The Effect of Blended Learning in English Language Proficiency Courses on the Language Performance of Kurdish EFL Postgraduate Students in Sulaimani City

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the effect of the blended learning strategy as compared with the face-to-face instruction in English language teaching has become a popular topic of research. This study focuses on the effect of implementation of Blended Learning (BL) approach in English Language Proficiency courses in Sulaimani city, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) on the language proficiency of both Elementary and Pre-intermediate level course participants. The study utilizes the quasi-experimental research design involving 104 Kurdish postgraduate students, who were allocated into a treatment group (blended

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learning) and control group (traditional face-to-face classroom), from these two levels. Thus, the main goal of this study is to investigate whether there are any significance differences in obtained language proficiency between participants of the two groups between groups and per level. The sampling has been taken from the population who were enrolled in an English language proficiency course at the public universities' language centres in Sulaimani city. The experiment was carried out during an intensive course lasted for six weeks (100 hours) in which the classes of English language proficiency were taught four days per week. The experimental group was taught using blended learning (i.e. an equal combination of both virtual and face-to-face teaching) and the control group was only instructed with regular face-to-face teaching. Overall, the results show that the participants who were taught using both blended learning and traditional teaching methods outperformed the control group who were only taught in face-to-face classrooms. Additionally, the pre-intermediate experimental group achieved higher language performance than the pre-intermediate control group and improved their overall language proficiency slightly higher than the elementary group. The findings of this study bring further evidence and support for the integration of blending learning into English language classes, particularly in the language proficiency courses of the universities' language centres. This study also has a number of teaching implications for EFL teachers which will be highlighted at the end of the paper.

Keywords: BL, language proficiency courses; face-to-face instruction, Kurdish students, EFL.

تأثير التعلم المدمج في مساقات إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية على الأداء اللغوي لطلبة الدراسات العليا الأكراد في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في مدينة السليمانية

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الـمـسـتـخـلـص

في الآونة الأخيرة، أصبح تأثير استراتيجية التعلم المدمج بدلاً من التدريس وجهاً لوجه في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية موضوعاً شائعاً للبحث. تبحث هذه الدراسة في مدى فعالية اعتماد التعلم المدمج في مساقات إجادة اللغة الإنجليزية في إتقان اللغة لدى طلبة الدراسات العليا الأكراد من المشاركين في

دورات Elementary و Pre–intermediate في إقليم كردستان العراق .لذا تم تنفيذ تصميم البحث شبه التجريبي الذي شمل ١٠٤ طالباً كردياً في الدراسات العليا والذي تم تقسيمهم إلى مجموعة علاجية ومجموعة ضابطة وبالتالي كان الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو التحقيق فيما إذا كانت هناك أي اختلافات ذات أهمية في الكفاءة اللغوية التي تم الحصول عليها بين المشاركين في المجموعتين أو بين المجموعات أو بين المستويين. وقد تم أخذ العينة من الملتحقين في مساق إجادة اللغة الإنجليزية في مراكز اللغات التابعة للجامعات الحكومية في مدينة السليمانية. تم تدريس المجموعة التجريبية باستخدام التعلم المدمج (أي مزيج من التدريس عبر الإنترنت والتدريس وجهاً لوجه)، أما المجموعة الضابطة فقد تم تعليمهم من خلال التدريس التقليدي وجهاً لوجه فقط. تم تنفيذ التجربة خلال دورة مكثفة استمرت لمدة ستة أسابيع (١٠٠ ساعة) تم فيها تدريس فصول إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية أربعة أيام في الأسبوع. بشكل عام ، أظهرت النتائج أن المشاركين الذين تم تدريسهم باستخدام كلٍ من التعلم المدمج وطرق التدريس التقليدية تفوقوا على المجموعة الضابطة التي تم تدريسها فقط من خلال الفصول الدراسية وجها لوجه. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، حققت المجموعة التجريبية من Pre–intermediate أداءً لغوياً أعلى من المجموعة الضابطة في المستوى نفسه وتحسنت كفاءتها اللغوية الإجمالية أعلى قليلا من مجموعة Elementary. تقدم نتائج هذه الدراسة المزيد من الأدلة والدعم لاستخدام التعلم المدمج في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية، لا سيما في مساقات إتقان اللغة في مراكز اللغات في الجامعات. هذه الدراسة لها أيضا عدد من الاستخدامات التعليمية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات الدالة: التعلم المدمج، مساقات إتقان اللغة، التدريس وجهاً لوجه، الطلبة الأكراد، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been controversy about the effects of BL as an approach to education in comparison with instructor-led physical classes. Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum (2013) raise concerns over the arrival of new technologies in language education and literacy since students need to be fully competent in digital literacies to survive in modern society and workplace. For instance, the lack of human contact is deemed as one of the limitations with the advance of more technology-assisted learning (Thorne, 2003). Tango Rojas (2020) emphasizes that online learning with no teacher to promptly respond to students' questions is challenging, in addition to considering several other factors that influence the success of blended lessons during its implementation. This notion is

supported by Thorne (2003, p. 17), mentioning that the drawbacks can be a variety of aspects: "wrong time, wrong place, wrong people". Namely, the study context, students' needs and teachers' technological skills should be accounted for.

