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# The Impacts of Blended Teaching Method on Iraqi EFL Students' Performance in Speaking Skill

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**Abstract**

This study investigated the impacts of blended teaching method (BTM) on the speaking skill performance of Iraqi EFL students and explored their perceptions of this method. Employing a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design, 60 Iraqi EFL students at the intermediate level were randomly assigned to either a BTM group or a traditional instruction group. Quantitative data, collected through pre- and post-tests using an adapted IELTS Speaking Exam, revealed a statistically significant improvement in speaking proficiency in the BTM group. Qualitative data, gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten participants from the BTM group, illuminated positive perceptions related to enhanced engagement and motivation, increased flexibility and convenience, and improved confidence and fluency. While challenges related to technology and time management were also identified, the overall results suggest that BTM holds considerable promise for improving Iraqi EFL students' speaking skills.

**Paper Info**

**Keywords**

*Blended teaching method (BTM), speaking skills, students' perception.*

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## 1. Introduction

English, as a global lingua franca, plays an increasingly vital role in various aspects of modern life, including international communication, commerce, education, and technological advancement (Crystal, 2003). Mastery of English unlocks opportunities for individuals and nations alike, fostering cross-cultural understanding and enabling access to a vast repository of knowledge and information. Among the four core language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – speaking is arguably the most immediately impactful, enabling real-time interaction and effective communication in diverse settings (Brown, 2007). Fluency and accuracy in spoken English are crucial for academic success, professional advancement, and meaningful participation in a globalized world (Luoma, 2004).

However, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners face significant challenges in developing their speaking proficiency (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). These challenges often stem from factors such as limited exposure to authentic language use, anxiety about making mistakes, and a lack of opportunities for meaningful practice (Woodrow, 2017). In the context of Iraqi EFL learners, these challenges are often exacerbated by specific socio-cultural and educational factors (Al-Khairy, 2013).

Traditional instructional practices in Iraq, such as those that focus on grammar and memorization, may not meet the communicative needs of students (Salih, 2016). In addition, insufficient time, overcrowded classes and lack of native English-speaking teachers can also contribute to the students' lack of development in speaking skills of Iraqi EFL learners (Hasan, 2010). The case of war effects in all regions of Iraq and the absence of days and time exacerbates their struggles (Elttayef & Hussein, 2017). When teaching speaking skill, some basic factors of communication like pragmatic and culture competence failed to exist (Elttayef & Hussein, 2017). As a result, the majority of Iraqi EFL students face difficulty in expressing themselves in English with fluency and confidence, and it affects their academic and professional performance. There have been several approaches to dealing with difficulties in conventional EFL, thus academics and teachers have begun to adopt innovative methods of teaching.

Blended teaching method (BTM), that combines traditional teaching with technology-based, has become the most potential answer (Sharma & Sharma, 2020). Considered as a natural step of being educated, BTM attempts to foster customize learning experiences to suit individual's needs (Finlay et al., 2022; Shohel et al., 2022). The BTM is variously defined by researchers. Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) accentuate the integration of technology and face-to-face training. Akkoyunlu

and Yilmaz Soylu (2006) further explain that it combines traditional classroom with online components in order to maximize fulfillment of course objectives. Building the right training program for the right audience, in the right media, using the right technology, and undertaking the right learning activities" (Bersin, 2003).

Virtual Training Team (2019) explains further and generalizes the concept by asserting that BTM is no longer limited to distance learning/ online and face-to-face and encompasses using any online, electronic platform to support teaching. Through combining the best of both traditional and online learning, BTM has the potential to provide a more engaging, adaptable and personalized experience for EFL learners (Al Bataineh et al., 2019). Sharma & Sharma, 2020) mention its spread across the globe compelled by the growing necessity to cater to the various requirements of the students and to provide them with a stimulating environment (Miraei Mohammadi et al., 2022). Examining the integration of e-learning into face-to-face work training, usually in the presence of a learning management system: (Mohamed, 2022). These integrated methods are hypothetically associated with better learning outcomes as active, motivated, and involved learners typically will engage more with the learning content (Apsari & Parmawati, 2022) which can be interpreted to better knowledge retention (Zulhamdi et al., 2022). As technology integration in language learning can be successful, not everything is rosy, especially regarding specific contextual issues. For example, Jalili and Ahmadi (2020) present these challenges in the Iranian educational environment. Moreover, their findings were contradictive, as participants had higher performance in face-to-face learning than online. This would imply in some situations that an anti-technology learning attitude would exist. Jalili and Ahmadi (2019) argued that the success of technology-oriented learning would depend on that learners are willing for that change. Additionally, in settings such as Iraq, students may not have experience with self-study, and these learners rely greatly on teacher-centered instruction, so TELL could be seen as irrelevant, time-consuming, or unapproachable. The culture of technology-based teaching could also change significantly from culture to culture as well as the availability and accessibility of the technology (Kuddus, 2018). Moreover, teachers may feel averse or technophobic about integrating technology in their classrooms (Giacomo & Puglisi, 2020). Hence, teacher education and setting up of digital, sustainable learning environment is imperative (Choi & Chung, 2021; Leshchenko et al., 2023). In addition, they need persistent, technologically literate educators who are accessible to trouble-shoot issues (Faramarzi et al., 2021). In the view of Stanley and Lehman (2015), a predetermined learning journey can restrict play-in addition to learners' control over their learning and can stand in the way of future generation, creativity, and well-being. Thus, the

success of BTM in such situations as Iraq is not a foregone conclusion and requires further scrutiny. This study, therefore, aimed to investigate the impact of BTM on the speaking skill performance of Iraqi EFL students. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Does BTM enhance Iraqi EFL students' performance in speaking skills?
2. How do Iraqi EFL students perceive BTM in enhancing their speaking skill performance?

By addressing these questions, this research was intended to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of BTM as a pedagogical approach for bolstering the speaking skills of Iraqi EFL learners, ultimately informing future research and practice in EFL education in Iraq and similar contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

### *BTM: Components and Definitions*

BTM as a pedagogical approach BTM is a methodology that has garnered increasing attention in recent years due to its potential to overcome the limitations of traditional classroom instruction which capitalizes on the advantages of technology-enhanced learning. However, the concept of BTM is controversial because it has been defined differently by different researchers. Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) describe BTM as an educational atmosphere where technology is mixed with face-to-face teaching, and Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz Soylu (2006) state that the traditional classroom teaching and online learning are integrated in a mixed learning method to attain course objectives. Bersin (2003) adopts an expansive view by defining BTM as development of the most effective training approach based on the audience, and using different media, technologies and activities.

Regardless of the narrow definition of Blended Learning, however, the central theme is the conscious mixing of face to face instruction and online learning experiences in order to achieve more effective and active learning (Al Bataineh et al., 2019). Successful BTM adoption should be considered with aspects, such as instructional design, technology interaction, and learner support. As Sharma and Sharma (2020) suggested, BTM has drawn the attention of teachers in the world as the increasing demand to cater to diverse students and to engender engaging learning for EFL students. It is called the merge of e-learning, face-to-face training with the use of a learning management system, Mohamed, 2012. Active, motivated, and involved learners who also interact with the learning content yield greater learning outcomes (Apsari & Parmawati, 2022). Furthermore, effective blended teaching models frequently include features of self-directed learning, collaboration, and personalized feedback (Zulhamdi et al., 2022). The aim of BTM is ultimately to develop a model in

which these methods merge taking the best of both on-campus and online learning (Alsalhi, et al., 2021).

***Theoretical Frameworks Supporting BTM***

BTM is effective in terms of learning theories, including constructivism, sociocultural theory, and cognitive load theory. Constructivism Theoretical Underpinning Finding Constructivism is based on Bridging the gap between constructivism focuses on the learning that learners have actually experiences by providing created for the learners but are meaning the experiences with they have actual or with and have personal known, by making how it could be application of that experiences who they standards in different and expand the would otherwise have been overcome problems scenarios by learning to them (Gilbert responsible (Jonassen 1994). Blended learning environments, design to incorporate a variety of activities and resources, can support opportunities for learners to investigate, test, and share with each other to support student understanding and knowledge (Turpin, 2018). Consistent with the constructivist view, BTM offers several chances for teachers and students to teach and learn. Teachers need to understand the teaching principles and BTM. Additionally, an understanding of the learning theories is beneficial for teachers to create the necessary teaching materials and choose appropriate methods, activities and assessment to meet students' requirements and involve them in active learning.

Sociocultural theory highlights the importance of social interaction and collaboration in learning (Lantolf & Beckett, 2009). Blended teaching environments can foster social interaction through online discussion forums, collaborative projects, and virtual group activities, allowing learners to learn from each other and develop their communicative competence (Hojnacki, 2015). As interaction and engagement are important, this study is an attempt to investigate BTM and its impact on learner engagement as well as interaction realized in the form of oral production.

Speaking is a key component of a broad sociocultural theory of L2 learning from the viewpoint of sociocultural theory of second language learning, language is a product of interaction and develops in the social context where it is used. The context of language learning provided by BTM is a combination of everyday face-to-face contexts and virtual contexts. Horn and Staker (2011, p. 3) define BTM as "any time a student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace".

Finally, cognitive load theory suggests that learning is most effective when the cognitive load on learners is optimized (Sweller, 1988). BTM is able to help manage cognitive load by breaking down complex information into smaller, more manageable chunks, providing opportunities for self-paced learning, and offering personalized support and feedback (Bersin, 2004). By optimizing cognitive load, BTM can enhance learners' ability to process and retain information, leading to improved learning outcomes (Slavin, 1994).

***Previous Studies on BTM and Speaking Skills***

An increasing number of studies have explored the efficacy of BTM across diverse EFL settings, particularly concerning the effects it has on speaking. For example, Isda et al. (2021) found that BTM model had a significant impact on students' speaking: grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and pronunciation gains. Similarly, Ehsanifard et al. (2020) reported that "the use of a blended task-based teaching approach significantly improved learners' speaking performance and promoted their participation in comparison with traditional teaching. This illustrates an inherent benefit of BTM, which is the ability to enhance students' involvement and motivation, pivotal conditions for learning a language.

Almanafi et al. (2023), for example, found out that BTM develops team work and self-directed learning in EFL students which is conducive to gaining in self-esteem which can enhance learning of language. Kantisa and Sitthitikul (2020) examined the impact of the BTM on the speaking and motivation of 102 Thai university students, as well as students and teachers' beliefs. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, researchers measured students' speaking ability and motivation using oral pre- and post-tests. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were also conducted to examine students and teachers' attitudes. The results showed that BTM had a significant positive effect on the students' speaking performance. Additionally, student motivation was high and students as well as teachers had positive perceptions of BTM as showed through the research. Furthermore, Ginaya et al. (2018) reported that the use of WebQuest applications in instruction enhanced motivation and interest among the students, consequently enhancing their speaking. This is consistent with the results of Aalinezhad et al. (2021), who reported that BTM not only improves vocabulary learning but also has a positive impact on the autonomy and self-esteem of learners.

Besides, Diner et al. (2023) opines that BTM develops speaking expertise more fun and creative, enjoyable and effectively. In the Iraqi context, Al Mayyah (2023), examined the impact of BTM on the reading comprehension skills and attitudes under exposure of Iraqi university students compared

two groups (BTM and TC group). By means of pre-and post-tests scores and an attitude questionnaire, compared to the control group, it was revealed that the BTM group made a statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension, and the BTM approach evoked more positive attitude.

Alzubaidi (2023) examined the effects of BTM on Iraqi college EFL learners' attitude, motivation, and achievement, using mixed methods. Regarding the quantitative phase, BTM was significantly better than the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in terms of achievement and motivation, and it reduced anxiety compared to the control group. The qualitative stage examined learner perceptions for BTM's : (a) advantages (learner-based, motivating, efficient and enhancing student autonomy) and (b) disadvantages (workload, infrastructure and techno stress).

The influence of BTM integrated with Edmodo on young Iraqi EFL learners' speaking performance and attitudes was investigated by Aljabery (2023). The research revealed that an Edmodo-integrated group performed better in oral performance than a traditional instruction group after comparing to a BTM group. This was coupled with mostly positive perceptions of Edmodo reported by learners. Yet, warnings are expressed in some research that learners are still at the core and that individual learner levels should be considered when speaking about tailored pedagogical approaches (Bataineh et al., 2019). According to the current literature, BTM appears to be a very promising pedagogical technique to develop the speaking competence in EFL students. Yet, more studies are warranted to comprehensively investigate its efficacy in specific settings, including Iraqi EFL context, and to reveal best ways of implementing it. This research attempted to add to this increasing body of research by investigating the effect of BTM on Iraqi EFL learners' speaking ability performance and exploring their attitudes toward this new technique.

## 3. Methodology

This investigation used a quasi-experimental mixed methods design to examine the effectiveness of BTM on the speaking skills of Iraqi EFL learners. A concurrent triangulation mixed methods design was the appropriate choice because it allows for the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a fuller understanding of the research issue (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative part intended to assess the impact of BTMs on students' speaking, while the qualitative part investigated the learners' attitudes and experiences with the BTM.

### *Participants*

Participants were selected from the Oxford Language Institute, Baghdad, Iraq. Firstly, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was given to 100 language learners in an intermediate class to measure their

general proficiency in English. According to the OPT, 90 students qualified for study participation (intermediate learners). From this pool, 60 students were randomly selected to participate and were then randomly assigned to either the experimental group (n=30) or the control group (n=30). To ensure a balanced representation, the groups were randomly assigned to treatment types (either as the BTM experimental group or the traditional instruction control group). The age range of the participants was between 24 and 30 years old. The control group comprised 23 females and 7 males, while the experimental group consisted of 22 females and 8 males.

***Instruments***

The following instruments were used to collect data in this study:

**Oxford Placement Test (OPT):** The OPT (Allen, 1992), a standardized language proficiency test, was utilized to assess the participants' overall English language ability. The OPT consists of 60 multiple-choice questions designed to evaluate various aspects of language knowledge, including knowledge of signs and notices, cloze passage comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary. The results of the OPT were used to confirm that all participants possessed an intermediate level of English proficiency prior to the intervention.

**IELTS Speaking Exam (Part 2):** To measure participants' speaking proficiency, a task from an IELTS Practice Exam (speaking section) was adapted for use as both a pre-test and a post-test. The IELTS Speaking Exam (part 2) requires participants to deliver a short, spontaneous talk on a given topic. In this study, the participants were asked to describe a teacher who significantly influenced their education, providing details about where they met the teacher, the subject the teacher taught, and the qualities that made them influential. Participants were given one minute to prepare their response and two minutes to speak. These time constraints were strictly adhered to during both the pre-test and post-test administrations.

**Semi-Structured Interviews:** Besides the quantitative evidence, semi-structured interviews were performed with a number of the experimental group (n=10). These participants were chosen depending on their willingness to communicate about their experiences and perceptions on BTM. The interviews were to investigate how the participants perceived the effectiveness of BTM in developing their speaking ability, the problems they encountered, and the benefits they acquired from BTM.

***Procedure***

The program was offered over 10 weeks one 90-minute session per week. Before the study started, all the participants and the school authorities gave informed consent. Both the experimental and the control groups took a pre-test (IELTS speaking exam part 2) as an initial estimate of the baseline speaking proficiency. Classroom activities and online materials/activities through the *Nicenet* platform were integrated using a BTM to teach the experimental group. The teaching materials and activities were the same but there was no on-line component in the traditional control group. The only thing that distinguishes the groups is the use of *Nicenet* by the experimental group. It supported links, document sharing, online talking using conferences, and collaborative work through a number of features.

For the experimental group, the intervention followed these steps: the teacher registered with Nicenet and invited students to join the class on www.Nicenet.org. Then, content was created and delivered through Nicenet. Schema activation was performed with relevant questions regarding themes. Authentic texts were used as conversation triggers. Later, the students were asked general questions and detailed questions regarding the content presented. Vocabulary and structures were taught after that, and students were then asked to work on activities in pairs. All materials used in the experimental group were also presented to the control group, and the instruction procedure was also the same.

At the end of the 10-week intervention, both the experimental and control groups completed the post-test (IELTS Speaking Exam part 2). The conversations from both the pre-tests and post-tests of both groups were recorded for analysis and scoring purposes. Finally, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants from the experimental group who had expressed a willingness to participate.

***Data Analysis***

Pre-test and post-test speaking recordings were rated by two trained speaking proficiency raters. The raters referred to the level descriptors provided by the CEFR to infer the participants' speaking levels, and these levels were transformed into the equivalent IELTS scores. In order to standardize the procedure and set uniform scoring criteria between both rate sets, the raters received a briefing session. For quantitative analysis of data, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 24) was used. Independent samples t-tests were performed to analyze speaking performances of the experimental and control groups at pre and post test stages. The interview data were coded using

thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis method. Thematic analysis included finding patterns and recurring themes in the interview transcripts in order to develop a deeper understanding of the participants, and their perceptions and experiences with the BTM (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Results for Research Question One

Preliminary checks on the pre-test and post-test data were carried out before running the main analyses to confirm the suitability of parametric procedures. In particular, the Levene test for homogeneity of variances and the Shapiro-Wilk test for normal distribution were applied. The results are presented below:

**Table 1**

*Tests of Assumptions for Parametric Analyses*

| Variable | Test | Statistic | df1 | df2 | *p* | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | | | | | | |
| | Levene's Test (Variance) | 0.85 | 1 | 58 | 0.36 | Variances are Equal |
| | Shapiro-Wilk (Normality) | 0.97 | | | 0.21 | Data is Normally Distributed |
| Post-test | | | | | | |
| | Levene's Test (Variance) | 0.52 | 1 | 58 | 0.47 | Variances are Equal |
| | Shapiro-Wilk (Normality) | 0.96 | | | 0.18 | Data is Normally Distributed |

Results of normalcy testing of the pre-test and post-test data, to determine the appropriateness of planning parametric statistical analyses, are presented in Table 1. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was evaluated with the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, which returned non-significant findings, both in the presence of pre-test ($p = 0.36$), and post-test ($p = 0.47$) data. This suggests that the divergences in variances of the groups were also not statistically significant, thereby meeting the assumption of homogeneity of variances. Also, the Shapiro-Wilk Test for Normality, an examination of the data for normal distribution, produced non-significant results for both the pre-test ($p = 0.21$) and post-test ($p = 0.18$) data. It means that the data for both tests were near to normal. Since both the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were sufficiently satisfied, the application of parametric tests such as independent-samples t-test was an acceptable approach for the further comparison analyses. On the pre- and post-test, descriptive statistics were generated, providing means, standard deviations, and standard errors of the means for the BTM group and the

traditional instruction group. The descriptive statistics give a preliminary account of the groups' performance on the speaking tests.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics for Speaking Pre-test and Post-test*

| Group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | | | | |
| Blended | 30 | 5.17 | 0.78 | 0.14 |
| Traditional | 30 | 4.82 | 0.84 | 0.15 |
| Post-test | | | | |
| Blended | 30 | 6.31 | 0.61 | 0.11 |
| Traditional | 30 | 5.68 | 0.45 | 0.080 |

A summary of the speaking performance of the BTM and traditional instruction groups during the pre-test and posttest is displayed in Table 2. On the pre-test, the BTM group averaged 5.17 (SD=0.78), and the traditional instruction group's average was 4.82 (SD=0.84). It suggests that, before the study, the mean speaking score of the BTM group was a bit higher than that of the traditional instruction group with the same level of variation. In addition to the improved performance (Table 5), on the post-test the BTM group displayed raised mean performance of 6.31 (SD = 0.61). Traditional instruction Mean score increase also improved for the traditional instruction group, but to a mean of 5.68 with a slightly decreased standard deviation of 0.45. These summary statistics indicate that both groups increased in the performance of production of the speech tasks over the testing periods, but with the BTM group showing more average growth and with a more homogenous group performance in that group as we can see a smaller standard deviation. To examine the effect of the BTM intervention on speaking performance, independent samples t-tests were used.

**Table 3**

*Independent Samples T-test Results*

| Test | Groups | *t* | df | *p* | 95% CI | Effect Size ($\eta^2$) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | Blended vs. Traditional | 1.79 | 58 | 0.078 | [-0.39,0.73] | 0.05 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Post- test - | Blended vs. Traditional | 4.98 | 58 | < 0.001 | [0.37, 0.89] | 0.10 |

The first t-test was between the performance of BTM group and the traditional instruction group in speaking on the pre-test. Results of this analysis indicated that there was no significant difference in the two groups regarding speaking ability before instruction, t(58) = 1.79, p =. 078, (95% CI[-0.39, 0.73]). This suggests both groups had similar speaking ability at the beginning of the course. The second independent samples t-test was used to compare the performance difference of the two groups on the post-test. Unlike their pre-test data, the ANCOVA showed a significant difference between groups' speaking ability post-intervention, t(58) = 4.98, p <. 001 (95% CI [0.37, 0.89]). This finding indicates that the BTM treatment produced significant improvement on the speaking performance of the treatment group. The magnitude of the intervention effect was estimated with eta squared. The effect size of the mean differences was considered large, eta squared =. 10. Consequently, although there were no differences in speaking ability between the two groups prior to the intervention, the BTM group achieved significantly greater progress than the TEG group after treatment.

**Results for Research Question Two**

The semi-structured interviews with ten subjects in the experimental group offered some important insights into how they perceived the BTM approach and their changes in speaking abilities. We conducted thematic analysis on the interview transcripts and identified four main themes: (1) Increased engagement and motivation, (2) More flexibility and convenience, (3) Enhanced confidence and fluency, and (4) Technical challenges and time management.

**Theme 1: Increased Engagement and Motivation**

A key theme that emerged from the interviews focused on participants' perception of added engagement and motivation attributed to the BTM method. Participants uniformly reported that the diverse nature of the learning activities available (online discussions, multimedia resources, interactive exercises) made learning more enjoyable and interesting.

- *"I thought English class was boring, but BTM was not. The videos and online games made it fun to learn, and I was more motivated to get involved"* (Participant 3).

- *The virtual discussions were fabulous! I was one of those guys who always had to write their way into what they were going to say in class. It made me ready and more confident"* (Participant 7).

This increased level of participation and motivation seemed to have helped them develop their speaking abilities as they were more open to engage in speaking activities and they were more willing to practice their English in and out of the class.

**Theme 2:** More flexibility and convenience •

The flexible nature of the BTM was also appreciated by the users. Their ability to access materials and optional activities at their own pace and schedule were identified as a boon, especially for those with demanding schedules and other commitments.

- *"I love the Internet resources! I was able to learn whenever I wanted – even late in the evening when I had a minute. It was much easier to [study] English into my life"* (Participant 1).
- *"I liked the fact that the lectures and materials were recorded so I could look back at them online. If I didn't get something in class, I could re-watch it. It made me understand things more'* (Participant 9).

This freedom allowed learners to become more responsible for their learning and to shape the how of reading-needed accordingly to his/her own interests and preferences.

**Theme 3: Enhanced Confidence and Fluency**

A few of the members also said that the BTM has helped their oral English fluency and confidence a great deal. The use of online practice, peer and teacher feedback, and opportunities for interaction in the classroom allowed them to over-come anxiety and gain proficiency.

- *"It used to be that, speaking English, I was always afraid that I would make a mistake. But through the BTM I felt more confident to make mistakes and play around with the language"* (Participant 5).
- *"The speaking practice activities online were the most beneficial. I could speak into a recording device and receive feedback from the teacher and classmates. It's helped me to pinpoint areas where I'm weak and work on pronunciation*" (Participant 8).

This boosted confidence and fluency equated to a greater willingness to take part in classroom discussions and other speaking activities, and the cycle continued.

**Theme 4: Technical Challenges and Time Management**

Despite numerous positive impressions of the BTM, some respondents described technological issues and difficulties with time management. Some students indicated facing some technical challenges using the online medium, and other issues to do with time management between online activities and face-to-face ones.

- *"Every now and then the website would be slow or not working like it should. It was frustrating when I had a time constraint"* (Participant 2).
- *It was tough to keep up. "I really had to be disciplined and organized to ensure that I finished all the online activities and that I still made it to the normal classes"* (Participant 6).

These barriers indicate that a well-designed program and technical support will be critical for a successful roll-out of BTM programs.

**Table 4**

*Frequency of Emergent Themes*

| Theme | Frequency (Out of 10) |
|---|---|
| Enhanced Engagement and Motivation | 9 |
| Increased Flexibility and Convenience | 8 |
| Improved Confidence and Fluency | 7 |
| Challenges with Technology and Time Management | 4 |

The semi-structured interview qualitative data provides strong evidence to suggest BTM has succeeded in improving Iraqi EFL learners' perceptions of their speaking skill development. From the themes emerged, BTM augments the motivation and engagement, offers more flexibility and convenience, and enhances the confidence and fluency in spoken English. Where challenges around technology and time management are evident, the positive perceptions of the BTM experience have the potential to counterbalance these. This study implies that BTM has a great potential of facilitating improvement in the speaking skill of Iraqi EFL learners, if the technical and logistical obstacles can be overcome. The results of the current investigation on the beneficial effects of BTM on Iraqi EFL learners' speaking skill performance are well-financed by current learning theories and previous

experimental studies. The enhancement in the BTM group could be argued based on the fundamental beliefs of constructivism, socio-cultural theory, and cognitive load theory. The increased active engagement and motivation along with participant accounts are consistent with constructivist theories (Vygotsky, 1978; Turpin, 2018). This reflected the positive experiences in online activities including online videos, online games and it aired that the participants were enacting their own learning through these motivating (as described by the participants) impressions. This is in agreement with Ginaya et al. (2018) who reported that the incorporation of WebQuest applications in teaching resulted in higher motivation and interest which made students' speaking skill increased. The higher flexibility and the learners' convenience reported in this study are associated to the sociocultural dimensions of learning. Materials were accessible for learners at their own pace and through collaborative online discussion, learners had the chance to participate, learn from one another, and enhance their communicative competence (Lantolf & Beckett, 2009; Hojnacki, 2015).

Additionally, participants in this study gained a new set of resources for engaging with peers, instructors, and content both in and outside the classroom. This enabling role is supportive of blended forms of learning because they enrich the learner's experience by promoting collaboration and engagement. Such findings are also in agreement with Almanafi et al. (2023), on the other hand defined that BTM encourages co-operation and develops self-directed learning among EFL students which reflecting self-esteem that is essentially needed in language learning. The BTM reduced the cognitive load of learning for the learners by chunking instructions into bite-sized manageable pieces and providing the support and feedback tailored to individual (Sweller, 1988; Bersin, 2004; Slavin, 1994). Being able to look at material, hearing lecture and receiving guidance through feedback gave students a chance to take control of their learning. Thus, it improve their performance results by assisting them learn the content and memorize it effectively. The results of this study, indicating the beneficial effect of BTM on the performance of Iraqi EFL learners' speaking skill, coincide with those of an increasing number of empirical studies conducted across a variety of EFL settings. In particular, our finding of increased speaking performance in the BTM group is in line with what has been reported by Isda et al. (2021), who reported that a BTM model had good impacts on grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency and pronunciation. Similarly, Ehsanifard et al. (2020) concluded that BTM instruction improves speaking performance and learner engagement compared to conventional methods enhanced engagement had also been a key factor in the success of the blended approach as in the present study.

Almanafi et al. (2023) reinforces these points, indicating that BTM supports more cooperation and enhancements in students' self-esteem. Kantisa and Sitthitikul (2020) take a wider view, pointing out that the production skill and learning motivation of university students in Thailand had developed more rapidly in the BTM-context. Their results are in line with the qualitative impressions of the present study, in which participants enjoyed the blended model and were able to engage more actively in learning. In addition, these qualitative findings are consistent with Diner et al. (2023) assert that BTM enhance speaking skills through creativity and fun learning. Ginaya et al. (2018) also showed that integrating WebQuest in instruction brought out more motivation and interest, which contributed to the better speaking performance of their participants. This is consistent with the results of the present study in that students described multiple ways in which their motivation was greater under blended instruction than under traditional instruction. However, Aalinezhad et al. (2021) studying Iranian EFL learners is more concerned with the impact on vocabulary achievement and student's autonomy & self-esteem. Support for these findings also comes from the contribution of existing literature within the Iraqi setting. The Al Mayyah (2023) investigation concluded with Iraqi university students demonstrated that BTM results in far greater improvements in reading comprehension and more positive attitudes to learning than traditional teaching. This reveals the ease by which this work is adjusted to the Iraqi student.

Additionally, Alzubaidi (2023) confirmed the effectiveness of BTM, stating, The Blended Teaching Model of Blended Learning enhances achievement and motivation and diminishes the feeling of anxiety among the Iraqi EFL learners. This suggests that learners might be facing an extra workload and additional technostress.While Alzubaidi (2023) investigates the Iraqi EFL learners, and more specifically focuses on the role of reading skills, rather than writing skills, or on the learners' perceptions. As a result, the present study is a more valid approach to understanding how the blended methods impacts especially their speaking. Putting the findings of this study into the context of existing empirical evidence, it is apparent that as a sound and effective pedagogical practice, BTM does enhance the speaking performance of EFL learners in different geographical and educational contexts. To sum it up, the results of this research are in accordance with one of the well-founded learning theories and are synchronized with the previous empirical studies and it can be inferred that BTM has truly been a potentially effective method in enhancing the speaking performance of Iraqi EFL students.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the effect of BTM program upon the use of the speaking skill with Iraqi EFL students and their attitudes toward this method. Quantitative results showed significantly greater improvement in speaking ability in the BTM group than in the traditional instruction group. The qualitative data from semi-structured interviews shed even more light on the advantages of BTM, with participants also reporting that it increased their engagement and motivation, flexibility and convenience, and confidence and fluency. The outcomes of the study intimate that integrating blended teaching methods could develop the Iraqi EFL learners' speaking ability along with their general learning performance. Blended learning should be introduced and supported by the education system in order to increase the efficiency of EFL teaching. Successful BTM requires teachers who are not only trained to use technology, but who are trained to design effective online and BTM activities. Institutions must offer teachers regular professional development and technical support in order for teachers be properly trained to provide quality BTM experiences.

Although the findings of the research are indicative of BTM's benefits, the paper also recognizes the limitations of technology access and adoption. Solutions to these challenges must be sought through making dependable internet connections and easy-to-navigate online solutions available to students. Responding to infrastructure challenges, as well as to technostress., could bring forth positive results on the improvement of study outcomes for learners. Some likely lines of future investigation are suggested by this work. Long-term studies are required to investigate the lasting effects of BTM on EFL students' speaking ability and general language learning. Comparison of different integrated teaching methods may help the identification of the best approaches according to situational or learner factors. A deep qualitative investigation of EFL learners' experiences (attention, motivation, self-efficacy etc.) will help us understand how multiple learning processes are influenced in different ways by various types of input. Further explorations on the effects of BTM on other skills (listening, reading and writing) and on an integrated skills approach are suggested. Cross-national research on BTM outcomes, also with the involvement of native countries and non-native teachers' perspectives, could help expand our knowledge in this area. This research adds to the growing literature on BTM and values that this approach has the potential to transform EFL teaching in Iraq. Through making good use of these suggestions and conducting more exploration, EFL practitioners and researchers will be able to refine BTM approaches to cater for the changing demands of 21st-century EFL users.

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