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## **Online vs. Traditional Learning of English Language: A Qualitative Study on Diploma Students' Blended Learning at Umm Al-Qura University**

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to investigate diploma students' perceptions of blended learning of the English curriculum at the Applied College, Umm A-Qura University (UQU) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, during the second semester 2023-2024. Eight students from different diploma programs attended the English language course (English AP1302) at the elementary level (CEFR A1-A2) for all streams, using the Business Result Elementary textbook from Oxford University Press. There were a total of twelve study hours a week, including two three-hour online classes (English activity 1) and two three-hour lectures on campus (English activity 2). The study used qualitative methods to collect information from students' experiences regarding how they studied their blended English course. The results showed that diploma students held fewer positive attitudes towards both segments of blended learning than a higher number of issues about each. While the online classes were more enjoyable, flexible, interesting, and skill-building in terms of virtual communication, collaboration and technical skills, the on-campus ones brought them a lot of concentration, interaction with the instructor and colleagues, suitability to read-write learners, time effectiveness, and more enjoyment. On the other hand, the list of issues raised about the online classes included isolation, technical challenges, less motivation, less interaction, boredom, distractions, health issues and less interaction with the instructor, while the complaints about the traditional classes included more instructor control, less flexibility, time and location bounds, boredom, cost of transportation, possible classroom

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equipment failure, less consideration for individual needs, possible feeling of intimidation, and high sense of social pressures. The findings of this study can help EFL lecturers at UQU understand the perceptions of students on both segments of blended learning to design the English language learning experience to better suit the individual types of learner and their different needs. Additionally, the study is expected to enlighten students about the potential strengths and weaknesses of learning English in a blended environment to make the best use of the strengths and work on minimizing the challenges.

**Keywords:** EFL, blended learning, hybrid learning, online learning, traditional education

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## 1.Introduction

English language blended learning, also known as hybrid learning of English language, is an approach used at UQU this year to teach EFL through online resources in addition to classroom education. It requires the physical presence of both instructor and students to some extent as it combines face-to-face classroom interaction along with computer-based activities. Because there have been diverse definitions of blended learning, the specific experience of UQU diploma students was the exposure to web-based training and instructional technology (i.e., the eBook with interactive exercises and audio-video materials from the publisher's website) under the instructor's guidance and supervision, with traditional, face-to-face instructor-led education on campus. Students studied six hours a week of each segment of blended learning, making a total of twelve hours of EFL learning a week, which represented a new experience worth of studying and evaluation for quality assurance and improvement on all aspects.

The UQU diploma programs' English language course book – Business Result - introduced elementary-level content in the second

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semester. It had two segments of learning: online and traditional. Students were exposed to the new content in the classroom, then they had to do the technological, interactive, web-based part online. Both segments tackled the same language content but in different exercises. However, due to individual differences among diploma students, technological abilities, and different learning types, their academic performance differed and led to different experiences in hybrid learning. It was crucial to listen to learners' voices and utilize their experiences to improve EFL instruction and learning. Therefore, this study investigated students' opinions of blending learning as an approach used to teach them EFL at UQU that semester.

## **2. Research Objectives**

This study aimed to analyze students' opinions on their blended learning of the English course (English AP1302) for diploma programs at UQU, analyzing its benefits and drawbacks of each segment. It also aimed to identify ways to better utilize both the online and traditional classes to develop the learning experience of the students through making the best use of the strengths and avoiding the weaknesses.

## **3. Literature Review**

The literature review discusses various topics related to blended or hybrid leaning, including its definition, importance, development, and current trends. It also highlights the need for further studies to explore and understand the types of blended learning more specifically and relate it to EFL instruction and learning, due to the diverse definitions and approaches to blended learning that have emerged and flourished since the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Driscoll (2003) contends that “the point is blended learning means different things to different people” and “this may appear to be an academic point but in reality these definitions illustrate the untapped potential of blended learning. While Graham “emphasizes the central role of computer-based technologies in blended learning, other researchers highlight different understandings to what can be considered technological learning and whether it should be online or using instructional technology. (2006, p. 5) In 2006, *The Handbook of*

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*Blended Learning* by Bonk, Graham, Cross & Moore was published to state the same dispute among researchers with “the problem that they define [blended learning] so broadly that they encompass virtually all learning systems”.