A blended learning approach might bring various barriers for learners due to prevailing differences between conventional and online classes in terms of the style of learning and roles of students and tutors (Macdonald, 2008). According to Macdonald (2008, p.123), one of the challenges is to keep students "on course and in tune" in the BL-based course due to the freedom and choice they tend to have. Particularly, the effectiveness of BL has recently been challenged by some scholars claiming that a variety of factors (e.g. enthusiasm, commitment, and energy) influence the successful implementation of BL to promote effective learning aligning with individual needs (Thorne, 2003). As Garrison and Vaughan (2007) report that it is not an easy task to design learner-orientated blended learning since it brings challenges and requires flexibility in its design that accounts for specific learners' individual differences, learning goals and the context. Thorne (2003) unveils some other obstacles of BL application, such as a lack of technological awareness, suitable infrastructure, mode of delivery, a comprehensive plan, integrating several dimensions of active learning and technology-based necessities.

On the other hand, the benefits of BL outweigh its drawbacks. There has been much research argues for blending learning modes as they exploit the strengths of both face-to-face and online learning (Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum, 2013), which integrates the assets and potentials of both to level up the potentials of each alone (Garrison and Vaughan, 2007). For instance, the integration of technology with the Internet has played a crucial role in facilitating learning and teaching in ESL/EFL classrooms, and most importantly BL has brought a great deal of benefits for both teachers and learners (Tango Rojas, 2020). Promoting learner autonomy is the core principle of BL that encourages deep learning, enables learners to be "self-directed" and independent (Garrison and Vaughan, 2007, p 45) and provides a solid base for lifelong learning (Macdonald, 2008). BL has become an innovative and effective tool to promote education and foster learning in the 21st century. It creates equal opportunities of inclusive and universal education for learners regardless of their cultures, boundaries, learning situations, and time zones (Thorne, 2003).

Supporting this view, Bersin (2004, p.3) highlights the role of technology in solving the onsite classroom challenges, such as large class sizes and travel costs through extending instructor model the "in space and time." Moreover, Bersin (2004, p.3) contradicts the claim that BL is a new concept, since technology was first utilized as mainframe and mini-computers in training programs in the 1960s and 1970s. At present, as Bersin (2004) argues, BL is accomplished through a variety of forms, such as "self-study events (also called asynchronous) … (that) do not require synchronization with anyone (p.149), (which) include web-based courseware, simulations, EPSS systems, books, and job aids (p.12). Live events (also called "synchronous") require an instructor or mentor to be available in real time with students (p.149), … (which) include webcasting, live video, conference calls, and instructor-led training (p.12)". Furthermore, blending online and offline is more beneficial than e-learning alone since students may suffer losing motivation and feeling isolated if they only study via online (i.e. asynchronously)

(Macdonald, 2008). Although there are differences in the ratio between online learning and face-to-face in blended learning, the online learning model is recommended to be "between 33% and 50%, and even as high as 80%" (Lazar et al., 2020; Owston and York, 2018 cited in Tong, Uyen and Ngan, 2022, p. 2).

Another advantage lies in facilitating communication beyond the class through the assistance of technological tools and platforms that help both teachers and students to shift from considering learning as a social practice rather than an isolated activity (Stanley, 2013). Similarly, Garrison and Vaughan (2007) explain that one of the key reasons for adopting BL is the need to develop the sense of collaboration and engagement in learning experiences, particularly in higher education, that are essential strategies to meet the demands of society in the 21st century.

The integration of technology into traditional face-to-face classes is a common condition which has a considerable impact on teaching and learning worldwide, yet instructors and scholars have conflicting views about the role of blended learning in improving the quality of the learning experience. Although many studies have been conducted in various educational contexts on the impact of BL on enhancing leaning performance of ESL/EFL students, to date there has been little agreement on what model of BL is the most effective and how it affects the performance of Kurdish postgraduate learners' overall language proficiency and to what degree the BL effect changes in accordance with certain language levels. Additionally, no research has been found investigating the effect of BL in the language proficiency courses delivered at the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)'s public universities' language centres. It is thought that the participants of these courses have issues in understanding and communication because the classes are generally teacher-centred due to their intensiveness and time restriction. Thus, it might be assumed that combining their conventional (face-to-face) classes with blended learning may help participants develop their autonomy and self-direction in learning due to the student-centred nature of blended learning.

This study is conducted to determine the impact of BL on the language performance of Kurdish postgraduate students in English language proficiency courses in Sulaimani governorate. Specifically, it investigates whether there were any significance differences in language proficiency between the participants of the treatment group (online and face-to-face learning) and the comparison group (face-to-face lessons). Additionally, it examined whether there were any significance differences in language proficiency between the students with different levels: elementary and pre-intermediate. The research questions that guide this study are the followings:

1. What is the effect of blended learning on language proficiency of Kurdish postgraduate students in the elementary level courses between the experimental group (i.e. blending online and face-to-face learning) and the comparison group (i.e. traditional face-to-face learning) in Sulaimani city, KRI?
2. What is the effect of blended learning on language proficiency of Kurdish postgraduate students in the pre-intermediate level courses between the experimental group (i.e. blending online and face-to-face learning) and the comparison group (i.e. traditional face-to-face learning) in Sulaimani city, KRI?

3. Is there any significant correlation between blended learning and the level of language proficiency of Kurdish postgraduate students in Elementary and Pre-intermediate English language proficiency courses in Sulaimani city, KRI?

