Theoretical Review and Analysis of Blended Learning and Its Effect on the Speaking Skills of Iraqi Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract in English

This study aims to investigate how blended learning enhances the speaking skills of Iraqi intermediate EFL learners. Teaching English as a foreign language in Iraq continues to face persistent challenges that demand practical and innovative solutions. Among the four language skills, speaking is often the most difficult because it requires confidence, continuous practice, and real opportunities for interaction. Traditional methods based on memorization and drills rarely prepare learners for authentic communication, which restricts their fluency and willingness to participate. Blended learning, which integrates classroom teaching with digital platforms, offers a more dynamic and effective alternative. It creates interactive spaces that motivate learners to take risks, engage actively, and improve both speaking and writing skills. The findings of this study indicate that blended learning has a positive effect on students' fluency, participation, and communicative competence. However, poor infrastructure and limited digital resources continued to be serious barriers. Therefore, the study recommends curriculum reform, sustained teacher training, and greater investment in technology to strengthen English education in Iraq.

1. Introduction

English in the twenty-first century has moved far beyond its traditional role as a school subject. It is now recognized as a vital prerequisite for academic achievement, international communication, and professional success. As the global language of science, technology, and commerce, English enables learners to stay connected with the accelerating demands of modern life. Within education, its significance is twofold: it develops language proficiency and fosters cognitive advancement. Among the four skills, speaking stands out as the cornerstone of authentic communication and the gateway to mastering other linguistic abilities, as it directly influences how learners express ideas and interact with others (Luoma, 2003).

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed the way knowledge is delivered and absorbed. Modern tools are no longer peripheral; they have become central to building interactive learning spaces that engage and motivate students. Within this educational shift, blended learning—defined as the integration of face-to-face instruction with digital platforms—has gained attention as a strategy capable of raising instructional quality and strengthening learner engagement (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019; Ramalingam et al., 2022). Importantly, this model reflects constructivist principles that encourage learner-centered practices and resonates with communicative language teaching, which identifies speaking as the foundation of meaningful interaction. Consequently, blended learning is increasingly considered not only a supplementary method but also a transformative framework for language education. This integration of technology in education lays the groundwork for blended learning, which will be discussed in the next section.

Scholars argue that blended learning offers more than a mix of formats; it provides a pathway from memorization-driven methods to technology-supported practices that encourage confidence, independence, and creativity. Albiladi and Alshareef (2019) note that such approaches enhance learner motivation, while Ramalingam et al. (2022) add that digital integration enables students to interact with content in ways traditional classrooms cannot replicate. However, speaking remains a demanding skill, requiring consistent practice, fluency under pressure, and self-assurance (Luoma, 2003). Evidence nevertheless shows that learners in blended contexts often outperform their peers in traditional classrooms, especially in spontaneous oral tasks (Ali et al., 2023). This suggests that blended learning creates conditions for authentic language use, even if challenges persist.

 However, when examining the Iraqi context, the situation becomes more complex. Studies reveal that local learners often struggle with oral proficiency, largely due to reliance on rote memorization and limited opportunities for interactive practice (Almadhady & Muhsen, 2022). Ghaffar and Amin (2022) further highlight that weak infrastructure and unstable internet access, particularly in northern regions, reduce the potential benefits of blended instruction. Unlike classrooms in countries with robust digital systems, Iraqi classrooms frequently face disruptions that hinder teachers and students from taking full advantage of technology. These barriers create not only technical challenges but also pedagogical ones, since teachers may revert to traditional practices when digital resources are unavailable.

 Majeed et al. (2023) emphasize that addressing these issues requires more than curriculum updates. While improving syllabi is important, real progress depends on systemic reforms such as investment in digital infrastructure and professional development for teachers. Without these steps, blended learning remains a promising idea constrained by practical limitations. For this reason, the significance of research at the intermediate school level is clear because it identifies how blended methods can be adapted in Iraq as it can provide concrete guidance for teachers, administrators, and policymakers who seek sustainable improvements.

