

Blended Learning in ESP Context: Perceptions and Challenges

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Abstract:

This research study seeks to investigate the perceived attitudes towards integrating blended learning in English for Specific Purposes context from the students' perspective at the level of the department of Sociology, Guelma University, Algeria. To achieve such an aim and to provide comprehensive answers for the research questions tackled in this study, a quantitative methodological approach was adopted and the questionnaire was used as the primary data gathering tool. It has been administrated to a sample of 45 students. Ultimately, data analysis and research findings have revealed that the participants have shown relaxed attitudes and positive perceptions towards Blended Learning methodology. They have also reported that integrating Blended Learning in their English for Specific Purposes learning course has both potential benefits as well as significant obstacles.

Keywords) :Attitudes, Blended Learning, English for Specific Purposes, Benefits, Obstacles.

Introduction :

Recently, COVID-19 has had significant social and economic effects all over the globe. Algeria and its educational sector was not an exception. Then and driven by the pandemic situation, the higher education has witnessed a necessity for the shift towards distance learning during Covid-19 era and blended learning in the post pandemic period in both EFL and ESP contexts in the Algerian higher education landscape. That is to say in parallel to onsite language learning within classrooms, lessons, learning activities and tasks have been delivered via online platforms as well. Though, an extensive body of the literature has thoroughly examined blended learning in EFL contexts, research studies dealing with its use in ESP classrooms remains few. Therefore, this empirical study adopts a quantitative research methodology in an attempt to fulfill that research gap. Its intended aim is to investigate ESP learners' perceptions and challenges in relation to blended learning at the ESP context, as well as; to suggest some fruitful implications and effective recommendations.

1. Research Foundation :

1.1 Aims of the Study

The present study aims is to investigate ESP students' perceived attitudes towards integrating blended learning in ESP context as well as to uncover ESP students'

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encountered obstacles and challenges in the process of blended learning adoption and implementation.

1.2. Research Questions

This empirical study tries to address the following research questions:

What are the perceptions of ESP students towards the implementation of blended learning in ESP course?

What are ESP students' faced challenges in the implementation of blended learning in an ESP course?

1.3. Research Methodology

The current research study adopts a quantitative research methodology for collecting and analyzing data. Specifically, the questionnaire was served as the main research instrument conducted with 45 second year students enrolled in the ESP course within the Department of Sociology at Guelma University in Algeria. Later one, the collected quantitative data were quantitatively measured and systematically analyzed in an attempt to find out answers for the aforementioned research questions and to achieve the main aims of the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. ESP Defined

In order to set a basic foundation for ESP concept and its related issues, it would be of a significant importance to initiate the discussion by presenting some of its most relevant definitions. ESP is an acronym that stands for "English for Specific Purposes". Accordingly, Hutchinson et al (1987, p.19) ¹ claims that ESP is "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and methods are based on the learner's reason for learning". In other words, while teaching ESP classes, the lesson, its content, materials and methods should be determined by the students' needs. Likewise, Harmer contends (1983, p. 1) ² that ESP can be considered as "situations where the student has some specific reasons to learn a language". Another definition is provided by Basturkmen (2006) ³ "ESP is understood to be about preparing learners to use English within academic, professional, or workplace environments and a key feature of ESP course design is that the syllabus is based on an analysis of the needs of the students"(p.18). The key idea of that definition is that ESP learners study English not because they are interested in the language in itself but rather to use it as a tool to fulfill their work or study-based needs. For Paltridge and Starfield (2013, p. 2) ⁴ "English for specific purposes (ESP) refers to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain". Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) ⁵ have gone further to identify the major features of ESP and classify them into two main categories i.e. absolute and variable characteristics.

Absolute Characteristics:

1. ESP is designed to meet learners' specific purposes and particular needs;
2. ESP applies the teaching methodology and the activities being used in the specific field it focuses on;

