

Exploring EFL Students' Perception in Blended Learning Environment in Saudi Technical Education Context

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Abstract - This study examined Saudi female students' perception of learning English in a blended learning environment in the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation Colleges (TVTC) via a learning management system called Dorooob. The study also explored factors that affect students' perception in the blended learning environment. 109 preparatory year students studying their first level English language course were targeted in this study. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 28. A mixed method approach, which entails two phases of data collection, was adopted in the present study. The quantitative phase employed an online questionnaire that deals with students' perceptions. For the qualitative part, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 volunteered participants to gain more insight into students' acceptance and the factors that play an influential role in shaping their perception of learning English in the blended learning environment. Results concluded students' positive perception toward learning English in a blended environment. This study addressed a gap in the literature as no previous studies investigated either the blended learning in the technical education context in Saudi Arabia or the use of Dorooob as a learning management system platform responsible for delivering the online part of the blended experience.

Keywords: blended learning, English course, students' perception, Technical College, (TVTC), Dorooob.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of information and communication technology in teaching has changed the educational systems around the world. Blended learning, which is regarded as the most promising learning approach (El-deghaidy, 2012), has led to a paradigm shift in the educational field from the traditional model toward new models based on the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) (Krasnova, 2015).

Educational institutions around the world have witnessed a shift to blended learning. This is due to the fact that blended learning compensate for the limitation of both fully online and traditional learning (Tayebnik & Puteh, 2013). Saudi Arabia is no exception to the technological

boom in the educational system. The use of ICT is now finding its way to the educational institutions in Saudi Arabia (Alnajad, 2014). One of the educational institutions that recently adopts blended learning environment in the delivery of its preparatory year courses is The Technical and Vocational colleges (TVTC). TVTC has recently taken initiative in integrating blended learning courses via a learning management system known as Dorooob. This platform is supported by the ministry of labor to help qualify TVTC colleges' students with the skills needed in the workforce market. Applying this new environment to teaching is considered a shift from the long used teacher-centered to the more interactive student-centered can be subject to resistance. Therefore, the researchers have felt a need to delve into students' perception and what affects them in order to bring forth suggestions for the TVTC curriculum design unit to enhance the quality of this newly adopted environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Blended Learning Definition

Many scholars have offered different definitions for blended learning. For example, Sharma (2010) has provided three different definitions for blended learning; as the mixing of two teaching modes, a mixing of two pedagogical approaches, or the combining of two technological tools.

Torrisi-Steele (2011) proposed a definition for blended learning as an “enriched, student-centered learning experiences made possible by the harmonious integration of various strategies, achieved by combining face-to-face interaction with information and communication technology (ICT)” (p.366). This definition focuses on three main dimensions that should be considered in any blended learning design: the student-centered learning experience, the learning strategies, and tools of implementation.

However, the most widely accepted definition of blended learning and the one adopted in this study is “combining online and face-to-face instruction” (Chen, Wei, Kinshuk, & Chen, 2008; Graham, 2006)

2.2. Benefits and Challenges to Blended Learning

The uniqueness of blended learning lies in the fact that it maintains the value of both offline face-to-face learning and full online learning. Therefore, it conserves the benefits of the two approaches. These benefits entail institutions, faculty members, and students. For example, institutions regard blended learning as cost-effective, in regards to its infrastructure and classroom maintenance, (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Alseweed, 2013; Chou, Chuang, & Zheng, 2013) and more efficient in term of classroom space (Lloyd-Smith, 2010; Owston, York, & Murtha, 2013). Blended learning also provides more flexibility in faculty schedules and helps in making better use of class time (Owston et al., 2013; Lloyd-Smith, 2010). As for students,

blended learning offers easy access to materials anytime and anywhere, enhances the student-centered approach to learning, fosters social interaction, provides learners with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and caters for the various learners' needs and learning or cognitive styles of learners (Khan Algayyum, Shaik, Ali, & Bebi, 2012; Li, Tsai, Tao, & Lorentz, 2014; Alseweed, 2013; Maulan & Ibrahim, 2012)

Despite all of the aforementioned advantages, blended learning still faces some challenges. Some of these challenges can be attributed to the limited network services, technical problems (Li et al., 2014), lack of required skills for both staff and students, and culture (Khan, et al., 2012).

2.3. Factors Influencing Learning in Blended Environment

Students' perceptions in the blended learning environment can be affected by a variety of factors. According to Lim & Morris (2009), factors that influence students' learning in the blended learning are of three types: instructional variables, motivational factors, and learners' variables. On one hand, instructional variables are concerned with the quality of instructors and learning activities, learning support, and study workload. Motivational variables, on the other hand, include six variables: reinforcement, course relevance, interest, self-efficacy, affect, and learner control. As for the learner variables, it deals with previous experience with online courses, confidence in using computers, students' preference of the delivery format, and average study time. Moreover, Lu, Zhao & Jiang (2012) considered several factors that impact students' satisfaction in blended learning based on Technology acceptance model (TAM) and Information System Satisfaction Model (ISSM). These factors include students' characteristics, instructor characteristics, course characteristics, infrastructure characteristics, perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use.

TAM, which was developed by Davis in 1986 (Chuttur, 2009), is used to measure users' acceptance through their internal beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Turner, Kitchenham, Brereton, Charters, & Budgen, 2010). Likewise, using TAM helps in identifying factors that affect users' acceptance based on two beliefs perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Marangunic & Granic, 2015). As defined by Davis (1989) perceived usefulness (PU) refers to "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance". However, perceived ease of use (PEoU) indicates "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort" (as cited in Akour, 2009, p. 94).

2.4. Blended Learning Studies in Saudi Context

Several studies have discussed Blended learning in Saudi Arabia but from different perspectives. These studies focused on a variety of areas including a) developing framework for

Saudi context (e.g. Alebaikan, 2011; Asiri, Mahmud, Abu Bakar & Ayub, 2012), b) teachers' perspective (e.g. Alfahadi, Alsalhi & Alshammari, 2015; Badawi, 2009), and students' perspective (e.g. Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Alseweed, 2013; Alzumor, Alrefaai, Bader eddin, Aziz alrahman, 2013; Ja'ashan, 2015).

Among the studies that researched students' perception and attitudes in Saudi EFL context is Alseweed's (2013). In his study, Alseweed investigated the effect of three delivery modes (traditional, blended, and virtual) on the attitude and achievement of 37 EFL students' at Qassim University. He collected two types of data from pre and post tests and questionnaire; his findings concluded that students' achievements and attitude are in favor of the blended mode.

Additionally, Al Zumor et al. (2013) explored EFL students' perception towards the advantages and limitations of blended learning environment via Black Board at King Khalid University. Their quantitative data indicated positive perceptions towards the benefits of learning English in such an environment. They also found that blended learning have contributed significantly to broadening students' reading opportunities, increasing their vocabulary, enhancing learning strategy usages namely metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

Furthermore, Ja'ashan (2015) investigated students' perceptions and attitude toward learning English through blended learning in the University of Bisha. His findings revealed that student are satisfied and are very positive with learning English in blended learning. This satisfaction with the blended learning for English courses is due to its role in enhancing their English language skills and in making the learning experience more fun, collaborative, and interactive.

As for Alebaikan's study (2010), it is concerned with exploring students' as well as instructors' perceptions on the benefits and challenges of blended learning on Arabic course, Islamic studies, and English language. This qualitative study was conducted on seven lecturers and sixty-eight students from King Saud University. The results of the study indicated positive view and enthusiasm of both students and lecturers toward the blended learning experience.

However, there is still a gap in the literature concerning ESL Saudi students' perceptions of learning in the blended learning environment, which according to Alebaikan & Troudi (2014) has been rarely studied. Thus, this study aims to shed light on the learners' perspectives toward learning English in a blended environment and the factors affecting them in such an environment. In addition the current study is also specifically devoted to studying TVTC girls colleges' context a location that have not been considered by Saudi researches.

2.5. Research Questions

The current study aims to investigate students' perception of learning English in the blended learning environment adopted at Jeddah Technical College for girls (JTC), a branch of

TVTC, and the factors affecting their perception. For this purpose, two research questions are addressed:

- 1-How do students perceive learning English language in a blended environment?
- 2-What factors affect student's perception in the blended learning environment?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were preparatory year female students studying level one English Language course (Eng. 118) during their second training semester in JTC. 97 students completed the online questionnaire, whereas 10 students volunteered to be interviewed by the first researcher. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 41 with the majority between 19 and 25 years old.

3.2. Instruments

Two instruments were used for data collection in the current study: an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The online questionnaire was developed based on the literature. The questionnaire items were adopted from several studies (Adas & Shmais, 2011; Alani, 2013; Alnajadi, 2014; Cetiz, 2006; Davis, 1989; Ke, Sun, & Yang, 2012; Larsen, 2012) to better suit the participants undertaken in this study and to enable the researchers to answer their research questions. The aim of the questionnaire was to examine students' perceptions and some of the factors that affected their perception. The questionnaire consisted of 15 close-ended Likert scale items that range from strongly agree to strongly disagree with neutral as a middle point. It should be noted that to guarantee student's understanding of the questionnaire, it was translated into Arabic and validated by a member of the academic board at the researchers' university. To ensure reliability, the Arabic version of the questionnaire was pretested on 5 students and then Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the reliability coefficient. The value of the questionnaire was 0.881, which implies a high level of internal consistency and reliability. To help in gaining more insight on the quantitative findings, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to explore their perception and the factors affecting them.

3.3. Procedures

In this study, the researchers aimed at examining students' perception of learning English via blended learning mode and the factors influencing their perception. For this purpose, a link to the online questionnaire, hosted by Survey Monkey, was sent to the students via WhatsApp mobile application along with a consent form that explains the study aim and purpose. 109 students responded but only 97 questionnaires were fully completed. The incomplete forms were

discarded while the completed ones were entered in the statistical analysis software SPSS 22 then analyzed by the mean of descriptive analysis.

As for the interviews, 10 students volunteered to be part of this study. The interviews, which were also held in Arabic, were recorded, transcribed and then translated from Arabic to English by the researchers. The interview questions were adopted from a verity of studies as to answer the research questions. Content analysis was done via NVivo, qualitative analysis software, to get the results from the qualitative data. Students were notified with their rights to withdraw and pseudonyms were assigned to them to ensure their privacy.

3.4. Data Analysis and Results

3.4.1. Quantitative data analysis

To gain sufficient background of the participants, five questions related to participant’s age, level (1-3), computer knowledge (novice- upper-intermediate), previous experience with blended learning course, and previous experience with online courses were collected.

Table 1: Personal information

Level	Students' level			Students' ages				Computer knowledge			Experience with BL		Experience with online courses		
	1	2	3	18-21	22-28	29-41	N	E	I	UI	Yes	No	None	1	2 or more
Frequency	91	3	3	65	31	1	4	9	53	31	85	11	69	12	16
Percent	93.8	3.1	3.1	67	32	1	4.1	9.3	54.6	32	87.6	11.3	71.1	12.4	16.5

Table 1 shows a summary of personal data presented by frequency and percentage. The table demonstrates that most students (N= 91) are in their first level at the college while only six students are repeaters three from level 2 and three in level 3. The participants’ ages range from 18 to 41 with the majority (N=65) falling in the range of 18 to 28. Considering knowledge of using computer, the table illustrates that only 13 of the students rate their ability of using computer either as novice or elementary whereas 84 students define their computing knowledge as intermediate or upper intermediate. In answering the fourth question about their experience with blended learning courses, the table indicates that 87.6% (N= 85) have never taken a blended learning course before whereas 11 (11.3%) of the students have some experience with blended learning courses. Since the blended learning courses utilized an online portion, the last question asked whether students have some experience with online courses. As shown in the table above, the number of students who have never studied online courses (N=69) are higher than the number of students’ who possessed some experience with online learning (N=28). However,

from the 28 (28.9%) students with experience with online courses, only 16% (N=16) have taken two or more courses.

With regard to the likert scale statements, the questionnaire was divided into three domains. The first domain was concerned with investigating students' perception. Five questionnaire items, as presented in the table below were utilized for this purpose.

Table 2: Students' perception of learning English in blended learning courses

Questions	SA		A		N		D		SDA	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I could learn more in this blended learning environment	27	27.8	51	52.6	10	10.3	6	6.2	3	3.1
I would recommend taking blended courses to friends and associates	30	30.9	52	53.6	8	8.2	5	5.2	2	2.1
Learning English in a blended learning environment is boring	8	8.2	13	13.4	16	16.5	49	50.5	11	11.3
I would like my other English courses to be taught like this course	26	26.8	41	42.3	16	16.5	10	10.3	4	4.1
I am in favor of applying blended learning to English courses	21	21.6	54	55.7	11	11.3	8	8.2	3	3.1

Looking at Table 2, the frequency and percentage of each of the likert scale items were presented. In response to the first question, a total of 9 (9.3%) students answered strongly disagree and disagree to this statement and only 10 (10.3%) chose to be neutral. However, 27 and 51 chose strongly agree and agree respectively. The table also indicates that 84.5% (N= 82) of the students would recommend learning via blended learning to their friends contrary to 7.3% who disagree and strongly disagree with this item when 8.2% were neutral. It is worth noting that the third question in the table, though a positive statement, it has a negative meaning. Thus, answering with strongly disagree would indicate positive results while agreeing completely yields negative ones. By examining students' choices to this question, it is evident that more than half of the students (N= 60) chose strongly disagree and disagree. As for the remaining students, 16 of them prefer to be neutral, 13 agreed and only 8 strongly agreed. As for their preference of the leaning mode of the English courses, 68.1% (N= 67) of students show strong or moderate preference toward learning English in this environment. On the contrary, only a few number of students (N=14, 14.4%) express their unwillingness to study English in such an environment while 16 took an unbiased position. Lastly, to indicate their satisfaction with the blended

learning, 75 students choose strongly agree and agree to indicate their opinion of applying blended learning in the delivery of English Language courses.

It can be noticed that most answers to the previous answers fall under agree or disagree and lesser students tend to choose one of the two extremes strongly agree and strongly disagree. The table also shows that in four out of the five questions, more than half of the students chose agree and strongly agree with an exception of one item that has a negative meaning

The second and third domains of the questionnaire tackled two of the factors that can affect students' perception and they are: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Seven statements were dedicated for perceived usefulness and three statements for perceived ease of use as shown in the table below.

Table 3: Factors affecting student perceptions

Questions	SA		A		N		DA		SDA	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
PU										
I can access the learning contents at times convenient to me	40	41.2	47	48.5	6	6.2	4	4.1	0	0
Blended learning via Doroob helped me to be an active learner	24	24.7	47	48.5	19	19.6	4	4.1	3	3.1
Doroob helped me to track my progress	41	42.3	45	46.4	5	5.2	4	4.1	2	2.1
Learning in a blended learning environment helped me in gaining skills that are useful in my actual or chosen profession	25	25.8	51	52.6	15	15.5	3	3.1	3	3.1
Learning English in a blended learning environment is more convenient	23	23.7	53	54.6	14	14.4	3	3.1	4	4.1
Learning English in a blended learning environment via Doroob provides me with more flexibility in using my time.	29	29.9	55	56.7	8	8.2	1	1	4	4.1
Learning English in a blended learning environment via Doroob helped me to understand the instructions better	29	29.9	48	49.5	10	10.3	7	7.2	3	3.1
PEoU										
I am able to use Doroob platform easily.	53	54.6	40	41.2	3	3.1	0	0	1	1
Learning to use the system is easy for me	44	45.4	48	49.5	3	3.1	1	1	1	1
The online part of the course via Doroob is well-organized and easy to navigate	38	39.2	49	50.5	7	7.2	1	1	2	2.1

By examining table 3, it can be noticed that agree followed by strongly agree are the most selected response in all the seven items of perceived usefulness. This indicates students' realization of the usefulness of learning English via the blended learning environment offered by Dorooob. It is worth mentioning that convenience in accessing content gets the largest number of agreement with 40 students responded strongly agree and 47 chose agree. Contrariwise, disagree and strongly disagree have not been used extensively as responses except for few cases where the highest number of rejection to the statements is an insignificant 7 out of 97.

Examining the statements related to perceived ease of use in the table above, it can be seen that the highest answers were in favor of both agree and strongly agree. 93 students advocates strongly that using the Dorooob platform is easy and free of effort and 92 students stated that learning to use it is in fact not difficult. Moreover, 87 of the students approved that Dorooob is a well organized system and easy to navigate. However, the number of students answering disagree or strongly disagree is very limited to only one or two cases in all the perceived ease of use questions.

3.2.2 Qualitative data analysis

With regard to the results of qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, all the interviewed students have expressed positive view of their learning experience in the blended learning environment. In answering the question “What do you think of learning through blended learning environment? What about learning English in a blended learning environment?”, all the participating students make use of positive vocabulary such as good, very good, great, wonderful, and excellent. Moreover, some students used other expressions such as “it is a new experience that has a lot of benefits”, it is very beneficial”, and “it is fun” when explaining their experience of learning English in the newly adopted environment.

As for the factors influencing their perception, two questions were employed to gather data “What aspects of Blended learning do you think help improving your success in English courses?” and “What aspects of Blended learning do you think help impeding your success in English courses?”. In responses to these questions, the participating students stated various factors that are considered of influence on their perception. These factors can be divided into three main categories: the course content, the quality of instructor, and the types of activities.

Talking about the course content in general, Arwa and Mona found them to be easy and relevant to their real life. In fact, all the ten participating students confirmed that the videos, pictures, and topics used in the delivery of the online content are what play a significant role in their learning and improvement They described the videos used in the course as clear, easy to understand, and suitable to their level. They also asserted that the use of videos helped them a lot in understanding the newly appointed language rules especially grammar.

Another advantage of the videos used in this course is the pictures they contain. In fact, using pictures “facilitate understanding and learning” as stated by Bayan and Hana. As for Wafa,

she believed that pictures increased their ability to remember the new vocabulary presented in the lessons and their meaning.

The second influential factor is concerned with the instructor quality. Four students have emphasized the role of the teacher in facilitating their learning.

For example, Arwa said, “if the teacher is not qualified, it affects her students negatively. In contrast, students benefit a lot from the teacher that explains the course materials very well and makes good use of class time ”.

Similarly, one student explained that the teacher plays a very important role in motivating students to learn and in clarifying difficult points. For example, Nuha declared, “as long as there is a good teacher who clarify and explain difficult points there are no disadvantages to blended learning”.

The last factor that exerts influence on students’ perception is the type of activities used. Three of the participants commented that blended learning provides a variety of activities that provide students with practice needed to improve their language skills. They also added that the activities also offer immediate feedback by allowing them to check their answers and motivate them to learn.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of the current study is to investigate students’ perception as well as the factors that affect students’ perception of learning English in a blended learning environment.

The results obtained from the study instruments proved that students perceived their language learning in a blended learning environment positively. This result is consistent with Ja’ashan’s (2015) findings, which proved students’ satisfaction, and positive attitude toward learning English in blended learning environment.

With respect to the factors that influence students’ perception, the study found that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are considered two predictors of students’ positive perception and attitude. This result goes in line with Lu, Zhao, & Jiang (2012) who found that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use impact significantly with students’ satisfaction when compared to other factors.

Furthermore, the findings from semi-structured interviews revealed more factors that affect students’ perception of the blended learning experience in English courses. These factors, which consist of quality of instructor, course content, and types of activities were identified by Lim & Morris (2009) as instructional and motivational factors. Moreover, Lu, Zhao, & Jiang (2012) considered a variety of factors that impact on students’ satisfaction in blended learning and among those factors they mentioned instructor and course characteristics.

In conclusion, the present study helped in bridging a gap in the literature as no previous

studies investigated blended learning in TVTC or the learning management system Dorooob. The findings approved that TVTC students have a highly positive perception toward learning English in in the newly adopted blended learning environment. This positive perception is attributed to several factors such as the benefits offered by blended learning, the easiness of the system, the instructor characteristics, the richness of content, and the suitability of learning activities.

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