 Despite the barriers, there are encouraging examples. Sadiq (2022) finds that even in resource-constrained environments, students became more engaged and improved their participation when exposed to blended methods. Similarly, international studies such as Ehsanifard et al. (2020) and Simanjorang et al. (2023) demonstrated that blended learning environments foster stronger oral performance by creating authentic opportunities for communication. These findings highlight that progress is possible, even when resources are limited, if blended approaches are applied carefully and adapted to local realities.

These findings also expose important gaps in current research. The gap in research becomes particularly evident when comparing global and local contexts. While international literature has extensively documented the benefits of blended learning, much of this work has focused on higher education (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019; Ramalingam et al., 2022; Tabassum & Saad, 2024)   Intermediate schools, by contrast, remain underexplored. This stage is crucial because it shapes learners' foundational skills and attitudes toward language. Students at this level are moving from basic knowledge to communicative competence, making them ideal candidates for blended interventions. Yet, little empirical evidence addresses how these methods affect Iraqi learners specifically. By targeting this group, the present study fills a clear gap in both the global and local literature.

In summary, English is indispensable in the modern world, and speaking is in the heart of its use. Blended learning represents a promising model for bridging the gap between traditional Iraqi classrooms and global educational standards. This study expands the existing body of research by examining how blended learning supports communicative growth among intermediate EFL learners. Through careful adaptation, blended learning can provide Iraqi learners with authentic opportunities to practice speaking, helping them move beyond memorization and toward genuine communicative competence.

Building upon these theoretical perspectives, Chapter Two reviews the theoretical and empirical foundations that inform the present study.

2. Theoretical and Related Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Importance of Blended Learning

Blended learning is commonly defined as the integration of classroom teaching with digital tools to create a flexible and interactive environment (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019). The approach is valued because it increases participation, fosters motivation, and allows teachers to diversify instruction. Ramalingam et al. (2022) emphasized that when digital platforms complement traditional teaching, students have more opportunities to engage with content. This encourages them to take greater responsibility for their own progress.

In Iraq, blended learning gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, when digital platforms became necessary. However, its sustainability was limited due to weak infrastructure and unstable internet (Sadiq, 2022). Teachers and students often faced frustration.This revealed that the problem lies not in the method but in the structural conditions supporting it. As Sheerah (2020) noted, blended learning succeeds only when institutional systems ensure accessibility and continuity.

2.2 Constructivism as a Theoretical Basis

Constructivist theory views learning as an active process in which knowledge is built through interaction with peers, teachers, and content, rather than passively received (Ramalingam et al., 2022). Blended learning reflects this principle by incorporating online discussions, collaborative projects, and interactive tasks (Ehsanfard et al., 2020). Li and Hu (2024) added that constructivist-based blended models strengthen critical thinking by enabling learners to reflect and take deeper ownership of learning.

In Iraq, however, the application of constructivism is uneven. Teachers frequently return to memorization and grammar translation when faced with unstable internet or a shortage of resources. Ghaffar and Amin (2022) confirmed that such conditions reduce creativity and discourage active participation. This suggests that while constructivism offers a strong theoretical base, its effectiveness depends on technological infrastructure and systematic teacher training.

2.3 Communicative Language Teaching and Speaking Skills

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) positions speaking as the core of language learning. Luoma (2003) described oral ability as the "gateway" to mastering other skills. Blended learning complements CLT because it provides authentic contexts for oral practice, peer collaboration, and real-time feedback (Ali et al., 2023).

International evidence supported this integration. For instance, Ehsanifard et al. (2020) found that students in blended classrooms gained fluency when practicing in meaningful contexts. Similarly, Simanjorang et al. (2023) noted that integrating technology encouraged interaction and built self-confidence. However, the Iraqi reality differs. Almadhady and Muhsen (2022) showed that classrooms still prioritize grammar and memorization, leaving speaking underdeveloped. This contrast highlights that while CLT has global value, its local application faces cultural and pedagogical resistance.