This study is of theoretical and pedagogical significance as it contributes to this growing area of research by exploring the effects of blended learning in EFL conventional classes at the Kurdistan Region's public universities. The findings of this study provide the stakeholders of the language proficiency courses in KRI with evidence and further insights into the effectiveness blending face-to-face with virtual classes, particularly for delivering language courses at the university level. Further, this research fills a contextual gap in the literature by investigating the effect of BL on Kurdish EFL postgraduate students learning English for academic purposes. This study also contributes to the existing literature concerning the theoretical foundation of BL and its benefits in learning situation, such as autonomy and motivation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 THEORITICAL FOUNDATION

There has been recently an increasing interest in the impact of technology in facilitating onsite teaching classes and promoting student-centred learning. Traditionally, ESL/EFL teachers integrated their lessons with some forms of homework (self-study); however, nowadays they tend to use "blended learning" as an approach to education, in which the out-of-class component is mediated by technological devices; for example, smartphones and tablets (Thornbury, 2017, p. 30). According to Thornbury (2017), the blended learning (BL) might also include the provision of virtual learning through a learning managing system so that learners are able to interact with their instructors via telephone communication or with other learners, using online discussions forums. Nowadays, BL is a topic of special research interest of scholars; however, similar to e-learning, different people conceive the term differently (Macdonald, 2008). Although there is no consensus on the definition of "blended," Stein and Graham (2014) state that blended courses are meant to be as a combination of onsite (i.e. face-to-face) with online experiences to produce effective, efficient, and flexible learning. Strengthening this view, Stickler (2022, p. 5) considers that the mix of face-to-face and online teaching and learning is "deliberate and planned". Glazer (2023, p.3) consolidates this by defining BL as the employment of various pedagogical methods to offer a course facilitated by active learning strategies that assist integrating the best features of online courses and face-to-face. Bersin (2004) establishes this assumption pointing out that BL is a powerful tool that enhance the performance of learners. Further, BL represents the most contemporary and logical methodology that embraces a blend of multimedia technologies, such as virtual classrooms, voicemail, online text animation, video-streaming, email and conference calls, and these tools can be integrated with conventional ways of classes and one-to-one trainings (Thorne, 2003).

The theoretical foundation of BL is in agreement with the constructivist learning theory, in which learners tend to take massive advantage of their learning experiences through actively participating in generating knowledge and building meaningful understanding (Garrison and Vaughan, 2007). The constructivist approach emphasizes learning by doing

and student-centred teaching model (Blumberg, 2019), and this is in line with Al Noursi (2020) who highlights that BL approach helps students to take some responsibility for their learning process and enhance active learning. Likewise, Vasileva-S-tojanovska (2015 cited in Tong, Uyen and Ngan, 2022, p. 2) points out that BL is "a student-centred learning method" that capitalizes on the characteristic of both physical and virtual classrooms.

In similar vein, according to BL approach, learners can be treated as partners when assigning activities, choosing topics and reading books of their general interest; besides, the teacher should take on the role of a facilitator (Williams and Burden, 1997). Extending this notion, Stickler (2022, p. 12) also posits that online learning can draw from a number of learning theories such as "socio-cultural theory, … ecological theory, and connectivism." Thus, ecological approach focuses on "the total environment of the learner" to decide on a learner success or failure (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 190). As far as pedagogy is concerned, language teaching and technology have become interconnected in EFL/ESL classrooms. Maintaining this position, Stickler (2022, p. 4) highlights the employment of ICT that underlies teaching practices for EFL/ESL tutors; accordingly, language teaching practices should adhere to an important criteria called "STAR" which includes: "Space: Is the teaching context purely face-to-face or fully online or is it blended (i.e., part of the teaching takes place in physical proximity and part at a distance)? Time: Is the communication asynchronous (e.g., email, blog) or synchronous (e.g., Skype, video-conferencing), or a mix of both? Accreditation: Is the educational setting formal, informal, non-formal, or does learning happen incidentally? Role: Is the teacher the focus of the classroom or is the learner in the lead?"

2.2 MAJOR PREVIOUS STUDIES

The study of the effects of machinery integration in classes on reading performance started as early as the 1980s with the vital development of technology which led scholars to believe that traditional paper-based materials would be replaced with a more advanced system which involves the use of high-tech equipment. Muter et al. (1982), for instance, compared reading speed and comprehension of texts from a book and a television screen. The results showed no significant difference between the two methods regarding comprehension of the text while there was a noticeable delay (28.5%) for those who read from the television screen. Later studies, however, such as Askwall (1985) and Cushman (1986), confirmed that none of their subjects displayed any significant speed discrepancy.

BL continued to attract the interest of scholars in the following years and numerous experiments were conducted in order to examine various factors, such as accuracy (Wilkinson and Robinshaw, 1987), fatigue (Muter et al., 1982; Gould and Grischkowsky, 1984), readability (Gould et al. 1987; Ziefle, 1998) and preference (Starr, 1984) (See Dillon, 1992 for more details).

It is worth mentioning that these early studies used simple technologies, such as videotex and TV screens with low resolution qualities compared to what is being used now. This is also confirmed by Muter and Maurutto (1991) who concluded that reading from a computer screen did not differ in speed and comprehension from reading from a book which they attribute to the higher quality equipment they used compared to those in

earlier studies. Moreover, some of the studies lack accurate details on the methodology and exact measurements of the parameters, this is why it is not easy to resolve the inconsistency in the results achieved.