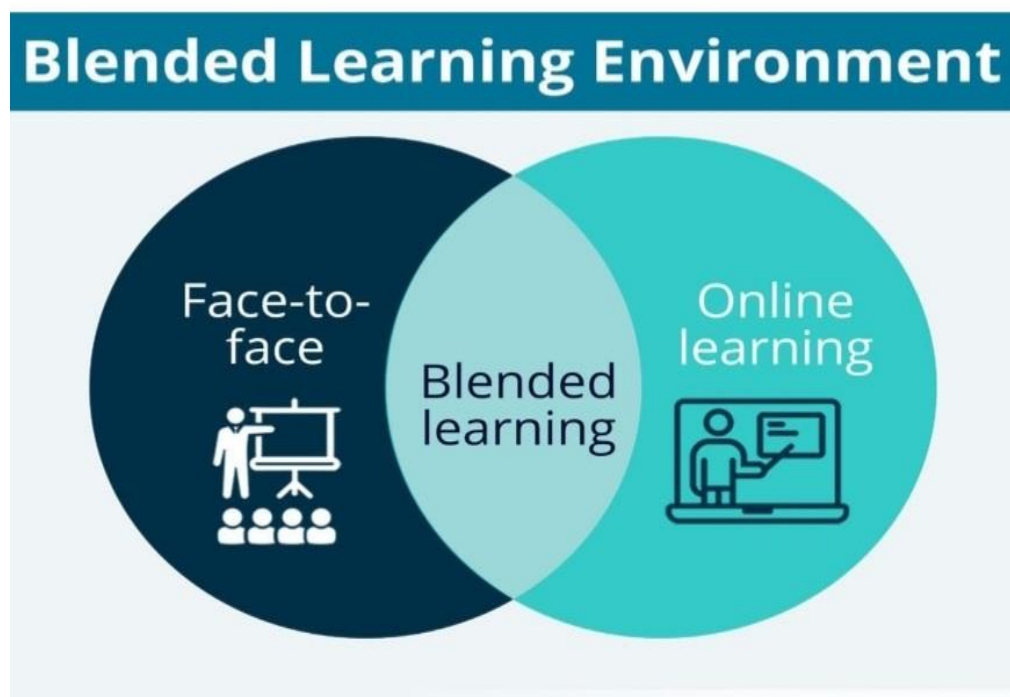
3. ESP focuses on the language, skills, discourse and genre suitable to the activities and tasks that are tied to the field of study.

Variable Characteristics:

1. ESP may be linked to particular fields of study;
2. In some specific cases, ESP may use a teaching methodology that differs from the one of General English;
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners in universities or workplace. It could, however, be for adopted for secondary school learners;
4. ESP is generally designed for learners with intermediate or advanced level;
5. Most ESP courses require learners to attain a basic knowledge of the language, though it can also be used with beginners.

2.2. Blended Learning Concept

In the reported literature the concept blended learning has been defined by Garrison and Kanuka (2004)⁶ as “the thoughtful integration of classroom face - to - face learning experiences with online experiences” (p. 96). On the other hand, Graham (2006)⁷ has argued that “Blended learning systems combine face- to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” (p. 5).



Source: Albiladi & Alshareef (2019)⁸

A more comprehensive definition has been proposed by Sharpe et al. (2006)⁹ who identified the term “blended learning” on the basis of eight dimensions. These key dimensions are: delivery, technology, chronology, locus, roles, pedagogy, focus, and direction. Amore detailed explanation for each aspect is provided in table 1:

Dimension	Explanation
Delivery	the chosen combination of different modes, e.g., classroom-based vs. online education
Technology	the use of different ICT, e.g., simulation software or the internet
Chronology	the applied mixture of synchronous and asynchronous interventions by the teacher
Locus	the place of learning, e.g., this can be a traditional classroom setting, a more authentic practice-based setting, or even a workplace
Roles	the roles the teachers and students play, e.g., the traditional teacher-led, hierarchical setup, or a setup where the learners play a more active role in the development of their learning program
Pedagogy	the pedagogical approach, e.g., a theory-led approach to learning which strongly relies on extrinsic motivation and a final exam, or a problem-based approach which relies more on intrinsic motivation, where the learning process is motivated from observations, involves collaboration and uses alternative assessment strategies
Focus	the overall aims of learning, e.g., whether the aims of the learning institution dominate or whether the (presumably different) aims of the learners are taken into account when shaping the learning program
Direction	the status of the learners, e.g., whether they are seen as equal partners in the ongoing learning process or not

Table 1: Dimensions of blended learning (Sharpe et al., 2006)⁹

The same authors have pointed out that there are three modes underpinning the use of blended learning practices. These are:

1. The provision of supplementary resources for courses that are conducted along predominantly traditional lines through an institutional supported virtual learning environment.
2. Transformative course level practices underpinned by radical course designs, making use of technology to facilitate interaction and replacing other modes of teaching and learning.
3. Students taking a holistic view of the interaction of technology and their learning, including the use of their own technologies.

2.3. Blended Learning Ingredients

Carman (2005, p. 2)¹⁰ in describing the blended learning ingredients, has pointed out to five key ingredients in the learning process:

Live Events: most learners feel that nothing can place the ability to tap a live instructor for that blended learning is synchronous instructor led events in which all learners participate at the same time.

Online Content: learners should complete their learning experiences individually on his time and at his own speed. In the aim of getting maximum value, real business results, it must be based on effective implantation of instructional design principles.

Collaboration: learners create with others an environment of communication and discussions in which all of them try to improve their knowledge.

Assessment: A measure of learners' knowledge can be before live events "pre-assessments" to determine prior knowledge, and post assessments follows the online learning events to determine and measure the learning development.

Support Materials: Includes physical and virtual reference materials that encourage learning retention and transfer such as: printable references, job aids and personal digital assistance.

2. 4. Blended Learning Characteristics

Huang, Zhou and Wang (2006)¹¹ explained that blended learning has three characteristics:

1. It allows easy access and more flexibility of the educational learning materials
2. It supports personalized learning and differentiated instructions to fit learners' various learning styles and preferences.
3. It helps students to become more familiar with digital tools and e-learning experiences.

There are some characteristics of blended learning by Al Fiky (2011, p. 23-24)¹²:

1. shifting the focus from teacher centeredness to a more active and autonomous learning.
2. Offering more opportunities for teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction.
3. Providing integrated assessment methods for both teachers and students.
4. Supporting more availability of information and accessibility of learning resources.

2. 5. Blended Learning Benefits and Challenges

A'masha (2008) has summarized the main factors that can lead to the successful implementation of BL including: ensuring communication between learners and teachers, enhancing collaborative work and promoting creativity, and flexibility of BL programs to meet students' different needs and interests. Esmaeel (2009) suggests that the limited time for application; weakness of learner's electronic skills; slow internet connection; the instructor's inability to follow up the excessive movement of some learners. Farmati et al. (2023)¹³ have commented that blended learning brings considerable benefits to their ESP learning, namely flexibility, autonomy, collaboration, and self-paced learning. While, the findings also revealed that few students faced some challenges such as demotivation, procrastination, and technical issues.

As far as the Algerian scientific research is concerned, Gouider (2023)¹⁴ has conducted a narrative study with a specific focus on the most published works related to the issue at hand. According to his synthesis of the reported studies; challenges can be classified into two main types internal and external. The former incorporate negative attitudes, low motivation, lack of knowledge, lack of training, and resistance to adopt new online platforms. While, the latter encompass technical matters such as lack of connectivity, equipment, and guidelines.

3. Findings and Discussions

Answers and results collected from the students' questionnaire are analysed and interpreted in the following section:

Statements		Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Implementing BL in university reflects the effectiveness of education	58%	13%	29%
2	BL complements traditional classroom learning	47%	18%	35%
3	BL has become an obligation rather than a matter of choice in Algerian universities	38%	27%	35%
4	BL is a challenging step that has to be accepted by all universities	55%	16%	29%
5	Implementing BL in ESP course maximizes learning outcomes	39%	32%	29%
6	Implementing BL in ESP course is a necessary requirement for the 21 st century education	82%	13%	5%
7	BL is just supplementary for the teacher and cannot replace the role of the teacher	90%	2%	8%
8	Implementing BL in ESP course assures the availability and accessibility of the various sources of knowledge and information	41%	40%	19%
9	Implementing BL in ESP course helps me to meet the foreign Language requirements	60%	13%	27%
10	Implementing BL in ESP course increases my interest and motivation to learn	69%	21%	10%
11	Implementing BL in ESP course enhances my communication skills and collaboration with other students	75%	15%	10%
12	Implementing BL in ESP course helps me to develop my Language skills	63%	10%	27%
13	Implementing BL in ESP course fosters my responsibility in language learning (autonomy)	71%	16%	13%

Table 2: ESP Students' Perceptions towards the Implementation of BL in ESP Course

The question items presented in table 2 serve to probe into ESP students' perceived attitudes regarding blended learning implementation in ESP classes. The empirical results displayed in the table demonstrate that the sample learners perceive blended learning model as being beneficial for teaching ESP. A percentage of 58% of the participants has advocated that the idea of BL integration in university in general and in ESP context in particular. 82% of them admitted that BL has become one of the requirements of the 21st century education and that it has become a necessity rather than a matter of choice (38%). The participants have also pointed out that BL is a supplementary tool that goes hand in hand with the traditional face-to-face learning approaches (47%). It can aid language teachers to accomplish their tasks but can never substitute the role of the language teacher

(90%). The reported results denote to ESP students acceptance and readiness for BL models. Findings also revealed ESP students' awareness for the importance and effectiveness for BL approaches.

As far as the BL benefits are concerned, the sample students have pointed out that implementing BL in ESP course can maximize learning outcome (39%). It also assures the availability of authentic materials and accessibility of the various sources of knowledge and information (41%). Besides, it helps to meet foreign Language requirements (60%), and increases learning interest and motivation (69%). Moreover, it enhances communication and collaboration skills (75%). Furthermore, it helps to develop the other language skills (63%). Ultimately, it fosters learner's independence and autonomy (71%). Therefore, it is worthy to note that the research findings are typically in relevance with the previous literature review and our participants show relaxed attitudes, positive perceptions, and promising prospects towards BL integration in their learning of ESP.

Challenges for implementing Blended Learning ESP course include:		Agree	Neutral	Disagree
14	Lack of digital literacy knowledge and computer skills	60%	13%	27%
15	Lack of access to the internet and connection problems	100%	0%	0%
16	Lack and Unavailability of technological devices for some students	87%	5%	8%
17	Lack of effective training on how to use educational platforms of blended learning	84%	13%	3%
18	Blended learning is not suitable for teaching some university fields and specialties	87%	5%	8%
19	Blended learning is not suitable for teaching some modules	73%	10%	17%
20	Students are not convinced by blended learning and consider it as difficult model	77%	10%	13%

Table 3: ESP Students' Faced Challenges in the Implementation of BL in ESP Course

The obtained results that are shown in table 3 demonstrate the distribution of the challenges faced by ESP students while adopting BL models. At the first place comes the technical problems such as lack of access to the internet and poor connection (100%) followed by the percentage (87%) which is representative for the couple of barriers namely: unavailability of technological devices for some students and that BL is not suitable for teaching some university fields and specialties. The other highest percentage is opted for lack of effective training on how to use BL educational platforms (84%) and that BL is not suitable for teaching some specific modules (73%). Thereafter, it comes the students' lack of digital literacy knowledge and computer skills followed by the consideration of (60%) of BL approach as being difficult and challenging. The overall findings signifies that despite the fact that BL have potential benefits and advantages but its implementation is not an easy task but rather it is a challenging process and it is not without obstacles. These obstacles can be attributed to the relative novelty of the BL

experience in the Algerian educational sphere in general and ESP context in particular. In an attempt to overcome these challenges and obstacles, these recommendations can be proposed to be taken into account as guidelines for a successful implementation of BL in ESP environments:

- **Offering effective training for both ESP teachers and learners** both Esp teachers and students need to be involved on ongoing training programs to equip with online learning skills, pedagogical strategies, digital literacies so that to ensure successful implementation of BL instructions in ESP context.
- **Diversifying classroom activities and tasks to fulfill ESP students' different learning styles.** Learners' preferences and their learning styles vary considerably from one student to another. To address this diversity, ESP teachers have to adopt diversified learning instruction by incorporating a wide range of tasks such as group work, role-plays, multimedia presentations, and online quizzes.
- **Developing both ESP teachers' and learners' electronic literacy and digital skills.** In the post pandemic, digital competencies and online skills are no longer optional but they have become necessary for both ESP teachers and students as well. ESP teachers have to be knowledgeable enough on how to use online platforms as Moodle, Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom and so on. Students alike should master how to access online lessons, how to submit online assignments, how to actively participate in online discussions.
- **Specifying ESP students' different learning objectives and analyzing their particular needs.** Unlike in general English, ESP students precisely have specific learning objectives targeted from their learning of the English language. Therefore ESP teachers are required to conduct a needs analysis from the very beginning to basically determine what course content to be taught, what language components to be involved, what language skills to be given much priority.
- **Attempting to provide technical support and equipping classrooms with technological tools and materials.** Without administrative technological support and adequate infrastructure, BL can turn to become frustrating or less effective.

Conclusion

The research results have revealed that ESP students have shown positive perceptions, overall satisfactions, and acceptable appreciations towards the adoption of BL in their learning. Besides, the obtained quantitative data has also demonstrated that the ESP implementation of BL as a new teaching modality in the post pandemic era has been associated with several benefits including (maximizing learning outcomes, increasing autonomy and motivation, enhancing communication and collaboration, developing different language skills). However, its integration in ESP context has also been confronted by several challenges and barriers (technical problems, lack of training, lack of digital literacy). Therefore, future research should focus on exploring innovative ways on how to overcome these challenges and barriers to better ensure BL effectiveness and maximize ESP skills, competences, and learning outcomes.

Footnotes

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² Harmer, J. (1983). *The practice of English language teaching*. London: Longman.

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