2.4 Challenges in Iraqi Research on Speaking Skills

Research in Iraq consistently shows that Iraqi learners struggle with speaking skills. Barriers include reliance on rote memorization, limited teacher training, and weak infrastructure (Almadhady & Muhsen, 2022; Ghaffar & Amin, 2022). In northern Iraq, poor internet access creates further inequality, widening the gap between Iraqi learners and their international peers. Majeed et al. (2023) argued that curriculum reform alone is insufficient. Holovatska (2023) supported this view, noting that blended learning reforms succeed only when pedagogy and resources are developed in parallel. Without addressing both, reforms risk remaining superficial.

2.5 Blended Learning as a Practical Solution

Despite these obstacles, blended learning enhances participation, confidence, and oral communication (Ehsanfard et al., 2020). Holovatska (2023) further observed that well-structured blended programs shape positive learner attitudes, which are crucial for long-term achievement.

Local research likewise provides evidence of encouraging outcomes. Sadiq (2022) demonstrated that students in blended environments became more active in discussions, even with scarce resources. Likewise, Majeed et al. (2023) highlighted that combining infrastructure improvements with curriculum reform and teacher training is the only way to sustain success. These findings suggest that blended learning can be effectively implemented even in under-resourced settings when creativity and strategic planning are applied

2.6 Integrating the Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical basis of this study lies in the intersection of three perspectives: blended learning, constructivism, and CLT. Blended learning provides the structural model by combining face-to-face and digital practices. Constructivism offers the philosophical foundation by promoting active, learner-centered engagement. CLT translates these into practical strategies by focusing on speaking as the core of communication.Together, these frameworks explain why blended learning is particularly suited to addressing the speaking challenges of Iraqi learners.

Consequently, studying blended learning in Iraq is not a duplication of international findings but a response to urgent local needs. This research is among the first to investigate intermediate-level learners, a group often overlooked in both Iraqi and global contexts. By linking global theory with local barriers, it demonstrates how blended practices can help students move beyond memorization and toward genuine communicative competence.

Table (1): Advantages and Disadvantages of Blended Learning in Improving EFL Learners' Speaking Skills

Advantages	Disadvantages

Builds students' confidence in speaking.	Limited internet access and resources
Encourages active participation.	Lack of teacher training
Provides authentic contexts for language use.	Digital inequality among learners
Offers flexible access to materials.	Higher teacher workload.
Improves fluency more than traditional methods	Weak institutional support

As shown in Table (1), blended learning has both advantages and disadvantages that affect its role in improving EFL learners' speaking skills.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, the following review summarizes key international and local studies that have explored blended learning and its impact on EFL speaking skills.

2.7International Studies

Several international studies (e.g., Ehsanifard et al., 2020; Simanjorang et al., 2023) have supported the principles of Communicative Language Teaching by showing that blended learning encourages authentic interaction among learners. Yet both studies, like many others, stopped short of showing whether these improvements endure over time. More longitudinal work is needed to confirm whether such short-term gains translate into permanent communicative competence.

Recent contributions also reinforce these points. Pu and Chang (2025) suggested that digital platforms expand learner autonomy, but they stressed that outcomes depend on how consistently these tools are applied over the long run. Benlaghrissi and Ouahidi (2024) examined blended learning in North Africa and noted that while students became more motivated, results varied depending on the stability of resources. Similarly, El Mortaji (2022) highlighted the potential of blended instruction for oral skills but warned that uneven implementation across contexts makes comparisons difficult.

2.8Local Studies (Iraq)

In Iraq, several studies have examined the implementation of blended learning and its impact on learners' participation and speaking performance. Almadhady and Muhsen (2022) found that although traditional learning practices still dominate, blended approaches have introduced greater interaction and learner engagement. Ghaffar and Amin (2022) reported that, despite infrastructural barriers, both teachers and students have become increasingly open to integrating

technology into classroom instruction. Sadiq (2022) demonstrated that creative use of available tools enhanced classroom participation.