Making a distinction between virtual and in-person learning environments, Garrison and Vaughan highlight how online situations are mostly textual in contrast to the oral communication that is customary in classrooms:

Recognizing true blended learning is not obvious. Blended learning is the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences. The basic principle is that face-to-face oral communication and online written communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose. Although the concept of blended learning may be intuitively apparent and simple, the practical application is more complex. (2007, p. 5)

In general, several studies have analyzed and compared the diverse definitions of blended learning, and there have been further studies on blended learning in EFL education, e. g., the challenges EFL instructors face to plan virtual learning environments that can appeal to their students. The majority of previous studies focused on what technological activities can make hybrid learning when combined with classroom education of English a foreign language. None of these studies was on the students of UQU or in a Saudi context.

In one of these global studies, it was contended that blended learning enables students to explore and share cultural aspects and complement both the virtual and the face-to-face environments, such as in the research by Clavijo et al (2008). Another research focused on the challenges of blended learning for EFL teachers and students, such as the article of Alpala and Flórez "Blended Learning in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language: An Educational Challenge". One last example of foreign studies is Dr. Ling Li's paper entitled

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“Students’ Isolation Challenges in Blended EFL Learning During COVID-19: How Can Social Presence and Interaction Help Develop Sense of Community?” where the researcher emphasized the problems of isolation that an EFL student can face online and their social intimidation by top classmates in a classroom setting.

Up to this point, although most studies on EFL blended learning in foreign contexts revealed teachers and students’ insights or showed how blended learning has contributed to the improvement of EFL learning and teaching processes, but none of these studies investigated topics from a Saudi setting, thus there is a lack of analysis of such topics in the Saudi context, and one of these needed studies is the investigation of learners' perceptions and experiences of EFL blended learning at UQU which is the topic of the current study.

#### **4. Research Questions**

The study pursued students’ answers to the following list of four questions:

- As per your experience this semester, what were the advantages of your online English language classes?
- As per your experience this semester, what were the disadvantages of your online English language classes?
- As per your experience this semester, what were the advantages of your on-campus English language classes?
- As per your experience this semester, what were the disadvantages of your on-campus English language classes?

#### **5. Research Design**

##### **5.1. Methodology**

This qualitative study uses a descriptive approach to understand students' perspectives and experiences in learning English online and in a classroom. Qualitative data focuses on naturally occurring events in their natural settings, providing a deeper understanding of students' perceptions. The study incorporates structured interviews, allowing for a deep understanding of the context of students' experiences. Qualitative researchers prefer to conduct authentic studies, delivering reliable and trustworthy results within a specific context. The results from eight structured interviews were

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collected from eight randomly sampled male students from Group 3 and Group 14, ensuring a deep understanding of their experiences in learning English in the second semester. This method offers an advantage over quantitative data, as it provides a deep overview of students' experiences and provides reliable results within a specific context.

## **5.2. Participants**

This study involved eight Saudi diploma students from Umm Al-Qura University who shared their experiences in learning English both online and in the Applied College's premises. They expressed their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of both ways of learning English language as per their experience in the second semester of the academic year 2023-2024. Six students had face-to-face interviews and two had online interviews on Webex.

## **5.3. Data Collection**

The researcher conducted structured interviews with six participants, using various data sources for data collection. The interviews were conducted in person and online, with impulsive questions and prompts for thoughtful distinction. The questions were formulated based on the advantages and disadvantages of each of the two sides of blended learning because they studied English online for six hours a week and spent the same time on campus to cover the twelve-hour English course for diploma students at the Applied College of Umm Al-Qura University in Saudi Arabia. The list of interview questions was validated by two professors at. An mp3 recorder was used to record the six face-to-face interviews while auto recording was activated during the two Webex ones. For all the interviews, the transcripts were kept for data analysis.

## **5.4. Data Analysis**

Because data analysis is a crucial component of qualitative research, the interviews were videotaped, and the participant responses were transcribed. These were then compared to the original transcripts for confirmation. Based on the observations and answers from the interview, a transcription was made. After analyzing the qualitative data individually for each respondent, the results were aggregated to examine patterns and distinctions. Additionally, each

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question's data was arranged, and responses were gathered into four primary categories based on their experiences learning English in the second semester: advantages of online classes, disadvantages of online classes, advantages of on-campus classes, and disadvantages of on-campus classes. The continual comparative approach was used to assess qualitative data collected over time from several sources. The findings showed the opinions of diploma students regarding how they perceive the online and traditional classes of their English course in the second semester.

### **6.Limitations**

One of the study's drawbacks is the small sample size of students that were interviewed. They are all diploma students from various programs at the same college and university. Moreover, the research is qualitatively focused due to its nature. This restricted study opens doors for further research on the topic, and the findings may be strengthened in the future with more studies including a larger number of participants from different academic fields from a range of Saudi universities.

### **7.Findings of the Research**

The list of advantages and disadvantages of both online classes and the on-campus ones, as driven from students' experiences learning their English language course comprised the four parts of this study, as per the structured interview questions. Using a deductive approach, the analysis of the data gathered from the participants revealed a few positive attitudes toward the online segment. The main advantages were that the lessons were more enjoyable, flexible, interesting, and skill-building in terms of virtual communication, collaboration and technical skills. However, the findings also highlighted a higher number of disadvantages of online classes, including isolation, technical challenges, less motivation, less interaction, boredom, distractions, health issues and less interaction with the instructor. On the other hand, the list of five advantages and positive outcomes of on-campus classes included more concentration, more interaction with the instructor and colleagues, suitability to read-write learners, time effectiveness, and more enjoyment, although the higher number of complaints about the same classes comprised more

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instructor control, less flexibility, time and location bounds, boredom, cost of transportation, possible classroom equipment failure, less consideration for individual needs, possible feeling of intimidation, and high sense of social pressures.

***7.1 As per your experience this semester, what were the advantages of your online English language classes?***

The findings indicated positive attitudes toward the outcomes of the online classes, as the majority of respondents stated that they were more enjoyable, flexible, interesting, and skill-building in terms of virtual communication, collaboration and technical skills. The following quotes show these points:

*'I enjoyed a lot of flexibility and the ability to log on from any location.'*

*'It could learn on my own schedule.'*

*'The most important thing was that I enjoyed the eBook where I could revisit past material anytime.'*

*'Sometimes, it saved my time to prepare for the coming lesson.'*

*'Online classes helped me keep on schedules and meet deadlines.'*

*'...you don't have to ask the teacher all the time because you can check the eBook.'*

*'It was an opportunity to demonstrate self-motivation.'*

*'It improved my virtual communication, collaboration and technical skills.'*

***7.2 As per your experience this semester, what were the disadvantages of your online English language classes?***

The study findings showed that there are some drawbacks in learning a segment of the English course AP1302 online. The list of disadvantages, challenges and difficulties included complaints about less motivation, less interaction with other classmates and boredom. In other cases, respondents raised the issues of the technical challenges

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they faced to learn online. Others encountered a level of distractions, health issues and less interaction with the instructor. The following quotes present these points:

*'I usually felt isolated and lonely when I studied online.'*

*'I was less motivated in virtual classes.'*

*'I missed the face-to-face interaction with my colleagues, and the level of interaction with my teacher was lower online.'*

*'I sometimes faced technical problems and challenges that I could not deal with.'*

*'Unstable internet access or device hardware failure frequently interrupted my virtual classes.'*

*'I was not very good at using computers and smartphones, and sometimes felt bored when I dealt with technology to learn.'*

*'Lots of distractions came to me when I was online and made my concentration on the learning activities less.'*

*'I got eye strain when I studied online for a long time.'*

### **7.3 As per your experience this semester, what were the advantages of your on-campus English language classes?**

The findings indicated that there were positive outcomes of the traditional English classes that were held on-campus because they brought more concentration, more interaction with the instructor and colleagues, suitability to read-write learners, time effectiveness, and more enjoyment. The following quotes demonstrate these points:

*'The four walls of the classroom helped me focus on the lesson and I could concentrate on the language task only without technical challenges'*

*'I was more active and could interact with my colleagues more easily in the classroom because It provided a space to practice the new content face-to-face.'*

*'I liked dealing with the hardcopy of the course and writing down my notes.'*

*'I learned more from my colleagues' participation, answers, mistakes, questions, presentations and even body language.'*

*'There was always interaction with my instructor and colleagues in natural, real-life situations.'*

*'It saved time and effort to learn according to the timetable.'*

*'I enjoyed the hands-on activities because they increased my participation.'*

*'Activities were more fun with my colleagues in the classroom.'*

#### **7.4 As per your experience this semester, what were the disadvantages of your on-campus English language classes?**

While participants had positive ideas about the on-campus segment of their English language course, the list of issues and concerns they raised included more instructor control, less flexibility, time and location bounds, boredom, cost of transportation, possible classroom equipment failure, less consideration for individual needs, and a possible sense of social pressures from the feeling of intimidation by the distinguished participation of top classmates. The following quotes include some of these issues and concerns:

*'The instructor had more control and follow-up in the classroom than online.'*

*'We had to go to the University campus, so it was less flexible and more time consuming.'*

*'We had to pay for transportation and the University paid for equipment that sometimes did not work.'*

*'I did not like traditional classroom learning and found it boring.'*

*'There was less space for individual differences and needs.'*

*'I could not contact my instructor after class time, except in the office hours.'*

*'I felt less confident to practice the new content because I feared making mistakes in the classroom.'*

*'There was more competition and sometimes social pressures from the model participation of higher level colleagues.'*

## **8. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The findings of the study showed that the EFL students participating in the study held positive attitudes towards learning English online as part of their English language course in the second semester 2023-2024. The list of benefits included more enjoyment, flexibility, interest, and skill-building in terms of virtual communication, collaboration and technical skills. Nevertheless, the number of challenges and issues emerging from their experience with the online classes were mainly isolation, technical challenges, less motivation, less interaction, boredom, distractions, health issues and less interaction with the instructor. It was also stated that while the list of advantages and positive outcomes of on-campus classes included more concentration, more interaction with the instructor and colleagues, suitability to read-write learners, time effectiveness, and more enjoyment, the complaints about the same classes comprised more instructor control, less flexibility, time and location bounds, boredom, cost of transportation, possible classroom equipment failure, less consideration for individual needs, possible feeling of

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intimidation, and high sense of social pressures. It was noticeable that the number of advantages of each type of learning was lower than the number of its disadvantages raised by the respondents. The following table illustrates the advantages and disadvantages stated by the participants in response to the four questions of the structured interviews, on both segments of the blended learning of their English language course:

<b>English AP1302 Segment</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
<b>Activity One (Six Online Hours)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ more enjoyment</li><li>▪ flexibility</li><li>▪ interest</li><li>▪ skill-building in terms of virtual communication, collaboration and technical skills</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ isolation</li><li>▪ technical challenges</li><li>▪ less motivation</li><li>▪ less interaction</li><li>▪ boredom</li><li>▪ distractions</li><li>▪ health issues</li><li>▪ less interaction with the instructor</li></ul>
<b>Activity Two (Six On-campus Hours)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ more concentration</li><li>▪ more interaction with the instructor and colleagues</li><li>▪ suitability to read-write learners</li><li>▪ time effectiveness</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ more instructor control</li><li>▪ less flexibility</li><li>▪ time and location bounds</li><li>▪ boredom</li><li>▪ cost of transportation</li><li>▪ possible classroom equipment failure</li><li>▪ less consideration for individual needs</li></ul>

	▪ more enjoyment	▪ possible feeling of intimidation and high sense of social pressures.
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**Table 1. Summary of Findings**

The researcher recommends that further studies on the same topic should be carried out in other Saudi universities for verification and comparison, as well as on other a higher number of participants studding English language in Saudi Arabia and in other countries. The researcher recommends that the individual experiences and types of learner can make both types of blended learning more useful to a good proportion of EFL students, which makes both online and traditional learning instrumental.

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