Fast forward to the 21st century, the term 'blended learning' started to be widely used and descriptions of its aims and methods started to take shape (despite the challenges of providing precise definitions; see Oliver and Trigwell, 2005). In parallel with the rapid development of technology, new devices, platforms and approaches of teaching in blended classes were experimented and, consequently, a vast amount of research was conducted in order to examine and evaluate the effect of BL on improving language proficiency for ESL and EFL learners (Banditvilai, 2016).

Insofar as the effectiveness of BL is concerned, the literature displays varying results. Some studies highlight challenges for the implementation of the blended model of delivery (Harrington, 2010). There have been, however, several studies indicating positive findings for ESL/EFL teachers and learners' learning process and facilitating the student-centred approach.

To begin with, Rahimi and Behjat (2011) conducted a pretest-posttest analysis using a one-way ANOVA in order to demonstrate the influence of online reading on the comprehension of English. The study included 85 EFL students at Islamic Azad University who were given the material beforehand in order to do their pre-class study. The first group was given a printed copy of the texts while the other had access to links of the related sources with the freedom to do their own research online. The results showed that incorporating hypertexts significantly improved reading comprehension of the online group as it encouraged reading and made it easier.

These findings are similar to those reported by Szymanska and Kaczmarek (2011) who conducted a similar study on thirty second-year students at the Foreign Language Teacher Training College in Opole, Poland. Although the results showed no significant difference in terms of reading recall, reading comprehension of the electronic group was noticeably improved. Interestingly, the majority of the participants from both groups preferred reading the printed material over the electronic version since they described it as less tiring, easier to use and more portable.

Similarly, Adas and Bakir (2013) concluded that the use of BLA had a positive effect on the writing skill as well. Their experimental group, who were all undergraduates at a Palestinian university, displayed a substantial improvement in terms of their overall writing skill especially spelling, grammar and the use of punctuation marks. These results were achieved by analyzing the students' scores in a pre-test/post-test using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program. Supporting this outcome, Khudhair (2022) yielded similar positive results in favour of BL involving 139 Iraqi EFL students from the college of Education/ University of Babylon.

In contrast, Kim and Kim (2013) confirm that although their participants, who were teenagers from an American high school, were comfortable using computers, they still preferred traditional paper-based reading comprehension tests over computer-based ones, which was, consequently, reflected in the results of their study. The paper-based tests

displayed faster reading speeds and higher comprehension scores. Similar results were given by Solak (2014) who determined that their paper-based participants were 12% faster than the computer-based ones and had better comprehension accuracy by 15%.

Masita (2020) examined the use of BL in teaching vocabulary to 30 undergraduate students at an Indonesian university and established that BL has a positive effect on the students' attitude towards the learning process and hence they performed better in the exercises provided. It is worth mentioning, however, that Masita's study was an observational analysis which was based on the researcher's observation as well as survey interviews with the students. Similar result was reported by Al Bataineh, Banikalef and H Albashtawi (2019), who conducted a mixed-methods study investigating the impact of BL on 28 Jordanian EFL students' grammar performance. The study used both a quasi-experimental design followed by interviews, in which the treatment group was taught using Moodle and the control group was given traditional methods of teaching. The result of the qualitative interviews confirmed the positive result of the experimental study, showing that the students were all satisfied and motivated to learn English using BL approach.

As far as general communication skills are concerned, Tango Rojas' study (2020) revealed that online learning was not as effective as a regular face-to-face classroom. The research was conducted on 31 Spanish-speaking EFL learners of pre-intermediate (B1/CEFR) level in a language institute in Bolivia. They were divided into a comparison group (18 students) who had face-to-face classes and a treatment group (13 students) who had blended classes. The students were selected in line with a convenience method to involve two parallel classes studying the same content and receiving instructions by the same teacher to investigate the impact of blended lessons on the learners' overall language proficiency (using a two-way mixed ANOVA) and each language skill separately (using an independent t-test).

The results of the study demonstrated that the comparison group outperformed the treatment group in improving their overall language proficiency. As for the reading skill, grammar and vocabulary, no significant difference was reported between the scores of both groups. In contrast, the comparison group significantly performed better than the blended group in their communication skills: listening, writing, and speaking. The findings of the interviews with the students and the teacher indicated that online learning was rated positive in terms of interactivity and feedback, but negative in relation to listening and speaking skills. Additionally, working on their own in the blended learning group was found challenging as they were used to have a teacher to guide them in the regular face-to-face classes.

This finding contrasts with the data obtained by other researchers such as Al Noursi (2020) who conducted a study on 63 Emirati male twelfth-grade students and used IELTS as a post achievement test. The results indicated that the BL group achieved higher scores than the control group. Mezaal, Dehham and Hassan (2021) and Tong, Uyen and Ngan (2022) also reached similar conclusions.

In the context of Kurdish EFL learners, a number of studies have been conducted in recent years. Nuri (2021), for example, conducted a Quasi-experimental research study

on 40 Kurdish EFL learners who were second-year students in the Department of Translation Techniques at Erbil Polytechnic University (EPU) in KRI. The study used the pre-test and post-test design to collect data at the outset and end of the experiment, and the results showed that the experimental group which was taught using BLA significantly outperformed the control group which was given the traditional face-to-face instruction in improving the four language skills. Additionally, the findings of the questionnaire administrated to examine the attitudes of the experimental group confirmed the positive effectiveness of the use of BLA.

Ismail and Khaleel (2021) collected data from 59 3rd year students (in 2017-2018) at the Lebanese French University in Erbil using MAP (Measure Academic progress) and then conducted a t-test to measure and compare the scores between a BL group and a traditional group. The results showed that the blended group had a higher achievement level than the traditional group.

While Jamal (2021) conducted a descriptive qualitative study on 50 students from the same university which was based on a questionnaire analyzing the students' answers regarding online learning. The majority of the students (60%) gave negative feedback on online learning and this is mainly because of, as the answers to the questions indicate, lack of support from instructors, lack of experience in using the online tools and poor internet connection.

Similarly, in another survey study, Mohammed and Malo (2022) concluded that 51% of their participants, who were 100 undergraduate students at Zakho University, preferred face-to-face classes. They analyzed the students' attitude towards BL responding to a set of questions regarding its benefits and challenges. The negative attitude towards online learning, as the authors point out, was mainly due to lack of communication and poor management of the classes as the students remarked they had better chances of interacting with other students and thinking in a more critical way.

Contrastively, Mohammed and Muhammad (2023) investigated the impact of BLA on students' writing skill in two Kurdish universities, namely Soran University and Salahaddin University in KRI. For the purpose of their research, they pre-tested 181 students and then divided them into a control group (traditional learning) and an experimental group (BL). At the end of the courses, they performed two t-tests for each group to evaluate the writing performance of the students. They analyzed the data using SPSS. The data showed that the BL group generally outperformed the control group as the BL allowed the students to be engaged more in the activities and had better chances to practice online. This result is reinforced by Rassul and Wali (2020) examining the attitudes of the tertiary students in the English Department of the College of Basic Education/ Salahaddin University in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq towards the influence of using Moodle as an online learning tool.

The majority of the studies presented thus far show that BL has a positive impact on the performance of ESL and EFL learners. Statistic results of the pre-tests/post-tests demonstrate noticeable improvement of the language skills in general. Positive results were observed in reading and writing as well as vocabulary. Conversely, some studies

showed no significant impact of BL. Some of the researchers have even reported negative results of the performance of their participants.

As regards the attitude of the learners, again, there are varying results with the majority preferring the face-to-face traditional classes. This can be attributed to several factors, as reported in the previous studies, such as, a) lack of direct communication with the instructor and the other students in the online classes, b) poor internet connection, c) technological illiteracy, d) and feeling isolated while doing the online exercises.

Overall, as a relatively new method of learning, BL has proven to have a positive effect on learning English. Despite the negative attitude presented by the participants of the survey studies, the results of the pre-tests/post-tests clearly demonstrate that the students performed noticeably better at the end of the courses. It is important to note that BL has been less effective in regards the listening and speaking skills as these require more interaction which is not adequately obtainable in online classes.

In the light of the previous studies, this study tries to analyse the impact of BL in English Language Proficiency courses in Sulaimani city in KRI on their language proficiency and its impact on language proficiency levels individually. Moreover, this study is the first to investigate BL effects on different language proficiency levels. Unlike the previous studies which divide their participants into random groups regardless of any individual variations, this study presents the results of an experiment on two different levels: Elementary and Pre-intermediate. For each level, there is a control group compared to a treatment group. This provides new insights into the impact of the participants' language abilities and skills on the teaching approach, and show if there are any differences between the levels regarding the impact BL.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study applied a quantitative data collection tool "*experimental design*", which "*can establish unambiguous cause-effect relationships*" between the research variables (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 115). Additionally, Nunan (1992, p. 25) emphasizes that this method is used to "*explore the strength of relationship between variables.*" Furthermore, Gracia-Castro (2023) describes that quantitative research is conducted following a controlled, precise, and systematic set of procedures. This study used quasi-experimental design that is similar to true experimental design in every aspect, except using random allocation of participants into the groups for comparison (Dörnyei, 2007). Moreover, this method is appropriate when a researcher cannot make random assignment of the partakers to groups and may have to "settle for roughly matched classes" (Rose, McKinley and Baffoe-Djan, 2020, p. 4). For this research study, the independent variable is the instruction mode provided for the research participants, and the dependent variables are their scores reflecting their English language proficiency as well as language levels individually: pre-intermediate and elementary.

3.2 SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

This study involved 104 Kurdish EFL postgraduate, studying English Language Proficiency level-based courses (A1-B2/CEFR) run by the Iraqi Kurdistan Region's public universities' language centres under the administration of KRG Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The reason for their enrollment was to meet the required English entry level for pursuing their academic courses at public universities and obtaining academic titles, following the regulations laid down by the ministry. They were enrolled in this course for six weeks per level, and they are expected to exit with pre-intermediate/B1 level (equivalent to an overall IELTS Band Score of 5) or intermediate/ B2 level (equivalent to an overall IELTS Band Score of 6) if they plan to study master or doctorate respectively.

Due to its relevance to the procedures of this study, the purposive sampling was used to collect the exist test scores of those participants whose course instruction was given either blended or completely face-to-face (Al Noursi, 2020). According to Brown (2014, p. 40), a selection can be made based on certain criteria, such as "*English proficiency … to select equivalently matched groups*". The participants already assigned into blended or face-to-face classes were sampled based on the level of proficiency as follows: pre-intermediate group and elementary group. The former was subdivided into the treatment group (n=25) that students rotate between virtual classroom and traditional face-to-face classes on a fixed schedule (2 days each per week), and the comparison group (n=25), that was instructed face-to-face by a real time teacher four days a week. The latter was also subdivided into the treatment group (n=27) that students rotate between virtual classroom and traditional face-to-face classes on a fixed schedule (2 days each per week), and the comparison group (n=27), that was instructed face-to-face by a real time teacher four days a week.

3.3 RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

To measure the efficacy of BL comparing with the traditional face-to-face classroom, the quasi-experimental design was used to compare final test's scores of the pre-intermediate group (BL vs face-to-face) and elementary group (BL vs face-to-face). Additionally, this study compared the final test's scores of BL groups of both pe-intermediate and elementary participants to find out the differences in their language proficiency performance. The final exam questions were designed and reviewed for validation processes by an authorized committee formed by the KRG Ministry of Higer Education and Scientific Research. The exam was made up of five sections: writing, listening, reading, vocabular and grammar. The writing section was not considered for the purpose of this study to be compatible with the structure of the placement test. The test consisted of 80 multiple-choice questions (MCQ) with four answers: Listening = 10, Reading = 30, Vocabulary = 20 and Grammar = 20 questions. The passing score of the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels are equivalent to an overall IELTS Band Score of 5 and 6 respectively in accordance with a ministrative decree numbered (40) and dated 12th January, 2020 for pursing postgraduate study in KRI. The passing grade of all levels was 50 out %100. The exam questions of both the placement test (defined as pre-test in this study) and final course exam (means post-test in this study) were auto scored via

Zipgrade application through which answers sheets were graded and the marks were saved and synced automatically.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION, PROCEDURES AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study investigated the overall language performance of the Kurdish EFL participants who took a six-week pre-intermediate or elementary course in the language centres of Sulaimani-based public universities. Both control and experimental groups received the same content exposure and they were given the same placement (pre-test) and final (post-test) tests. The placement test was conducted at the outset of the course to assess their level of language proficiency and place them at the suitable level: Beginner (A1), Elementary (A2), Pre-intermediate (B1) and Intermediate (B2). The placement test questions booklet was also designed and reviewed by a different tasked committee for validation. The language proficiency course had been originally determined to take place in face-to-face classrooms of the language centres, some language centres adapted rapidly to online and blended learning modes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The treatment group studied the eight units of the decided communicative-based textbook called "Cutting Edge" blended/synchronously (a combination of 50% offline and 50% online instruction where students interact with their teachers both in physical classroom (2 days per week) and virtual classroom (2 days per week) through the application of Google Meet Video Conferencing Platform. While the control group was taught the same units through the traditional face-to-face instruction (four days per week). The participants in the treatment group were offered an orientation on how to use the platform and participate in the activities through virtual learning environments both collaboratively and individually. After termination of the course, both groups were given the same post course achievement test on campus under the same exam conditions.

The collected research data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential analysis to compare the differences between the post-test scores of the experimental group and the control group of each language proficiency level: Elementary and Pre-intermediate. In order to investigate whether there were any significance differences between the language proficiency of the two groups of each level (i.e. Elementary and Pre-intermediate) after the course, descriptive statistical analysis and the independent sample t-test were applied to compare the scores of the post achievement test. Additionally, to investigate any potential correlation between BL and the level of language proficiency, one-way ANOVA was used to compare the means of the post-test scores between the Elementary and Pre-intermediate groups.

4. RESULTS

The results obtained from the descriptive and inferential analyses of the effect of BL withing and between elementary and pre-intermediate groups are summarized in accordance with the research questions.

4.1 The effect of BL on language proficiency of Kurdish postgraduate students in the elementary courses between the treatment group and the control group.

To measure whether there were any improvements in Elementary participants' language proficiency from the pre-test to the post-test, a descriptive analysis was performed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of descriptive analysis of elementary participants' language improvement from the pre-test to post-test

Elementary participants	N	Mean Pre-test 100%	Std. Deviation Pre-test	Mean Post-test 100%	Std. Deviation Post-test
Control Group	25	34.75	6.57	78.45	10.66
Treatment Group	25	39.00	7.35	73.00	16.43

Table 2 summarizes the inferential analysis and the results of the paired samples t-tests conducted for both Treatment Group and Control Group of elementary participants, comparing the pre- and post-test scores, including the mean difference, t-value, degrees of freedom (df) and p-value. According to the results, the mean difference between pre-test and post-test scores of both Control Group and Treatment Group was significant with a p-value of 0.001 (<0.050). Thus, both groups demonstrated significant improvements from the pre-test to the post-test; however, Control Group had a higher mean post-test score compared to Treatment Group.

Table 2: Results of paired samples t-tests of elementary participants' language improvement from the pre-test to post-test

Elementary participants	Comparison	Mean Difference 100%	t-value	df	p-value
Control Group	Pre-test vs Post-test	43.27	8.14	24	0.001(<0.050)
Treatment Group	Pre-test vs Post-test	36.18	5.35	24	0.001(<0.050)

The descriptive statistics were calculated for both the Elementary Control Group and the Elementary Treatment Group based on their post-test scores.

Table 3: Descriptive analysis of the post-test scores between elementary participants (traditional vs BL)

Elementary participants	N	Mean Post-test 100%	Std. Dev Post-test
Control Group	25	79.35	11.86
Treatment Group	25	75.97	14.92

Then, an independent samples t-test was performed to compare the differences between the two groups as shown in Table 4. The results of the inferential analysis by performing the independent samples t-test show that the difference in mean post-test scores between the Control Group and Treatment Group is not statistically significant (p = 0.321>0.050): 79.35 with a standard deviation of 11.86 and 75.97 with a standard deviation of 14.92 respectively. Thus, the BL mode of teaching was not significantly useful for the elementary participants comparing with those who took the course entirely face-to-face.

Table 4: Results of the inferential analysis of the scores between elementary participants

Elementary participants comparison	t-value	df	p-value
Control Group vs Treatment Group	1.002	48	0.321(>0.050)

4.2 The effect of BL on language proficiency of Kurdish postgraduate students in the pre-intermediate courses between the Treatment Group and the Control Group.

To measure whether there were any improvements in pe-intermediate participants' language proficiency from the pre-test to the post-test, a descriptive analysis was performed as shown in Table 5. Accordingly, the results shows that the recorded post-test mean scores of Treatment Group (84.53%) was higher than that of Control Group, accounted for (76.73%).

Table 5: Results of descriptive analysis of pre-intermediate participants' language improvement from the pre-test to post-test

Pre-intermedaite participants	No.	Pre-test Mean 100%	Pre-test Std. Dev	Post-test Mean100%	Post-test Std. Dev
Treatment Group	27	63.55	7.05	84.53	10.38
Control Group	27	59.24	6.96	76.73	11.29

Table 6 summarizes the inferential analysis and the results of the independent samples t-tests conducted for both Treatment Group and Control Group of pre-intermediate participants, comparing the pre- and post-test scores, including the mean difference, t-value, and p-value. According to the results, the mean difference between pre-test and post-test scores of both Treatment Group and Control Group was significant with a p-value of 0.001 (p <0.050). Thus, both groups demonstrated significant improvements from the pre-test to the post-test; however, the Treatment Group had a higher mean post-test score compared to the control group.

Table 6: Results of inferential analysis of pre-intermediate participants' language improvement from the pre-test to post-test

Pre-intermedaite participants	Comparison	Mean Difference 100%	t-value	p-value
Control Group	Pre-test vs Post-test	17.49	7.96	0.001(<0.050)
Treatment Group	Pre-test vs Post-test	20.98	11.29	0.001(<0.050)

The descriptive statistics were calculated for both the pre-intermediate Control Group and the Pre-intermedaite Treatment Group based on their post-test scores.

Table 7: Descriptive analysis of the post-test scores between Pre-intermedaite participants' (traditional vs BL)

Pre-intermedaite groups	N	Mean Post-test 100%	Std. Dev Post-test
Control	27	76.57	10.99
Treatment	27	83.06	12.81

Then, an independent samples t-test was performed to compare the differences between the two groups as shown in Table 8. The results of the inferential analysis by performing the independent samples t-test show that the difference in mean post-test scores between Control Group and Treatment Group is statistically significant (p = 0.010): 76.57 with a standard deviation of 10.99 and 83.06 with a standard deviation of 12.81 respectively. Accordingly, Treatment Group (BL) with pre-intermediate level outperformed Control Group; namely, the participants who took the course entirely face-to-face.

Table 8: Results of the inferential analysis of the scores between pre-intermediate participants

Pre-intermedaite participants comparison	t-value	Df	<p-value
Treatment Group vs Control Group	2.652	52	0.010 (< 0.050)

4.3 The correlation between BL and the level of language proficiency of Kurdish postgraduate students in Elementary and Pre-intermediate courses.

The descriptive analysis was carried out for both the Pre-intermediate Treatment Group and the Elementary Treatment Group to compare differences between the post-test scores of the two treatment groups. Accordingly, the results shows that the recorded post-test

mean scores of Pre-intermediate Treatment Group (82.72%) was higher than that of Control Group, accounted for (76.30%).

Table 9: Descriptive analysis of the post-test scores between pre-intermediate treatment group and elementary treatment group (BL)

BL Groups	N	Mean Post-test 100%	Std. Dev Post-test
Elementary Treatment Group	25	76.30	13.52
Pre-intermediate Treatment Group	27	82.72	11.95

Then, an independent samples t-test was performed to compare the differences between the two groups as shown in Table 10. The results of the inferential analysis by performing the independent samples t-test show that the difference in mean post-test scores between Elementary Treatment Group and Pre-intermedaite Treatment Group is marginally significant statistically ($p = 0.050$): 76.30 with a standard deviation of 13.52 and 82.72 with a standard deviation of 11.95 respectively. Thus, the effect of BL mode of teaching was statistically significant: Pre-intermediate Treatment Group outperformed Elementary Treatment Group, who also took the course through blended strategy of teaching.

Table 10: Results of the inferential analysis of the scores between pre-intermediate treatment group and elementary treatment group

Elementary vs Pre-intermediate comparison	t-value	df	p-value
Elementary Treatment Group vs Pre-intermediate Treatment Group	-2.002	50	0.050 (=0.050)

5. DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to discover the effect of BL on the overall language proficiency of Kurdish EFL students studying language courses at the KRI public universities' language centres and whether its effect changes align with their language proficiency levels (elementary vs pre-intermediate). Most of the results were quite similar to the findings of other studies done in other EFL contexts; nevertheless, there were some discrepancies and significant differences between the students of elementary versus pre-intermediate levels.

For the first research question, which examined the effect of BL on language proficiency of Kurdish postgraduate students in the elementary courses between the experimental group and the control group, the results indicated that there were no significant differences in their language proficiency level between the groups. This finding is generally in agreement with the reviewed studies, such as Szymanska and Kaczmarek

(2011), Kim and Kim (2013), Solak (2014), and Tango Rojas (2020). Similarly, this finding is confirmed by a study conducted in the context of Kurdistan Region of Iraq by Jamal (2021) who indicated that the online instruction was rated negatively by the study participants. The insignificance improvement in the performance of the elementary BL group can be explained by the negative attitude of many EFL students towards online learning due to lack of communication and poor management of the online classes, comparing with the physical classes that can provide better chances of interacting with other students and thinking in a more critical way (Mohammed and Malo, 2022).

The negative results of the BL approach by the elementary students comparing with the traditional methods of teaching is line with Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum (2013) who were concerned over blending language classes with technological devises because students might not be competent enough in digital literacies to survive, and this may cause to increase affective filter, which results in the decrease of the amount of readiness of the learners for language acquisition as proposed by Krashen (1982). For instance, the elementary students might have found the less interactive feature of the online platform (Google Meet) used in this study (cf. physical classrooms or other online platforms such as Zoom) challenging due to fewer opportunities for varying interaction patterns (e.g. teacher-student and student-student) as well as some other hindering factors relevant to the study context, students' needs and teachers' inadequacy of the required technological skills as posited by Thorne (2003) and Tango Rojas (2020). Another issue that caused the BL elementary students to achieve less comparing with those who were given only face-to-face teaching could be the challenges faced by EFL teachers in designing learner-orientated blended learning tasks that accounts for specific learners' individual differences and learning goals (Garrison and Vaughan, 2007)

As for the second research questions addressing the effect of BL on language proficiency of Kurdish postgraduate students in the pre-intermediate courses between the experimental and the comparison group, the results show that the pre-intermediate participants who were taught using both face-to-face and online learning outperformed those who were given traditional face-to-face instruction. This result is not congruent with Tango Rojas's (2020) study indicating that their pre-intermediate experimental students made less progress in their overall language proficiency, comparing to the pre-intermediate control group. However, this finding is supported by other studies, such as Rahimi and Behjat (2011), Al Bataineh, Banikalef and H Albashtawi (2019) and Masita (2020). The positive result of the BL is also reinforced by Al Noursi (2020), Mezaal, Dehham and Hassan (2021), and Tong, Uyen and Ngan (2022). This finding also echoed the results of the other studies carried out in the context of Iraq (e.g. Khudhair, 2022) and Kurdistan Region of Iraq (e.g. Nuri, 2021 and Ismail; Khaleel, 2021; Rassul and Wali, 2020). This rather significant result could be due to the strengths of blending both face-to-face and online learning as pointed out by Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum (2013); Macdonald (2008), claiming that blending online and offline is more advantageous than e-learning alone since learners tend to feel unmotivated and isolated.

Concerning the third research question about the effect of blended learning on Kurdish EFL students with different language proficiency levels (elementary and pre-intermediate), the result showed that the pre-intermediate students outperformed the

control group even though the result was marginally significant. This result partially contrasts Tango Rojas's (2020) study indicating that their pre-intermediate experimental students made less progress in their overall language proficiency in comparison to the traditional teaching group. Nevertheless, this result consolidates the effectiveness of BL approach to teaching EFL students in general as no studies have been found investigating the BL impact on elementary and pre-intermediate EFL learners. It is clear that both elementary and pre-intermediate groups who were taught using BL outperformed the control groups, and this strengthens the assumption that BL is a powerful tool that enhances the performance of learners (Bersin, 2004). Additionally, the positive results of BL approach provides further support to Al Noursi's (2020) proposition, highlighting that BL approach helps students to take some responsibility for their learning process and enhance active learning.

Moreover, this result supplies more insights into the theoretical foundation of BL experiences through active participation in generating knowledge and building meaningful understanding (Garrison and Vaughan, 2007) as well as learning by doing and student-centred teaching model (Blumberg, 2019; Vasileva-S-tojanovska, 2015 cited in Tong, Uyen and Ngan, 2022, p. 2).

6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that blended strategy (using both face-to-face teaching and virtual classes) could be used as an effective method of teaching English language proficiency in EFL settings, particularly in the KRI public language centres that are yearly expected to enroll numerous postgraduate students seeking to meet the language requirements of their academic courses or applying for academic titles to be certified as university instructors. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that EFL students with higher proficiency level (e.g. pre-intimidate) tend to achieve better language performance than the lower level (e.g. elementary), though the difference in their improved language proficiency was marginally significant. However, it can be argued that blended strategy is more beneficial for pre-intermediate level and higher, comparing with the students with similar level who were taught English language through the classic teaching methods used by teachers in the classroom.

7. TEACHING IMPLICATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

These results might provide enriching insights into the demands of BL in EFL instruction and better help the EFL instructors cater for the students' language needs. Thus, it is suggested that EFL teachers implement blended strategy in teaching language proficiency courses, since it is suitable for most of the EFL students. However, this puts more demands on the teachers to be skilled enough to utilize computers and communication programs.

This study also suggests that further investigation with larger samples may be needed to provide further results and insights into the suitability of BL for EFL students with different language proficiency levels.

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