Overall, these findings suggest a gradual yet promising shift toward more communicative and technology-supported instruction in Iraqi EFL classrooms.

2.9Comparative Insights and Research Gap

When comparing international and Iraqi contexts, the contrasts become clear. Globally, blended learning is celebrated for enhancing confidence and creating authentic opportunities for communication. In Iraq, however, the same effects are often blocked by weak infrastructure and reliance on rote methods. Consequently, the promise of blended learning is uneven: where resources are stable, confidence and fluency rise; where they are not, improvements remain fragile.

This review shows that a significant research gap emerges. International studies tend to focus on university students and advanced learners, while intermediate learners remain underexplored. At the same time, Iraqi research highlights structural challenges but rarely examines how blended learning can specifically improve speaking skills at this stage. This study addresses both gaps by focusing on Iraqi intermediate learners, linking global insights with local obstacles, and offering new evidence on how blended learning can promote oral proficiency in resource-limited contexts.

To better illustrate the gap between global and Iraqi contexts, Figure 1 presents synthesized percentages from the reviewed literature on blended learning adoption. This visual comparison highlights how worldwide progress has been much faster and more consistent than in Iraq.

Figure(1): Comparative progress of blended learning adoption worldwide and in Iraq.

	2015	2020	2024
World	40	65	80
Iraq	10	20	30
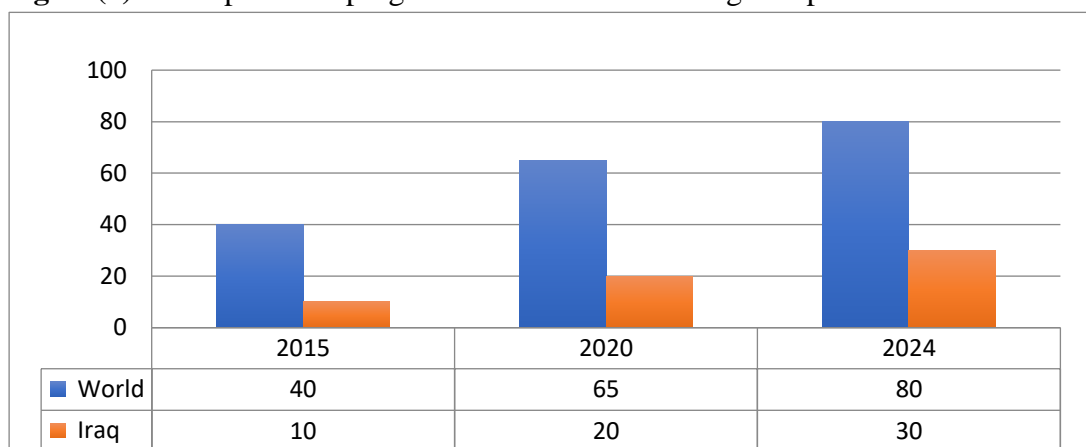
As shown in Figure, (1) global adoption of blended learning has steadily increased, reaching nearly 80% by 2024. In contrast, Iraq's adoption remains much lower, around 30% in the same period. This sharp difference underscores the structural and pedagogical barriers in Iraq, such as unstable internet access, limited digital infrastructure, and the persistence of rote learning. At the same time, the figure emphasizes that global experiences can provide useful insights for Iraq if systemic reforms are implemented.

Note. Percentages in Figure (1) are synthesized from reviewed studies (Ali et al., 2023; Ramalingam et al., 2022; Almadhady & Muhsen, 2022; Sadiq, 2022; Majeed et al., 2023) and are not direct field data from the present research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Criteria for Selecting Studies

 The present study is based on reviewing literature published in peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, since these databases guarantee both reliability and credibility. Only recent studies were prioritized in order to reflect updated perspectives on blended learning in English language education. Particular emphasis was placed on works that examined its role in developing speaking skills. According to Ramalingam et al. (2022), systematic reviews should highlight studies with transparent designs and measurable outcomes. Similarly, Ali et al. (2023) stressed the importance of selecting works directly connected to the research focus—in this case, the impact of blended learning on oral proficiency—supported by data grounded in classroom practice.

