; Kazu & Demirkol, 2014; Utami, 2018).

Regarding the learners' perception, they found BL could enhance their participation and engagement. As supported by Güzer and Caner (2013), students benefit from more engaging and rigorous learning experiences when classrooms are adapted to BL as a learner-centered approach. In fact, BL provides flexibility (Nortvig et al., 2018) by focusing on the learners and also differentiation (Prohorets & Plekhanova, 2015), which consequently increases engagement, dynamicity, and interaction in the learning environment (Kaur, 2013; Prohorets & Plekhanova, 2015).

Another point of consideration that many learners mentioned was their higher level of motivation in BL classes. This finding was in line with that of Tseng and Walsh (2016) indicating higher level of motivation in learners subjected to BL, compared to those in the traditional classrooms. López-Pérez, Pérez-López, and Rodríquez-Ariza (2011) reported that additional platforms for engagement and communication places students at the center of their learning and increases their motivation. Despite the availability of learning materials in online learning, no face-to-face interaction with classmates and teachers and inadequate monitoring of teachers in online learning could discourage the students and reduce their motivation (Fryer et al., 2014).

Last but not least, participants of the current study were of the opinion that BL could successfully enhance their autonomy. Similarly, Sheninger (2016) declared that the technology in BL environments serves as a means to enhance students' autonomy. Blended learning requires students to take more control of their learning which increases student responsibility and their ability to direct their learning (Klein, Noe, & Wang, 2006). A student's ability to self-assess one's abilities increases student autonomy and goal completion both within and outside of the learning environment (Gamble et al., 2018). Therefore, the study revealed that learning through digital pedagogy increases Iraqi EFL learners' literary knowledge, particularly in genres of poetry.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be beneficial to use blended learning in an era of the ascendence of technology when more and more students are accustomed to the advances in online activities to implement computer-assisted language learning (CALL) to improve their learning process autonomously. More significantly, the learning turns out to be more contextual. In sum, the EFL students conceived that blended learning's application was efficient and helpful. More notably, the use of blended learning could develop their motivation to undertake autonomous learning.
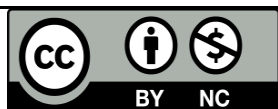
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The Impact of …

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