Relevance of Adopting Blended Learning in the Algerian University

أهمية تبني التعلم المختلط في الجامعة الجزائرية

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Article info:	Abstract
Article history: *Received :23-04-2022* *Accepted : 22-05-2022* **Key words:** *Relevance* *Blended Learning,* *Covid-19,* *Face-to-Face Learning, Post-pandemic,* *Algerian University.*	The variant spreading epidemic 'Covid-19' has been challenging the global educational systems. Education leaders and government officials are compelled to merge online/blended learning as an alternative solution to address the planned academic curriculum. In this context, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Algeria has ordered all local universities and institutions to eliminate face-to-face instruction and switch to virtual learning to rescue the continuum of education. However, for a number of reasons, many teachers and students considered blended learning inconvenient. The significance of this study is to shed light on the need for implementing blended learning in Algerian educational settings, its potential benefits, and its future better activation. It aims to examine the effectiveness of the Blended learning mode and its flaws and highlight EFL teachers/students' perceptions of it. That is, a qualitative research method was followed, and a constructed online survey was delivered to several teachers and students in various Algerian English departments alongside classroom observation. Finally, the findings of the study imply that a blended learning method helps students learn more effectively during and even after the Covid-19 pandemic.

الكلمات المفتاحية: | ملخص

الوباء المتحور «Covid-19» يتحدى النظم التعليمية العالمية، مما اضطر معظم القادة في العالم سواء في التعليم والمسؤولون الحكوميون إلى دمج التعلم عبر الإنترنت/المختلط كحل بديل لمعالجة المناهج الأكاديمية المخطط لها. وفي هذا السياق، أمرت وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي في الجزائر جميع الجامعات والمؤسسات المحلية بإلغاء التعليم المباشر والتحول إلى التعلم الافتراضي لإنقاذ سيرورة التعليم. ومع ذلك، لعدد من الأسباب، اعتبر العديد من الاساتذة والطلاب أن التعلم المختلط غير ملائم و مرن. تتمثل أهمية هذه الدراسة في تسليط الضوء على الحاجة إلى ضرورة انتهاج التعلم المختلط في المؤسسات التعليمية الجزائرية، و كذلك تحديد فوائده المحتملة، وتفعيله بشكل أفضل في المستقبل. وكما يهدف إلى تقييم فعالية وضع التعلم المخلوط وعيوبه وتسليط الضوء على تصورات الاساتذة/ الطلاب (EFL)عنه. أي أنه تم اتباع طريقة بحث استكشافية، وتم توزيع استبيان عبر تطبيقات الإنترنت إلى العديد من الطلبة والاساتذة في مختلف أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية الجزائرية إلى جانب اتباع مراقبة الفصول الدراسية. أخيرًا، تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن طريقة التعلم المختلطة تساعد الطلاب على التعلم بشكل أكثر فعالية أثناء وباء كوفيد 19 وحتى بعده.

اهمية،
التعلم المختلط،
التعلم الحضوري،
كوفيد19
ما بعد الجائحة
الجامعة الجزائرية.

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1. Introduction

This last half-century has witnessed a massive expansion in education across the world. Global health and education have been adversely affected by Covid-19, which has spread around the world. This pandemic may be contained by using infection prevention and physical separation precautions, which are critical to limiting the virus's spread. Many nations, including Algeria, have instituted a policy of mandatory physical distance. The emergence of COVID-19 has forced many institutions to adopt modifications that had been planned for months or years to be adjusted immediately. By shifting to an almost entirely e-learning mode, Algeria's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research compensated for the loss of academic year content. That is, this research paper examines the relevance of the online/blended approach; particularly, in light of the various ICT-based practices that have already transformed entire teaching-learning pedagogies and redefined the role of tutoring, mentoring, and counseling throughout the world, yet the case of online/blended learning in Algeria appears to be rather vibrant. For a variety of reasons, many EFL teachers and students are struggling to comprehend or accomplish the curriculum's goals while adopting blended learning.

As such, the current paper's prospective aims are to determine the EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions of the blended learning' relevance during the covid-19 crisis and to identify the benefits and drawbacks of embracing online/blended learning. Finally, to recommend innovative educational measures to be implemented to deliver a high-quality blended learning approach in post-Covid-19 situations and to establish a suitable pedagogy for use in Algerian universities.

2. Literature Review

Blended learning (BL) is a method of instruction that mixes in-person and online components (Graham,2013). As BL's popularity has risen, several models have developed. In schools, the most often used definition of BL portrays pupils studying "at least in part via online learning, with some degree of student autonomy about time, place, route, and/or pace" (Horn & Staker, 2014, p. 34). Blended Learning may be thought of as virtual education, and it is commonly used in the implementation of curricula in settings where participants are geographically separated (Onwusuru and Ogwo, 2019).

2.1. Why Blended Learning is Significant?

Blended Learning is an up-to-date concept that incorporates several benefits of both online and conventional education via the use of information communication technologies to facilitate and assist the delivery of the learning process. Lalima and Dangwal (2017) claim that " BL provides a potential for collaborative learning; constructive learning, and Computer-Assisted Learning (CAI)". While it involves a variety of methods, it also takes a lot of hard work, optimistic attitudes, and a large amount of fundi

Personalized, productive, and collaborative teaching-learning experiences are expected to transform the entire education system from traditional face-to-face mode to techno-based independent mode, where the primary focus will be on developing the potential and creativity of learners in the best possible ways 21st-century. The catalyst for change and the solution for establishing the democratic principle of education is, however, "providing equal access to education, guaranteeing equity and justice, assuring timely delivery of need-based educational content, engaging the learners through a carefully planned and pedagogically supported use of the latest online/ blended learning technologies" as indicated by Bordoloi, R., Das, P., and Das, K. (2021).

To successfully implement this unique teaching/ learning approach, a deep grasp of online and blended learning abilities is required. This process began when Utah's board of education updated teacher licensure requirements to include coursework preparing teachers "to teach effectively in traditional, online-only, and blended classrooms" and "to facilitate student use of software for personalized learning" (Utah Administrative Code R277-504-4. C.3.c-f,

n.d.). This necessity prompted us to do more research on the essential skills and abilities for successful teaching in such settings. Blended learning, according to Fitzpatrick, is a blend of online and classroom mastery (conventional). Also, proponents of BL imply it can be considered an opportunity to enhance student experience (Bernard et al., 2014; Connolly et al., 2003, 2006; Hall, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2005; Liu et al., 2016; Mariott et al., 2004; Spanjers et al., 2015).

Moreover, many academics and instructors questioned the similarities and differences between the competencies required for conventional, online, and blended education. While the majority of conventional educator preparation programs provide courses in technology integration, they require little training in online teaching (Archambault et al., 2014; Barbour et al., 2012; McAllister et al., 2016) and provide little data on preparedness for blended instruction. In virtual learning, instructors may instruct students using computer-generated classrooms and online technologies that enable class continuation. Even yet, teachers and students alike need to be educated on how to properly use computer-based learning.

When it comes to dealing with "Covid-19," many specialists consider that the use of BL is warranted. Online teaching and virtual Educ have displaced face-to-face instruction at several institutions, according to Daniel (2020, p. 1). On the other hand, students' lives have been influenced in diverse ways based on their level of education and course of study, as well as the number of points they have acquired. Garg (2019, p. 28 – 34) asserts that "the Covid-19 outbreak has had a profound effect on higher education. At first, everyone from political leaders to academic administrators was at a loss for what to do, given the diversity of pupils and their unique demands". Many different types of learning styles and academic needs necessitate a wide range of classes in a classroom. "With COVID-19, the installation of a computer-based learning technique called Blending learning is essential. As part of a blended learning environment." (Hrastinski, 2010).

3. Research methodology

Since the primary objective of this research paper is to demonstrate the benefits of BL in EFL classrooms and to ascertain teachers' and students' attitudes toward its relevance in the majority of Algerian universities during the pandemic crisis's movement to virtual learning, it is possible to make suggestions to improve it even post-pandemic. This study was conducted after months of the Blended learning adoption, descriptive quantitative and qualitative tools were employed to accomplish the research paper's objectives. A constructed online survey was distributed via emails and other online applications to many different teachers (20) and students (30) of the English departments in various local universities to assess their experience of teaching and learning, and the results of the responses obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Alongside teachers' classroom observation to identify the problem while the BL integration process thoroughly. The survey was delivered online from 1rst to 30th of November 2021, regarding the hard pandemic circumstances in the country. All respondents were fully informed about the objectives of the study and agreed to voluntarily participate. After that, data collection and interpretation of results are proceeded to confirm or reject the hypotheses.

3.1. Statistical analysis

After gathering online data, EFL teachers/students' perceptions of this teaching approach were analyzed according to statistical software. Descriptive statistics were carried out such as frequencies, percentages, mean, and SD deviation. Participants' viewpoints of advantages, disadvantages, and the level of blended learning mode acceptance are considered and comparing it genuinely with face-to-face learning. A qualitative descriptive evaluation in the second part is about participants' suggestions about future blended learning reforms.

3.2. Description of survey

The survey *(see Appendix a)* was developed by the authors of the current study. The google form survey consists of two parts of questions, the first one, is based on rating the participant's agreements according to their beliefs from *1: strongly agree / 2:*

agree/ 3: Neutral/ 4: Disagree/5: Strongly disagree. The defined 20 statements are various opinions related to blended learning and conventional teaching to answer the research questions. The second part of the questionnaire is an open-ended question to consider different future solutions as much as possible. Because there is a noticeable variation of participants who are from mixed levels, backgrounds, and gender from different Algerian universities: this is why we avoided including any background information in the survey sections and keep it standard for university teachers and students in general.

3.3. Research Questions

To achieve the stated objectives of the study, there will be some additional research questions as follows:

1–How do the EFL teachers/learners perceive the relevance of blended learning during the covid-19 pandemic?

2- What are the main problems and challenges facing EFL teachers/learners while adopting blended learning?

3- How should BL modes be adopted for improving education to better future e-learning?

It can be hypothesized that the use of Online/ blended learning as a new approach might have positive outcomes by facilitating the process of education during the Covid-19 crisis.

4. Results and discussions

According to the present results, challenges and related online /BL issues showed the highest scores of all the statistical measures, followed by the positive scores of BL efficiency. The study addressed these issues that most EFL teachers and learners encountered during COVID-19 online learning. The (20) Items were all measured statistically *(see Appendix a)*, yet the following table shows (10) related statements coherently with illustration to be more focused and precise since most issues are sequentially connected, and also, to ensure answering the research paper questions based on the above objectives. Accordingly, the following table and bars graphs display the

participants' total responses below:

Figure1:

Graphs of Rating the Participants'(Dis) Agreements toward Blended Modes during Covid-1
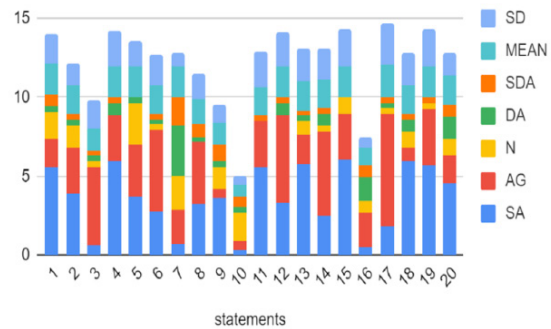
The above rating graphs indicate a dramatic fluctuation in scoring EFL participants'(dis) agreements about blended learning. The distribution of percentages is not steady in all item's ratings, yet there exist almost close scores in some statements for (agree in blue color and strongly agree in red color and that is remarkable with elements: **[1,2,3…6,13]** as shown above. While we also notice a near equivalence of means 'scores in these items *[20,19,18,17,13,14,11,1,2]*. Most of these responses support the use of ICTs to facilitate learning even though there are various obstacles.

Table 1:

Descriptive Analysis of University Teachers/ Students' perceptions of Blended Modes Implementation during the Covid-19 time

Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	means	SD
1-Students learn better because technology allows them to adjust the speed of their learning.	5.56	1.76	1.76	0.7	0.36	2.028	1.85280
2-Students will have better learning experiences when the teachers and students have better knowledge of online learning	3.93	2.86	1.43	0.36	0.36	1.788	1.41023

3-Teachers who extensively use data and up to date technological tools will be able to help their students more than those who do not	3.57	5	0.36	0.36	0.36	1.78744	2.09283
4. The combination of online and face-to-face learning would facilitate meaningful and authentic learning	5.93	2.96	0.36	0.37	0.74	0.31178	0.257899
5. Blended Learning promotes self-regulated learning.	3.7	3.33	2.59	0	0.37	1.998	1.52734
6-Learners confronted some difficulties accessing online lessons, materials downloading, online exams conducting	2.76	5.17	0.34	0.34	0.34	1.79	1.93250
7. An advantage of blended learning includes greater flexibility in arranging student class activities	1.79	7.14	0.36	0.36	0.36	2.002	2.628021
8. I find online class delivery of information more relevant than traditional in-class delivery.	5.71	3.57	0.36	0	0.36	2	2.26310
9. Combination of online and traditional in-class delivery is more effective than using one way of teaching	4.6	1.71	1.07	0.71	1.43	1.904	1.389389
10 I encourage Blended learning even it suffers from a lack of digital equipment; I find it enjoyable	6.07	1.79	1.07	0.36	0.71	2	2.089382

Responses to each question were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree (SA) = 1, agree (A) = 2, neutral (N) = 3, disagree (DA) = 4, strongly disagree (SDA) = 5). Responses were calculated using the weighted mean for each question and Standard Deviation.

According to the displayed table, the highest scores marked in all statements are *(7,14- 6,07degree)* for Agree-**Strongly Agree** in the **Items (7-10)**, whereas the lowest degree *(0,36)* marked for **-Disagree and Strongly disagree**- frequently in most items;*(1-2-5-6)*. In statement N°1, the highest score marked to *Strongly agree* (5,56 degree); however, it dropped down from Agree- Neutral *(1,76)* to the lowest one in Strongly disagree *(0,36)/M=2,028*. The second statement shows low degrees in all ratings, yet the top score falls *on SA* with *(3,93)* and then A *(2,86%) yet* falling stably in *Neutral (1,43)/ DA/SD* with *(0,36 degree)/ M=1,788*. Not so far, the third item's scores have risen a bit to (5) degree for A and *(3,57)* degree to SA, and the lowest degree fell on N/DA/SDA with (0,36 score)/M=1, 788744.Then, N° 4, the highest band goes to SA (5,93)and decreased to A *(2,96 degree/ for N=0,36/DA=0,37and SDA=0,74/M=0,2578599651)*. The scores in the 5TH item were low and fluctuated significantly from the bottom score (3,7) from SA to the weakest score (0,37) for **SDA/M=1,998**. Next, in the statement N° six, the score increased sharply in Agree (5 bands) yet dropped dramatically from SA (2,76 degree) to (0,36 degree) in **N/SDA/DA/ M=1,76**. For item 7 which describes the responses of the e-learning advantages, the highest score goes to Agree (7,14) and dropped sharply to SA with (1,79), for **N/DA/ SDA (0,36 degree) ND M=2,002**. Item 8, for those who support Online learning SA *(5,71 degrees)* and agree with *(3,57 degrees)*, the lowest degrees are for *N/SDA (0,36)/ M=2*. The highest scores voted SA with *(4,6)* to combine both traditional and online learning; also, the votes fell stably in *(1,07 degree)* for A/N, *(1,43degree- DA)* till reached *(0,71)* In **SDA/M=1,904**. Finally, statement N°10 **marked6 degrees** as the top-bottom in **SA with lower fluctuation scores in the rest of (A=1,79 degree/ N=1,07 degree/ SDA=0,71 degree 5 / M=2**.

5. Data Interpretation

From the scores marked above, teachers and students alike had a wide range of difficulties in accessing online classes, downloading materials, taking online exams, etc., based on the ratings noted above. When it comes to modern technology, several teachers are mostly unprepared. Thus, EFL instructors must build the necessary competencies to teach successfully in mixed environments, as well as a model and methods for assessing university blended teaching preparation. To prepare teachers for mixed classrooms, such a framework and instruments might give useful information about teachers' knowledge and abilities, enabling targeted/personalized professional development opportunities. BL emphasizes the need for instructors with the ability to teach successfully in mixed settings. Effective online teaching necessitates the acquisition of additional skills not necessary in a conventional setting (Archambault, Debruler, & Freidhoff, 2014; Barbour et al., 2012; Davis et al., 2007; Easton, 2003; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). Blended teaching needs a combination of online and conventional teaching abilities, as well as the ability to incorporate fluidly and intelligently two [1].

Furthermore, the necessity for all online learning equipment, tools, and systems was also mentioned by several participants, who claimed that they could not take online examinations or tests because of technical concerns, such as a lack of digital skills in utilizing online platforms (moodles/forums/etc.). Another significant barrier addressed is the teachers' lack of genuine English language interaction with their students [2]. Thus, the findings of this work support those of prior studies addressing similar problems with online/blended learning at COVID-19, where it was shown that the majority of professors and students are dissatisfied with distance education owing to the many hurdles faced (Bataineh, Atoum, Alsmadi & Shikhali 2020; Rajab et al., 2020).

In the second part of the survey, participants were asked to describe their online experiences and provide recommendations for improving e-learning. Online learning platforms may be intimidating to new users, with many participants saying they lack the expertise and confidence to use them effectively. The Ministry of Scientific Research and Higher Education's role is to schedule updated training for university educators and teachers to enhance their skills and become innovative to leverage technology like the use of digital tools; virtual whiteboards, discussion forums, online surveys, and videos to teach their curriculum and communicate with students. Students must be given time to master new technology, but technology should always be suitable based on the grade level.

The second suggestion is to create successful online classes; most teachers proposed setting reasonable expectations for the length of online sessions. In virtual classes, shortening courses assist students in remaining focused and enables them to take breaks as needed. Additionally, to maintain students' attention, particularly during live class sessions, instructors may promote engagement via polls, chat capabilities, and even by converting lessons into games through the use of participation points. The lecture may be made more enjoyable and interesting by having students participate in activities. If universities have access to the necessary facilities, equipment, and training, the benefits of blended learning may be fully realized.[3]

These findings add to the growing body of literature on the relevance of the blended learning model in the Algerian university and draw attention to the significant challenges and problems encountered by EFL teachers and learners during the sudden change to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Necessary steps are needed to facilitate the online education process to overcome these reported issues. Eventually, the rejection of the null hypothesis which predicted the use of Online/ blended learning as a new strategy that has negative outcomes on the learning process during the Covid-19 crisis, and the Alternative hypothesis confirmation, which claimed that the implementation of the Online/ blended learning approach has a positive outcome on facilitating the learning process during Covid-19 crisis. This study's data analysis has addressed the three research questions and supported the statements that the blended learning strategy makes learning easier during a pandemic and that it should be promoted even after the epidemic is over.

6. Recommendations and Suggestions

In light of the challenges, the following recommendations are made about areas in which Algeria's higher educational systems might lead the way in reforming the country's educational landscape in light of the Covid-19 pandemic experience and even after:

 Reconsideration of pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning throughout and after Algeria's pandemic-induced lockdown, there is a need to revaluate pedagogy as a strategy, an approach, a process, and a way for really effective teaching-learning.

 Teachers' performance issues might be addressed by providing training workshops guided by language teaching specialists who are experts in blended learning approaches and methodologies.

 Educators' ability to utilize online/blended learning to provide information is being built up. Higher education lecturers are already making use of tools like Facebook Live lessons, Google classrooms, Skype tutorials, audio-visual lectures through WhatsApp and blogs, and meeting applications like Zoom and Google Meet, which have provided significant relief to students during the epidemic. Thus, ability training for instructors or content developers/providers must be prioritized for them to get familiarity with the essential ideas of online learning while also overcoming their technological fear.

 The unfavorable attitudes of EFL teachers and students might be addressed by giving workshops that provide them with the necessary skills to utilize technology in a virtual classroom and educate them about the technical assistance available at their educational institution.

7. Conclusion

In this research paper, the primary goal is to examine the use of blended learning in the Algerian university by emphasizing the benefits and disadvantages that have been encountered by EFL professors and students. An antidote to the epidemic was discovered to be the use of synchronized BL learning; nevertheless, offering excellent education to all students in Algeria via the use of ICTs is still a difficult task. To elicit probable responses to study questions and to test the aforementioned research hypotheses, quantitative and qualitative instruments were involved. Findings from this research show that most users (teachers and learners) have difficulty using online platforms because they lack expertise, training, equipment...etc. The most common obstacles faced by EFL teachers and students in online learning are technical issues and concerns with internet access. Therefore, necessary technical changes must be made in designing online learning that particularly facilitates meaningful peer interaction.

Besides, it has been found that online/blended education also requires a thorough consideration of educational goals and objectives, as well as methodical planning, design, and implementation. In open-ended questions, learners' lack of effective connection with instructors owing to linguistic communication challenges may also be seen in their responses. According to the findings of the questionnaire, the majority of respondents favored blended learning as the most appropriate model of learning for the future teaching approach in the Algerian institutions. Thus, blended learning may deliver the best learning opportunities to everyone more flexibly and comfortably. Moreover, blended learning, which is often learner-centric and cost-effective, will have an impact on the whole of Algeria's educational environment in the future. It is worthwhile concluding that this investigation proves the importance of using BL in Algerian higher education, as well as the need to solve the present hurdles. Further study should be done to explore teachers' experiences and attitudes on online teaching during and after the epidemic.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest

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Appendix (a):

Online Survey of Blended Learning Relevance in the Algerian University

Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
1- Students learn better because technology allows them to adjust the speed of their learning.					
2- Students will have better learning xperiences when the teachers and students when have had better knowledge of the e-learning mode					
3 - Teachers who extensively use data and up to date of chnological tools will be able to help their students more than those who do not					
4. The ombination of online and face-to-face learning methods would facilitate meaningful and authentic learning					
Blended Learning promotes self-regulated learning.					
6- Learners confronted some difficulties accessing online lessons, materials wnloading, online exams conducting					
7- I find obstacles to interacting effectively when learning online, especially, in developing the English language skills					
8- Students should gain experience with blended learning					
9- Online technology is important to ensure that student has learned the material before moving on to the next lesson					
10-Online activities can result in learning that would be difficult for students to achieve without technology					

Statement					
11- Teachers should explore new teaching strategies that combine in-class and online learning					
12- With blended learning, you can control how fast or slow you move through lessons.					
13- With blended learning, the nformation is obtained in more than one way					
14- A path of nformation from classroom lectures through documents on the web, e.g., video and simulation will result in a good derstanding of the structional material.					
15- I encourage blended learning even the educational settings suffer from a lack of digital equipment, I find it enjoyable					
16- Blended learning is a tool that could be plemented at Algerian universities					
17. An advantage of blended learning includes greater flexibility in arranging student class activities					
18- I prefer only face-to-face learning					
19- I find online class delivery is more effective than traditional in-class delivery.					

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