In addition, recent contributions such as Benlaghrissi & Ouahidi (2024) and Li & Hu (2024) expand this discussion. They highlight that evaluating blended learning requires both methodological rigor and contextual sensitivity. Their findings suggest that meaningful insights arise not only from outcomes but also from how technologies are integrated into local teaching traditions. These perspectives strengthen the rationale for carefully selecting studies that connect pedagogy with practice.

 This approach ensures that the present review goes beyond merely summarizing findings. Instead, it evaluates both the quality and the relevance of contributions. By concentrating on speaking—often described as the cornerstone of language acquisition (Luoma, 2003)—the study avoids unnecessary generalizations and provides a focused analysis. Another deliberate choice was to examine intermediate learners. At this stage, students have already acquired basic linguistic knowledge but are still developing communicative competence. Therefore, evaluating blended learning at this level offers valuable insights into how digital tools can support the shift from memorization toward authentic communication.

3.2 Local and International Sources

To build a balanced perspective, both international and Iraqi studies were included. International research, such as Albiladi & Alshareef (2019) and Ali et al. (2023), demonstrated that blended learning improves student motivation and classroom participation. These studies showed that digital tools, when integrated with traditional teaching, foster learner confidence and promote active engagement. In addition, Ehsanifard et al. (2020) and Simanjorang et al. (2023) provided strong evidence that blended classrooms create authentic opportunities for oral practice. Their findings suggest that meaningful communication is more likely when technology supports collaboration and interactive tasks.

However, when the focus shifts to Iraq, the findings are less optimistic. Almadhady & Muhsen (2022) and Ghaffar & Amin (2022) reported that Iraqi schools continue to rely heavily on grammar and memorization, which leaves little space for speaking practice. Moreover, they noted that unstable internet and weak infrastructure further limit the effectiveness of blended instruction. These concerns resonate with broader discussions by Li & Hu (2024), who emphasized that without reliable infrastructure, even well-designed pedagogical innovations often fail to reach their full potential.

Nevertheless, some Iraqi evidence is more encouraging. Sadiq (2022) showed that when teachers adapted available tools creatively, classroom participation and oral communication improved, even under limited-resource conditions. Similarly, Majeed et al. (2023) highlighted that sustainable progress depends on systemic reform. They stressed that teacher training and infrastructural investment are both necessary to ensure that blended practices succeed in the long term. These findings are consistent with Benlaghrissi & Ouahidi (2024), who argued that effective adoption of blended learning requires not only digital tools but also the cultural and institutional readiness to integrate them meaningfully

Table (2): Summary of Reviewed Studies by Context, Educational Level, and Focus Areas

Notes	Educational Level(s)	No. of Studies	Context
Focus on motivation and fluency	University + Middle school	6	International
Challenges: infrastructure and rote learning	Secondary + Intermediate	4	Iraqi

As Tables (2)hows, international studies emphasized motivation and fluency, while Iraqi research highlighted infrastructural barriers and reliance on memorization. This contrast underlines the importance of contextualized reforms.

Therefore, by combining global advancements with local challenges, this review highlights where opportunities exist and where reforms are most urgently needed. It also illustrates that context matters greatly.While international studies often emphasize the benefits of digital platforms, Iraqi research shows that these benefits are constrained by systemic barriers

3.3 Analysis Procedure

The analysis proceeded in two main stages. First, a comprehensive review and summary of selected studies was carried out. This involved identifying how blended learning was implemented and what effects it produced on speaking skills. International works such as Ramalingam et al. (2022) and Ali et al. (2023) established a baseline by showing that blended approaches consistently generated positive outcomes. These findings confirmed that digital integration fosters learner autonomy, expands access to resources, and supports oral communication. To clarify this process

