

***Investigating Students' Attitudes Towards Blended Learning:  
A Case of First Year Students of English at Larbi Tebessi University (Tebessa-Algeria)***

**التحقيق في اتجاهات الطلبة نحو التعلم المدمج:  
حالة طلاب السنة الأولى للغة الإنجليزية في جامعة العربي  
التبسي (تبستةالجزائر)**

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**Abstract:**

This paper aims to investigate students' attitudes towards blended learning regarding advantages, limitations, and suggestions for improvement. Quantitative research methodology was used in this study and the data were collected through a thirty items questionnaire. The sample consisted of forty first year students of English at Larbi Tebessi University (Tebessa).

The results indicated that students mostly had positive attitudes towards blended learning as they found it advantageous for improving their language skills learning especially vocabulary retention. Enhancing students' communication competence and motivation was regarded to be one of the advantages of blended learning and internet connectivity rated the highest among its limitations. Finally, the students suggested providing proper training and solving all technical problems at the university.

**Keywords:** EFL Learning, Blended Learning, Advantages, Limitations, Suggestions.

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## **الملخص:**

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في اتجاهات الطلبة نحو التعلم المدمج فيما يتعلق بالمزايا والقيود و الاقتراحات لتحسين هذا النوع من التعلم، حيث تم استخدام منهجية البحث الكمي في هذه الدراسة وتم جمع البيانات من خلال استبيان مكون من ثلاثين بنداً، كما تكونت العينة من أربعين طالباً في السنة الأولى للغة الإنجليزية في جامعة العربي التبسي (تبسة).

وقد أشارت النتائج إلى أن الطلبة لديهم في الغالب اتجاهات إيجابية نحو التعلم المدمج حيث أنهم وجدوه مفيداً لتحسين مهاراتهم اللغوية وخاصة لاكتساب المفردات. كما أظهرت النتائج أن تعزيز كفاءة الطلاب في الاتصال وتحفيزهم هي من أعظم مزايا التعلم المدمج وأن الربط بالإنترنت هي أكبر مشكلة تعترض تعلمهم بهذه الطريقة. وأخيراً اقترح الطلاب توفير التدريب المناسب وحل كل المشاكل التقنية على مستوى الجامعة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، التعلم المدمج، المزايا، القيود، الاقتراحات.

## **1. Introduction**

The introduction of the LMD system (Licence, Master, Doctorat) in the Algerian university emphasized on the use of technology, and multimedia in particular leading to the addition of a transversal teaching unit in the curriculum comprising compulsory foreign language and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) courses, which in turn have paved the way to the growth of new methodologies in learning and teaching such as blended learning. Blended learning (BL) thus emerged as one of the most popular pedagogical concepts in higher education and in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts at the beginning of 2000.

To identify different practices and effects of BL in developing students' English language skills, it is essential to understand how learners perceive and evaluate this kind of learning. As Kessler and Plakans (2001) pointed out regarding the evaluation of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) materials, "Learners must be included, as they are also experts on their learning as well as the benefactors of well-developed materials" (p. 15). The present study attempts to investigate EFL students' attitudes towards BL, with a case of first year students at Larbi Tebessi University (Tebessa, Algeria). In this attempt, the following research questions were formulated:

- What are the students' attitudes towards the effect of using blended learning for the development of English language skills?

- What are the students' attitudes regarding the advantages of blended learning?
- What are the students' attitudes regarding the limitations of blended learning?
- What are the students' suggestions for the improvement of blended learning courses?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Blended Learning Definition**

The term 'blended learning' originated in the business world in connection with corporate training (Sharma and Barrett, 2007), then was employed in higher education and, lastly, it appeared in language teaching and learning. Within EFL literature, definitions for blended learning abound. For example, Laster, Otte, Picciano, and Sorg (2005) defined it as the type of learning that integrates online with traditional face-to-face (F2F) class activities in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner; and where a portion of F2F time is replaced by online activity. In addition, Badawi (2009) described it as "a flexible approach that combines face-to-face learning activities with online learning practices that allow students to exchange collective and individual feedback and responses [in] four specific areas, namely, learner feedback, learner strategies, and alternative assessment synchronously or asynchronously" (p. 15).

In EFL contexts, BL is viewed as a paradigm shift in pedagogy and learning theory for Garrison and Kanuka (2004) as they stated "blended learning inherently is about rethinking and redesigning the teaching and learning relationship" (p. 99). This shift in educational thinking happens when the entire course is redeveloped as a blended course, not just by having the online components added to the course. The shift then continuously develops as the blended course morphs into a completely new pedagogical model. From one model in which time and space are constants in the education equations to another model where mastery becomes the constant with time and space as the variables.

### **2.2. Blended Learning Models**

There are several models of BL. Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, and Francis (2006), for example, offered three distinct models for the purpose

of thinking about BL from a historical perspective based on Allan's (2007) description of BL as "the use of different internet based tools including chat rooms, discussion groups, podcasts and self-assessment tools to support a traditional course" (p. 4):

- a. The first model is BL as a supplement to traditional programs, e.g. the provision of additional materials and guidance through a virtual learning environment, e-mailing PowerPoint slides to delegates, use of online communication tools such as chat rooms or discussion boards, use of social software such as wiki or blogs, use of online quizzes, or additional resources provided via CD-ROMs or DVDs (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, and Francis, 2006).
- b. The second model is a transformative approach where new programs are designed or previously existing programs are redesigned to integrate a wide range of approaches to learning and teaching relevant to the learners and the context of learning (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, and Francis, 2006).
- c. The third model is the learner-led one, which is holistic and typified by the use of a wide range of technologies, including mobile phones, iPods, emails, social networking software such as MySpace or Facebook, weblogs and message systems (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, and Francis, 2006).

In the current study, BL was used to mean a supplement to the traditional course that employs a combination of: face-to-face lectures, traditional materials (prints), self-paced instruction, e-mailing, PowerPoint slides, audio and video resources and YouTube materials.

### ***2.3. Blended Learning Advantages and Challenges***

Using BL has a wide variety of advantages as it combines the advantages of traditional teaching methods and e-learning. In general, BL can benefit both the teacher and the student for it is convenient, flexible, cost effective, and motivating as a stimulant to learning. E-learning enables to update and modify the input easily, maximize communication, supply students with ongoing feedback on their learning, and varies learning resources as well as evaluating methods (Al-Hadidi, 2013). Along with that, Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008)

claimed that BL “supports all the benefits of e-learning including cost reductions, time efficiency, and location convenience for the learner as well as the essential one-on-one personal understanding and motivation that face- to- face instructions present” (p. 184). Moreover, it can enhance communication between the teacher and individual students or groups of students, as well as between students themselves creating a kind of collaboration.

According to Lo, Johnson, and Tenorio (2011), when students use BL their perception level of deep thinking and problem solving is higher. Additionally, Al-Jarf (2006) argued that online activities help remove anxiety and encourage students to be more self-dependent. Al Fiky (2011) added that the use of BL increases students' interaction and participation, develops their learning and performance, and reduces paper and photocopying costs. In hybrid courses, all course documents, including syllabi, lecture notes, assignment sheets and other hard copy handouts, are easily accessible to the students on the course web site.

While harboring new opportunities both for instructors and for students, BL also carries some challenges. Hofmann (2011) described a variety of technical, organizational, and design challenges facing BL:

- a. Ensuring participants' ability to use technology successfully,
- b. Overcoming the idea that blended is not as effective as traditional teaching,
- c. Managing and monitoring participant progress,
- d. Matching the best delivery medium to the performance objective,
- e. Keeping online offerings interactive rather than just ‘talking at’ participants,
- f. Some adults experience some computer-related phobia, and
- g. Frustration, confusion, anger, anxiety and similar emotional states which may be associated with the interaction can adversely affect productivity, learning, social relationships and overall well-being.

#### ***2.4. Previous Studies on Blended Learning***

Several studies were conducted to investigate EFL students' attitudes and perceptions towards BL. In this respect, for example, Akkoyunlu and Soyulu (2008) conducted a study with 34 students at Hacettepe University (Ankara, Turkey) to investigate their learning styles and their views of BL. Two instruments were used: a questionnaire

designed to identify students' views on BL and Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI) to measure students' learning styles. Additional data were gathered from achievement scores of the students; and records demonstrated students' participation in e-learning environment.

The Results revealed that students' views on BL process, such as ease of use of the web environment, evaluation, face-to-face environment, etc. differed according to their learning styles. The Results also revealed that students enjoyed participating in the BL environment and their achievement levels developed. At the same time, their views of BL process, and face-to-face interactive environment were positive. The overall findings showed no significant differences between students' achievement level according to their learning styles.

In their study, Al Zumor, Al Refaai, Bader, Eyhab, and Aziz Al-Rahman (2013) explored King Khalid University EFL students' views regarding the advantages and limitations of merging the features of face-to-face language instruction and online language learning via the Blackboard learning management system in a BL approach. The study also examined students' suggestions for improving the quality of BL courses. The sample consists of 160 male students. The participants completed a 33-item questionnaire. The results indicated the clear advantages of this new experience in broadening students' reading opportunities and enriching their English vocabulary. Moreover, the component on advantages clearly demonstrated how BL provides an environment for more effective employment of indirect language learning strategies such as meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies. The limitations and problems of BL highlighted by the respondents are followed by a number of practical suggestions for addressing these drawbacks.

Yağci, Çınarbaş, and Hoş (2016) conducted their study to investigate Turkish EFL students' perceptions about BL on the improvement of language skills. The study also found out the students' opinions about the advantages and the limitations of blended learning, and gathered the suggestions for the improvement of the BL experience. Quantitative research methodology was used in the study. The data were collected through BL perceptions questionnaire. The sample consisted of 101 students selected by random stratified sampling. The results showed that students mostly had positive attitudes towards blended courses and they found these courses advantageous and beneficial for improving

language skills. They reported that blended learning improved their vocabulary and listening at most. The use of multimedia was thought to be one of the greatest advantages of the blended learning. The connection problem was found out to be the biggest limitation faced by the students. Finally, the participants suggested more technical support to be provided during blended courses.

### **3. Method**

The study used the exploratory descriptive method of research using a questionnaire as the main research tool. This method was chosen due to its relevance for investigating first year EFL students' attitudes towards BL. Al Zumor et al. (2013) questionnaire was adapted with slight modifications to fit the purpose of the study. The collected data were analyzed quantitatively using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS.22) program.

#### **3.1. Participants and Setting**

A random sample of 40 students, grouped administratively into two groups, were selected out of 200 first year students of English language at Larbi Tebessi University (Tebessa) during the academic year 2019/2020. This selection was based on the fact that these groups were taught during oral sessions in a BL environment using technological devices such as PowerPoint slides, audio and video resources and YouTube materials.

#### **3.2. Data Gathering Tools**

To achieve the purpose of this research, a questionnaire was used to probe into EFL students' attitudes towards BL and distributed to the participants using Google Forms. It includes a total number of 30 items divided into four parts addressing respectively, language skills development, advantages, limitations, and suggestions for improvement. For a thorough description of the questionnaire in use, a 5-point Likert scale format. The initial version of the questionnaire was piloted before use with ten random participants from the same population to ensure that the items are sufficient, answerable, reliable and useful. Based on the students' comments and feedback, the questionnaire was revised.

**3.3. Data Analysis Procedures**

The gathered data were analyzed quantitatively using the following calculations: percentages (%), mean scores (M), and standard deviations (SD) generated by SPSS. Table 1 presents the scales and the mean values.

**Table 1: The Scales and Mean Values**

<i>Scales</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree (SDA)</i>	<i>Disagree (DA)</i>	<i>Neutral (N)</i>	<i>Agree (A)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree (SA)</i>
<i>Mean Values</i>	1.00 - 1.50	1.51 - 2.50	2.51 - 3.50	3.51 - 4.50	4.51 - 5.00

**4. Analysis of the Results**

The questionnaire used in this research was analyzed quantitatively in accordance with the formulated research questions. Tables were used to display the obtained data. The first part of the questionnaire aims to answer the first research question which investigates the students’ attitudes towards the effect of using BL for the development of English language skills. Table 2 presents the collected data.

**Table 2 : English Language Skills Development**

<i>Items</i>	<i>SDA%</i>	<i>DA%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>1. BL helps to improve my listening skills.</i>	5	10	25	32.5	25	3.57	1.18
<i>2. BL helps to improve my speaking skills.</i>	12.5	10	17.5	30	30	3.55	1.34
<i>3. BL helps to improve my reading skills.</i>	12.5	7.5	30	25	25	3.42	1.28
<i>4. BL helps to improve my writing skills.</i>	12.5	5	22.5	40	20	3.50	1.22
<i>5. BL helps to improve my pronunciation.</i>	10	5	35	27.5	22.5	3.47	1.18
<i>6. BL helps to improve my spelling.</i>	17.5	10	42.5	17.5	12.5	2.97	1.21
<i>7. BL helps to improve my grammar.</i>	10	32.5	37.5	12.5	7.5	2.75	1.04
<i>8. BL helps to improve my vocabulary.</i>	12.5	10	7.5	35	35	3.70	1.36
<i>Total mean</i>						<b>3.36</b>	



According to Table 2, the participants' responses indicated agreement on items no. 1, 2, and 8 with a mean score of (3.57, 3.55, and 3.70) at a standard deviation of (1.18, 1.34, and 1.36) respectively. On the contrary, the participants responded with neutrality concerning items no. 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 with a mean of (3.42, 3.50, 3.47, 2.97, and 2.75) at a standard deviation of (1.28, 1.22, 1.18, 1.21, and 1.04) respectively. The total mean (3.36) shows neutrality of the general attitude of the students.

The second part of the questionnaire aims to answer the second research question regarding the advantages of BL. The results are tabulated below.

**Table 03 : Advantages of BL**

<i>Items</i>	<i>SDA%</i>	<i>DA%</i>	<i>N%</i>	<i>A%</i>	<i>SA%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>9. BL is more convenient for me than face-to-face learning.</i>	20	15	35	20	10	2.85	1.23
<i>10. BL makes teaching and learning more effective; because it integrates all forms of media, print, audio, video, and animation.</i>	15	12.5	5	35	32.5	3.57	1.42
<i>11. BL helps me to use time effectively.</i>	15	15	5	32.5	32.5	3.52	1.44
<i>12. BL gives me access to authentic second language materials.</i>	5	12.5	40	30	12.5	3.32	1.00
<i>13. BL enhances my motivation and interest to learn.</i>	5	7.5	17.5	50	20	3.72	1.02
<i>14. BL develops my integration and participation in class.</i>	7.5	10	17.5	37.5	27.5	3.67	1.19
<i>15. BL supports collaboration between students.</i>	5	5	15	50	25	3.85	1.01
<i>16. BL improves my communication competence using online technologies and social network applications.</i>	2.5	2.5	17.5	42.5	35	4.05	0.92
<i>17. BL provides effective and frequent feedback.</i>	12.5	7.5	22.5	45	12.5	3.37	1.17
<i>Total mean</i>						<b>3.54</b>	

Examining Table 3 above, it can be noticed that the students' responses depicted neutrality regarding items no. 9, 12, and 17. The mean scores are (2.85, 3.32, and 3.37) at a standard deviation of (1.23, 1.00, and 1.17) respectively. When it comes to item no. 16, most of the participants showed agreement with the highest mean score (M= 4.05, SD= 0.92). Similarly, they responded with agreement regarding item no. 15 (M=3.85, SD= 1.01). Prior to the advantages of BL raised in items no. 13, 14, 10, and 11, the participants showed agreement with a mean score of (3.72, 3.67, 3.57, and 3.52) at a standard deviation of (1.02, 1.19, 1.42, and 1.44) respectively. Consequently, the total means at this stage reaches (3.54) revealing that the students have positive attitudes towards the advantages of BL.

With regard to the students' attitudes towards the limitations of BL raised in the third research question, seven items under the third part of the questionnaire were allotted to address this aim as presented in Table 04.

**Table 04 : Limitations of BL**

<i>Items</i>	<i>SDA%</i>	<i>DA%</i>	<i>N%</i>	<i>A%</i>	<i>SA%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>18. BL is difficult to handle and therefore hard to use.</i>	15	20	45	15	5	2.75	1.04
<i>19. Implementing BL strategy makes the classroom very noisy.</i>	12.5	30	40	10	7.5	2.70	1.05
<i>20. I get bored during the BL class.</i>	42.5	32.5	12.5	7.5	5	2.00	1.14
<i>21. BL facilitates cheating and plagiarism.</i>	25	20	37.5	10	7.5	2.55	1.18
<i>22. Slow internet connectivity is a major problem I face in using BL.</i>	0	5	5	40	50	4.35	0.79
<i>23. I face technical problems when I use BL.</i>	5	10	25	32.5	27.5	3.67	1.12
<i>24. I think socially isolated when I use BL.</i>	12.5	20	40	20	7.5	2.90	1.09
<i>Total mean</i>						<b>2.98</b>	

It is clearly noticed that the highest means (M= 4.35, SD= 0.79) and (M=3.67, SD=1.12) in respect are in favor of items no. 22, and 23.

With respect to items no. 18, 19, 21, and 24, the participants responded with neutrality. The mean scores are (2.75, 2.70, 2.55, and 2.90) at a standard deviation of (1.04, 1.05, 1.18, and 1.09) in respect. Surprisingly, the participants responded negatively towards item no. 20 ( $M=2.00$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ). It is worth mentioning here that the students show an overall neutral attitude (Total  $M=2.98$ ) regarding the limitations of BL.

The fourth part of the questionnaire seeks to answer the fourth research question addressing the students' suggestions for the improvement of BL courses. The results are shown in Table 05.

**Table 05 : Suggestions for the Improvement of BL Courses**

<i>Items</i>	<i>SDA%</i>	<i>DA%</i>	<i>N%</i>	<i>A%</i>	<i>SA%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>25. I would like lecture time in the classroom to be reduced.</i>	12.5	12.5	32.5	25	17.5	3.22	1.23
<i>26. Our department should increase the number of online blended courses.</i>	7.5	7.5	47.5	25	12.5	3.27	1.02
<i>27. The number of computer labs should be increased.</i>	5	2.5	25	40	27.5	3.82	1.02
<i>28. All technical problems should be solved.</i>	2.5	5	10	42.5	40	4.12	0.95
<i>29. E- learning training should be provided to all teachers as well as students before they start courses.</i>	2.5	12.5	7.5	27.5	40	4.00	1.09
<i>30. Rewarding the distinguished users of blended learning.</i>	7.5	10	22.5	30	30	3.65	1.21
<i>Total mean</i>						<b>3.68</b>	

As far as the students' suggestions with the goal of improving the quality of BL courses are concerned, Table 5 reflects that the students were neutral towards items no. 25 and 26 with the lowest mean scores of (3.22 and 3.27) at a standard deviation of (1.23 and 1.02) respectively. The table further demonstrates that the students' responses indicated

agreement on the suggestions provided under the questionnaire items no. 27, 28, 29, and 30 which scored the highest among all the suggestions. The mean scores are (3.82, 4.12, 4.00, and 3.65) at a standard deviation of (1.02, 0.95, 1.09, and 1.21) respectively. Remarkably, the total means at this stage scored (3.68) denoting, in general, that the students were almost in favor of the suggestions provided under the questionnaire items.

## **5. Discussion :**

The findings of this research paper are discussed in light of the results, related literature and previous studies considering the proposed research questions. With regard to the first research question, the results indicated that the students had positive attitudes towards the effect of BL on the development of vocabulary, listening, and speaking, while they showed a neutral attitude towards its effect on developing reading, writing, pronunciation, spelling, and grammar.

The students perceived BL to be useful to vocabulary at most. This finding might be resulted from the fact that the students were exposed to BL courses for oral sessions in which they had to learn the necessary and relevant vocabulary to the discussed topic; also they might have been exposed to new vocabulary in the different multimedia texts, or while watching videos and short movies or listening to podcasts. Accordingly, this finding is in alignment with Al-Zumor et al. (2013) research findings, in which a high rating was attributed to vocabulary development by incorporating the Blackboard learning management system in a blended environment.

The results further presented that BL helped improve the students' listening skills. This might have resulted from the fact that BL offered a modest advantage over traditional classroom instruction in providing chances to listen to videos/podcasts and do some exercises to check their comprehension and abilities. This is supported by Yağcı et al. (2016) claim that BL, in learners' views, facilitated listening more effectively. With regard to speaking, the students believed that this skill might be developed when using BL. This finding supports the results of Ibrahim

and Yusoff's study (2012) which indicated that the students in their study observed that using wiki in a BL environment facilitated their speech preparation process specifically in receiving feedback and improving speech delivery in a public speaking course.

As noted all the remaining skills occur below the mean (3.50) and above the mean (2.51) i.e. within the neutral response, which reveals that the students are not sure whether reading, writing, pronunciation, spelling, and grammar can be enhanced by implementing BL. This might be attributed to the inadequate utilization of technology with face-to-face learning.

In light of the second research question addressing the students' attitudes regarding BL advantages, the results revealed that the students have an overall positive attitude. Out of the nine items suggested in the second part of the questionnaire, six items clearly emphasized the students' positive stand, while only three advantages were categorized under the neutral response indicating the students' hesitant attitudes. Improving the students' communication competence obviously ranked the highest, followed by supporting collaboration between them. The other advantages asserted by the students refer to the role of BL in enhancing their motivation and interest to learn, developing their integration and participation in class, making their teaching and learning more effective through the integration of different modes of instruction, and helping them to use time effectively. According to Staker and Horn (2012), the introduction of BL in EFL classrooms encourages the development of group work, motivation, and better integration of contemporary technological solution.

In this vein, it can be mentioned that the current study findings are consistent with some studies such as Alfahadi, Alsalhi, and Alshammari (2015); Yağcı et al. (2016); and Dweikat and Amer (2017), in which detailed information about how students experienced teaching and learning in a BL environment was provided. The data yielded also by these studies provided strong evidence that student participants have some positive attitudes as well as neutral or negative towards BL English

course in their institution. This ambivalence may be attributed to the fact that the students were in favor of the idea of BL but not satisfied with the way of implementation.

The third research question of the present study targets the students' attitudes regarding the limitations of BL. Noticeably, the results indicated that the general tendency of the students' attitudes show neutrality or uncertainty of the suggested limitations. They further denoted that internet connectivity and technical problems rated the highest and were the most serious challenges to the students' successful learning via the blend. This finding is quite significant and must be seriously considered by institutions before and during the introduction of technology to EFL students. The other limitations provided under the questionnaire items fall under the neutral response.

In an attempt to answer the fourth research question of the present study, the students' suggestions were surveyed. The results indicated uncertainty among the students regarding the size of the technological component in the instructional process. Students were not sure whether reducing lecture time in the classroom or increasing the number of online BL courses is going to help them. However, the students' responses indicated agreement on increasing the number of computer labs, solving all technical problems, providing proper training to all students as well as teachers, and rewarding the distinguished users of BL.

## **6. Conclusion :**

The current study investigates the attitudes of first year students of English at Larbi Tebessi University (Tebessa) towards BL with a focus on language skills and areas development, advantages, limitations, and suggestions for improvement. Therefore, this study seems to be significant in the sense that knowing students' attitudes towards BL would help teachers evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy. Furthermore, when students perceive their experience as enjoyable, satisfying, and personally fulfilling, they tend to interact more, which results in enhanced learning. Based on the attitudes of the students, some important implications and recommendations can be given in this regard.

There is a need to familiarize all stakeholders with the different aspects of BL and the advantages and challenges facing this type of learning before its implementation.

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