Table (3): Main Analytical Procedure and Focus of the Study

Step	Action	Focus	Expected Output
1	Identification of sources	Peer-reviewed articles (Scopus, WoS, 2019–2025)	Corpus of credible, recent studies
2	Application of selection criteria	Focus on blended learning and speaking	Narrowed, directly relevant set
3	Exclusion of irrelevant works	Non-speaking skills, purely theoretical papers	Sharpened scope of analysis
4	Thematic reading and coding	Themes: motivation, participation, fluency, infrastructure	Organized notes for synthesis
5	Comparative analysis	International vs. Iraqi findings	Balanced view of similarities and differences
6	Gap identification	Under-represented groups (Iraqi intermediate learners)	Rationale for present study

As Table (3) shows, the analysis was conducted in systematic stages, moving from source identification to gap recognition. This structured process ensured that the findings remained coherent and aligned with the study's objectives.

Second, a critical comparison was undertaken between international and Iraqi studies. Research such as Ehsanifard et al. (2020) and Simanjorang et al. (2023) showed that blended models provide authentic, interactive contexts for oral practice. By contrast, Iraqi studies— including Almadhady & Muhsen (2022) and Ghaffar & Amin (2022)—revealed that infrastructural and pedagogical weaknesses restrict similar success. Consequently, this dual perspective not only documents results but also interprets their implications. In Iraq, progress required attention to both teaching methods and broader systemic reforms, since pedagogy alone cannot overcome structural barriers.

3.4 Research Gap

While international research on blended learning is extensive, most of it has concentrated on university students and advanced learners (Ali et al., 2023). Very few studies have examined intermediate-level Iraqi learners, even though this stage is critical for developing communicative competence. Majeed et al. (2023) stressed that middle school represents a transitional stage where learners shift from basic linguistic skills to real communication. Evidence from other contexts supports this claim. For instance, Simanjorang et al. (2023) found that middle school students in blended classrooms benefited significantly from interactive opportunities that enhanced their fluency and confidence. Nevertheless, large-scale studies from Iraq are still lacking.

This absence highlights the importance of the current study. By bridging global achievements with local challenges, it aims to provide new insights into how blended learning can support speaking skills among Iraqi intermediate learners. It contributes not only to theory but also to practice, offering recommendations for policymakers, teachers, and curriculum developers. Ultimately, the study seeks to connect international perspectives with Iraqi realities, demonstrating how blended learning can move students away from rote memorization and toward authentic communication.

4.Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that blended learning significantly enhances the speaking abilities of Iraqi intermediate EFL students. In contrast to traditional classrooms dominated by grammar drills and memorization, the blended approach encouraged learners to engage in spontaneous communication, express themselves with greater confidence, and participate actively in oral tasks. These results underscore a central contribution of this research: blended learning, even under limited conditions, fosters authentic communicative competence rather than producing students who rely solely on rehearsed phrases.

At the global level, several studies support these findings. Ramalingam et al. (2022) emphasized that digital integration expands access to learning in ways that conventional classrooms cannot achieve. Albiladi and Alshareef (2019) also argued that blended learning builds independence and confidence. Our results align with these perspectives but extend them by focusing on intermediate learners, an age group often neglected in prior research. By demonstrating measurable gains in fluency and willingness to take risks, this study shows that

blended strategies are effective not only for university students, as frequently reported, but also for younger learners who are still developing their oral proficiency.

Other recent international evidence provides further support. Cao and Phongsatha (2025) demonstrated that exposing learners to diverse content through blended environments promotes fluency and motivates students to experiment with new language forms. Similarly, Tabassum and Saad (2024) reported that blended models shift classroom interaction toward a student-centered dynamic, which enhances both speaking accuracy and engagement. These findings mirror our own: Iraqi learners, though working under constrained conditions, showed enthusiasm, volunteered to speak more frequently, and offered more coherent and extended responses during discussions.

Evidence from the Arab region reinforces these results. Ali et al. (2023) found that Arab university students in blended settings displayed greater fluency and higher engagement in oral activities. Alshehri et al. (2025) reported that Saudi learners developed stronger self-confidence when technology supported instruction. Our findings are consistent with these regional patterns, though the Iraqi case differed in the pace of improvement. Whereas students in well-resourced contexts advanced quickly and sustainably, Iraqi learners progressed more slowly due to infrastructural barriers. This comparison highlights a critical insight: blended learning is not equally effective across contexts. Its success depends heavily on the availability of resources and institutional readiness.

The challenges in Iraq are longstanding. Almadhady and Muhsen (2022) observed that classrooms remain dominated by rote memorization, limiting opportunities for authentic speaking practice. Ghaffar and Amin (2022) noted that weak digital infrastructure, particularly in northern Iraq, obstructs the consistent application of blended learning. Our study confirmed these issues: students struggled with unstable internet, and many teachers lacked sufficient training to use digital platforms effectively. Despite these limitations, learners still showed progress, suggesting that motivation and exposure to interactive pedagogy can partially compensate for structural deficits. Such findings naturally lead to a critical question about whether blended learning can truly thrive under these persistent constraints.

This raises an important question: can blended learning succeed in fragile conditions? Evidence from Iraq and the wider region suggests that it can, though with limitations. Sadiq (2022) demonstrated that Kurdish university students improved their oral skills even with scarce resources. Majeed et al. (2023) argued that meaningful improvement requires more than curriculum reform, stressing the need for teacher training and infrastructural investment. Our results support this argument: students improved in confidence, fluency, and participation, but the sustainability of these gains will remain uncertain unless systemic reforms are implemented. Two additional perspectives deepen this analysis, Sheerah (2020) highlighted the necessity of institutional policies to ensure accessibility and continuity, without which blended learning remains inconsistent. (El Mortaji, 2022) emphasized teacher professional development, noting that untrained teachers are unable to fully exploit the advantages of digital tools. Both perspectives are directly relevant to Iraq. The lack of institutional planning and insufficient teacher preparation in our study limited the impact of blended strategies, even though students responded positively to them. This underscores the need for comprehensive reforms that go beyond short-term solutions.

Taken together, the results of this study illustrate both the potential and the limits of blended learning in Iraq. On the positive side, students developed greater confidence, became more willing to participate in oral tasks, and showed measurable gains in fluency. On the negative side, infrastructural weakness, unstable internet, and lack of teacher training prevented more substantial progress. The key point here is that blended learning itself is not the problem; rather, the broader context determines the depth of its effectiveness.

5.Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

5.1Contributions of the Study

This study adds two key ways to English teaching in Iraq. First, it provides practical insights for improving instruction at the intermediate stage, with a focus on speaking as the heart of real communication. Most earlier work focused on university or advanced learners, but this research turns attention to middle school students. This stage is critical because learners move from basic competence toward more confident, real-life interaction (Luoma, 2003). By highlighting this underexplored group, the study addresses a major gap in the literature and adds new evidence from the Iraqi context.

Second, the study demonstrates both the strengths and the limits of blended learning in Iraq. On one side, it offers more opportunities for participation and oral practice than rote learning allows (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019). On the other side, its success is reduced by weak internet, poor infrastructure, and reliance on traditional teaching practices (Ghaffar & Amin, 2022). The value here lies in showing that even with these obstacles, blended learning can still create meaningful progress when applied carefully.

Building on these contributions, the next section offers practical recommendations to help guide future applications of blended learning.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are suggested.

1. **Infrastructure Development**

 Reliable internet and access to digital resources must be available in all schools, including rural areas. Without this foundation, blended learning cannot succeed. Tabassum and Saad (2024) stress that equity in technology access is essential for sustainable results.

2. **Teacher Training**

Professional development should prepare teachers to use digital tools effectively. Training must also help them shift from teacher-centered practices to learner-centered approaches. for example, Cao and Phongsatha (2025) explain, digital tools are only effective if teachers know how to connect them with interactive strategies.

3. Curriculum Reform

English syllabi need to give more space to oral communication and interactive tasks. Relying too much on memorization limits learners' growth. Majeed et al. (2023) argue that reforms should combine updated materials with digital innovation.

4. Institutional Support

Policymakers must design long-term frameworks, allocate resources, and monitor progress. Without systemic support, blended learning will remain a temporary measure rather than a lasting reform.

5.3 Future Research
Further studies are needed in three main areas.

1. Long-term Effects

Research should track whether speaking improvements last beyond the classroom. Longitudinal studies would clarify if gains in fluency and confidence are sustained over time (Sadiq, 2022).

2. Urban–Rural Comparison

More studies should compare results between urban and rural schools. This would shed light on equity challenges and help decision-makers allocate resources fairly.

3. Role of Specific Tools

Future work should test which technologies are most effective for speaking practice. Mobile apps, interactive platforms, and online forums each offer different possibilities. Cao and Phongsatha (2025) noted that, when integrated carefully, digital platforms can significantly increase participation and motivation.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms that blended learning is an effective and sustainable approach for developing speaking competence among Iraqi intermediate EFL learners. Drawing on international (Ramalingam et al., 2022; Cao & Phongsatha, 2025), regional (Ali et al., 2023; Alshehri et al., 2025), and local evidence (Sadiq, 2022; Majeed et al., 2023), the findings reveal that blended environments foster confidence, participation, and oral proficiency even under limited resources.

However, persistent challenges such as weak infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, and reliance on rote learning (Almadhady & Muhsen, 2022; Ghaffar & Amin, 2022) continue to hinder progress. Addressing these barriers through targeted investment, continuous professional

development, and institutional reform (Mortaji, 2022; Sheerah, 2020) is essential for achieving long-term success.

By focusing on Iraqi intermediate learners—a group often overlooked in prior research—this study bridges the gap between global theory and local practice. It demonstrates how blended learning can help the Iraqi educational system move from traditional, teacher-centered instruction toward communicative, learner-centered models aligned with international standards.

Furthermore, the pedagogical implications of this research extend beyond academic interest. For teachers, the findings offer practical strategies to integrate digital tools into speaking activities without abandoning classroom traditions. For curriculum designers, the study provides insights into balancing grammar instruction with interactive speaking tasks. For policymakers, it emphasizes the necessity of investing in infrastructure and professional training to create an enabling environment for blended learning.

Overall, these implications highlight the relevance of this study to Iraq's ongoing educational reform efforts and the modernization of English language teaching. Blended learning, when properly supported, has the potential not only to enhance students' speaking proficiency but also to strengthen the entire framework of English education in Iraq.

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Abstract in Arabic

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في كيفية تعزيز التعليم المدمج لمهارات التحدث لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المرحلة المتوسطة في العراق. لا يزال تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق يواجه تحديات مستمرة تتطلب حلولًا عملية ومبتكرة. ومن بين المهارات اللغوية الأربع، تُعد مهارة التحدث الأصعب غالبًا لأنها تتطلب الثقة والممارسة المستمرة وفرصًا حقيقية للتفاعل. فالأساليب التقليدية القائمة على الحفظ والتكرار نادرًا ما تهيئ المتعلمين للتواصل الحقيقي، مما يحد من طلاقتهم ورغبتهم في المشاركة. يُقدّم التعليم المدمج، الذي يدمج بين التدريس الصفي والمنصات الرقمية، بديلًا أكثر ديناميكية وفعالية. فهو يخلق بيئات تفاعلية تحفّز المتعلمين على خوض التجارب، والمشاركة النشطة، وتحسين مهارات التحدث والكتابة معًا. وتشير نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى وجود أثر إيجابي للتعليم المدمج على طلاقة الطلاب ومشاركتهم وكفاءتهم التواصلية. ومع ذلك، ما تزال ضعف البنية التحتية وندرة الموارد الرقمية تمثل عوائق خطيرة. لذلك توصي الدراسة بإصلاح المناهج، واستمرار تدريب المعلمين، وزيادة الاستثمار في التكنولوجيا لتعزيز تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق.