

Implementing Blended Learning in Higher Education: An Exploratory Study of EFL Students' Perceptions and Challenges

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Abstract:

The sudden shift to online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for effective blended learning (BL) approaches in higher education. However, the successful integration of BL in EFL contexts faces significant Challenges. This study examines the perceptions and challenges faced by EFL students at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine-Setif2 University, Algeria, concerning the implementation of blended learning (BL) following the rapid transition to online education necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing an exploratory research design, a structured questionnaire was administered to 62 first-year EFL students, chosen via convenience sampling. Quantitative data, gathered from these questionnaires, were subsequently analyzed using SPSS.22. The findings suggest that, while students acknowledge the flexibility and accessibility of online learning modalities, they nonetheless maintain a strong preference for face-to-face instruction. The effective implementation of BL is significantly hindered by a number of challenges including poor infrastructure, limited online interaction, concerns about assessment integrity, and ICT illiteracy. Accordingly, this study suggests a number of recommendations among which the necessity of targeted pedagogical interventions, such as infrastructural improvements, the establishment of reliable assessments, the enhancement of online engagement and the development of ICT literacy, to optimize BL for EFL students within the Algerian educational landscape.

Keywords: EFL Students, Perceptions, Challenges, Blended Learning, Higher Education,

1. Introduction

The unprecedented global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a rapid and profound transformation in higher education. Faced with lockdowns and social distancing measures, universities worldwide were compelled to integrate computer-based online learning platforms, effectively shifting from traditional face-to-

face instruction to Blended Learning (BL, henceforth). This transition was not merely a pedagogical adjustment; it represented a fundamental reshaping of the educational process, necessitated by the newly imposed and unpredictable circumstances. This sudden and unprepared shift to BL presented significant challenges for students, who were engaged into a hybrid learning environment without adequate

preparation or support. The integration of online modes of learning introduced complexities that students had to navigate, including technological proficiency, autonomy, and adapting to new modes of interaction. These challenges were particularly salient within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL, henceforth) classroom, where the learning and communication are often best implemented through direct, interactive engagement. The shift to BL in EFL contexts raised questions about maintaining student motivation, fostering effective communication, and ensuring equitable access to resources, ultimately impacting the overall learning experience. The rapid adoption of BL in higher education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has stimulated research to examine its effectiveness and impact on student experiences. Several studies emerged to provide valuable insights into the perceptions and challenges associated with BL, particularly within EFL context.

2. Review of Literature:

This section synthesizes existing research on blended learning in higher education, focusing on its definition, components, and impact. It aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge within this evolving pedagogical approach.

2.1. The Nature of Blended Learning:

Blended Learning, a dynamic and multifaceted educational approach, strategically integrates diverse learning methodologies beyond traditional single-mode instruction, aiming to optimize the learning experience by combining the

strengths of face-to-face and online modalities (Parkins, Roberts, & Savio, 2012). This intentional integration, often envisioned as a balanced distribution between face-to-face and online instruction (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), is not a random mixture but a carefully designed fusion maximizing the benefits of each modality. Effective BL implementation, however, goes beyond mere technology integration, demanding deliberate implementation of both modalities, a strong emphasis on educator capabilities and training (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019), thoughtful pedagogical design (Beatty, 2019), and the development of digital literacy to promote student autonomy, particularly in EFL contexts (Garcia & Fernandez, 2022), with digital devices and resources serving as integral components (Wang, 2021). In essence, BL is a pedagogical approach that creates a holistic and engaging learning environment by strategically combining the best of both modes, recognizing that diverse learning objectives and student needs are better served by different modalities, providing a flexible and adaptable framework for effective instruction.

2.2. Related Studies about Perceptions and Challenges of Implementing BL:

Research on blended learning (BL) has evolved significantly, reflecting the changing landscape of higher education. Early studies, such as Alzumor et al. (2013), laid the groundwork by exploring the initial integration of technology into teaching practices, highlighting foundational challenges and opportunities. Jashaan (2015) narrowed the focus to EFL

instruction within technology-enhanced environments, emphasizing pedagogical considerations and strategies for language learning. Marunić & Glazar (2015) broadened the scope to examine the general impact of BL across disciplines, analyzing its effectiveness in promoting student engagement and motivation. These studies provide a crucial historical context for understanding the evolution of BL and its application in EFL settings.

The COVID-19 pandemic generated research examining the immediate and long-term effects of BL. Gulnaz, Althomali & Alzeer (2020) investigated the initial challenges and adaptations during the pandemic's onset, focusing on the sudden shift to online learning. Riano (2020) explored the pedagogical implications of BL in the post-pandemic context, analyzing different BL modes and student engagement strategies. Ashraf et al. (2022) provided a comprehensive analysis of the current state of BL, examining its long-term impact on student learning and the challenges of ensuring equitable access. Al-Jarf (2021) specifically addressed blended learning in EFL higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on students' perceptions and challenges, providing valuable context for understanding the unique difficulties faced by EFL learners. Al-Salman & Haider (2022) further explored EFL students' perceptions and challenges during this period, specifically focusing on the use of online platforms for learning English, underscoring the specific difficulties encountered by EFL learners during the pandemic. These studies shed light on the pandemic's influence on BL implementation in EFL education.

Beyond student experiences, research has also addressed the crucial role of educator development in successful BL implementation. Bond & Bedenlier (2019) emphasized the need for comprehensive professional development for lecturers, focusing on digital literacy and pedagogical strategies. Beatty (2019) offered insights into teaching methodologies for creating engaging BL experiences. Rasheed, Kamsin & Abdullah (2020) examined the challenges of online collaborative learning during the pandemic, highlighting issues arising from rapid online integration. Collectively, these studies underscore the multifaceted nature of BL, encompassing technological, pedagogical, and professional development aspects, all of which are vital for optimizing student learning outcomes, particularly in EFL contexts).

2.3. Statement of Problem:

Despite a substantial body of research examining students' perceptions and challenges in BL across higher education, as evidenced by studies like Alzumor et al. (2013), Jashaan (2015), Marunić & Glazar (2015), Gulnaz, Althomali & Alzeer (2020), Rasheed, Kamsin & Abdullah (2020), Riano (2020), Al-Jarf (2021), Ashraf et al. (2022), and Al-Salman & Haider (2022), a significant research gap exists concerning the specific experiences of Algerian students. While these studies provide valuable insights into general trends and patterns of BL implementation, they often lack the contextual specificity needed to understand the unique challenges within the Algerian educational system. The distinct socio-cultural, economic, and technological context of Algerian higher

education, including varying digital infrastructure, language proficiency, and cultural attitudes, necessitates context-specific research. Research specifically addressing EFL students' experiences during the pandemic which focused on perceptions, challenges, and the use of online platforms, reinforces the necessity for focused investigations into the Algerian context. Therefore, a further investigation is crucial to understand and address the perceptions and challenges faced by Algerian students.

2.4. The Purpose of Study:

This research aims to conduct a thorough examination of the experiences of EFL students engaged in BL. The central objective is exploring students' perceptions and the specific challenges they encountered during the implementation of BL at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine-Setif 2 University. This study seeks to provide a detailed understanding of how EFL students navigated this significant pedagogical shift.

3. Research Methodology:

This section outlines the methodological approach employed in this study. It details the research questions, data collection tool, participant selection, and data analysis procedures.

3.1. Research Questions:

To effectively address the central purpose of this research, which aims to explore EFL students' experiences with BL at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine-Setif2 University, two key research questions are posed. These questions are designed to guide the investigation and provide a framework for a

thorough analysis of the students' perspectives and challenges:

- 1- What are EFL students' perceptions of BL?
- 2- What are the challenges faced by EFL students in BL context?

3.2. The Participants:

This research was conducted with 62 EFL first-year students at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine-Setif 2 University, Algeria. The sample consisted of 53 female students and 9 male students. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years. The majority of these students reported utilizing smart mobile phones or laptops as their primary ICT devices for accessing online learning materials, participating in virtual classes, and completing assignments. This highlights the increasing dependence on personal technology for educational purposes within the Algerian higher education context. However, a significant challenge identified by the students was the poor quality of their internet connection, which creates substantial obstacles for students engaging in BL, affecting their ability to participate in real-time online activities, access digital resources, and maintain consistent engagement with the learning materials.

3.3. The Sampling Technique:

The participants in this research were selected using a convenience sampling technique based on their availability and willingness to participate, selecting readily available and willing first-year EFL students at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine-Setif 2 University due to its practicality, especially during the transition to blended learning amidst potential pandemic disruptions.

3.4. The Research Instrument:

To effectively gather data on EFL students' perceptions and challenges within the blended learning (BL) environment, this research utilized an adapted structured questionnaire. This instrument was carefully designed with three distinct sections, each serving a specific purpose in addressing the research questions.

a) Section 1: Background Information of Participants

This section of the study aimed to gather demographic information from the participants to contextualize their BL experiences. It consisted of four key questions focused on gender distribution, age range, primary ICT devices used for accessing online learning materials, and the quality of their internet connection. These questions were designed to assess students' technological access and the reliability of their internet, which significantly impacts their engagement in online learning activities.

b) Section 2: Students' Perceptions of BL

This section of the study aimed to gather students' perceptions of their blended learning experience through a twenty-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The items were designed to assess various aspects of their learning, including the effectiveness of BL in facilitating language learning, the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the hybrid model, their satisfaction with both online and face-to-face modes, their engagement and motivation within the BL environment, and the perceived usefulness of online resources and activities.

c) Section 3: Challenges Faced by Students in BL

This section of the study sought to identify the specific challenges students faced within the blended learning environment using a ten-item, five-point Likert scale questionnaire, similar in structure to the previous section. The items were designed to measure challenges related to technology (internet and devices), pedagogy (adapting to online strategies), communication (language practice in a hybrid setting), motivation (engagement and isolation), time management and autonomy, and digital literacy.

3.5. Data Collection:

The adapted structured questionnaire was distributed in printed format to 62 first-year EFL students. This administration took place during the second semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. The students were provided with sufficient time to complete the questionnaire, and all 62 students successfully completed and returned the instrument.

3.6. Data Analysis:

Aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of EFL students' perceptions and challenges in BL, quantitative data from the Likert-scale items (Sections 2 and 3) were analyzed using SPSS version 22, calculating percentages, frequencies, means, and ranks to determine response distributions, central tendencies, and the relative significance of perceptions and challenges.

4. Results and Discussion:

This section presents a detailed analysis of the quantitative data gathered from the student questionnaires, focusing on their perceptions of BL and the challenges they encountered. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences, supported by

statistical findings to contextualize these results within the existing body of research on BL in higher education.

4.1. Students' Perceptions of the Online Mode in BL:

This section analyzes students' evaluations of the online mode, exploring their experiences with digital tools.

Table nº 01: Students' Perceptions of the Online Mode in BL

Nº	Item	Mean	Percent	Response Level	Rank
1	It can be reached at any time and place	4.22	84.4	Strongly Agree	1
2	It clearly defines lesson objectives	4.04	80.8	Strongly Agree	3
3	It clearly describes learning procedures	3.55	71	Agree	5
4	It provides clear instructions	3.48	69.6	Agree	6
5	It provides comprehensive needed materials	3.64	72.8	Agree	4
6	It develops learning autonomy	2.78	55.6	Neutral	8
7	It provides user friendly features	4.12	82.4	Strongly Agree	2
8	It provides useful feedback	2.98	59.6	Neutral	7
9	It provides effective interaction between the teacher and the students	0.95	19	Strongly Disagree	10
10	It provides more reliable and valid assessment	0.91	18.2	Strongly Disagree	9
Total		3.06	61.2	Agree	

Table 1 presents EFL students' perceptions regarding the online component of BL. Overall, the students exhibit moderately positive perceptions of this mode, as indicated by a total mean value of 3.06. This

suggests that students recognize certain advantages and find some aspects of online learning beneficial. Specifically, the data reveals that students strongly appreciate the flexibility and

accessibility afforded by the online mode. They particularly value the ability to join online learning sessions at any time and from any place, as evidenced by a high mean value of 4.22. This flexibility aligns with the inherent nature of online learning, which allows for asynchronous participation and accommodates diverse student schedules and locations. Furthermore, students perceive the online platforms used in BL as user-friendly, with a mean value of 4.12. This suggests that the technological interfaces and tools employed are intuitive and easy to navigate, contributing to a positive learning experience. Additionally, students acknowledge that the online mode effectively communicates lesson objectives, with a mean value of 4.04.

However, the data also highlights significant concerns regarding the limitations of online interaction and assessment. Students express strong reservations about the online mode's ability to facilitate effective interaction, indicated by a low mean value of 0.95. This suggests that students feel the online environment lacks the dynamic and spontaneous interaction characteristic of face-to-face instruction, potentially hindering collaborative learning and the development of communicative competence. Similarly, students perceive online assessment as unreliable and lacking validity, with a low mean value of 0.91. This concern may stem from anxieties about the academic integrity of online exams, the potential for technical glitches, or the perceived difficulty in accurately assessing language skills through digital means.

In summary, while EFL students acknowledge the flexibility, user-friendliness, and clarity of objectives provided by the online mode of BL, they hold negative perceptions about its capacity to foster effective interaction and deliver reliable assessments. These findings underscore the importance of addressing these concerns to optimize the online component of BL and ensure a more engaging and effective learning experience for EFL students.

4.2. Students' Perceptions of The Face-To-Face Mode in BL:

This section examines students' perceptions of the face-to-face mode of BL, focusing on their experiences and perceived value of traditional classroom interactions.

Table nº 02: Students Perceptions of the Face-to-Face Mode in BL

Nº	Task	Mean	Percent	Response Level	Rank
11	It provides better interaction between the teacher and students	4.82	96.4	Strongly Agree	1
12	It can be replaced by online learning	0.61	12.2	Strongly Disagree	10
13	It provides explanation for missing points	3.78	75.6	Agree	6
14	It provides better discussion environment	3.67	73.4	Agree	7
15	It provides profound answers to questions	3.94	78.8	Agree	4
16	It provides detailed content explanation	4.82	96.4	Strongly Agree	2
17	It provides appropriate feedback	3.81	76.2	Agree	5
18	It provides reliable & valid assessment	3.59	71.8	Agree	8
19	It is more convenient than online learning	4.71	94.2	Strongly Agree	3
20	It can be replaced by BL	2.81	56.2	Neutral	9
Total		3.65	73	Agree	

Table 2 reveals that the EFL students, on average, hold a significantly positive perception of the face-to-face mode of BL, as evidenced by a total mean value of 3.65. This indicates a strong preference for the traditional classroom setting within the BL framework. This positive perception likely stems from the students' recognition of the unique benefits offered by face-to-face instruction, such as direct interaction with the teacher, immediate feedback, and opportunities for collaborative learning. The physical presence of the teacher and peers creates a dynamic learning

environment that fosters engagement, motivation, and a sense of community. However, a particularly striking finding is the students' strong belief that face-to-face learning cannot be replaced by online learning, as indicated by a remarkably low mean value of 0.61. This suggests strong evidence that the essence of traditional classroom instruction is irreplaceable and that online modalities, while valuable, cannot fully replicate the benefits of in-person interaction. This likely reflects the students' perceived limitations of online learning, such as the potential for reduced

interaction, difficulties in maintaining focus, and the absence of the social and emotional dimensions of face-to-face settings. The students' low mean value in this respect is very significant, and suggests a strong preference for the traditional learning model.

In essence, while students appreciate the flexibility and accessibility offered by the online component of BL, they maintain a strong preference for face-to-face

interaction and believe that it plays an indispensable role in their learning experience. This highlights the importance of carefully balancing the online and face-to-face modes of BL to maximize student satisfaction and learning outcomes.

4.3. Students' Perceptions of BL:

This section explores the students' overall perceptions of blended learning

Table n° 03: Students' Perceptions of BL

N°	Learning Mode	Mean	Percent	Response Level	Rank
1	Online Mode	3.06	61.2	Agree	2
2	Face to Face Mode	3,65	73	Agree	1
Total		3.35	67	Agree	

The overall analysis of student perceptions, as presented in table 3, reveals that students generally hold positive views regarding BL, with a total mean value of 3.35. This indicates that, on average, students perceive BL as a beneficial approach to their education, acknowledging its potential to enhance their learning experiences. However, a closer examination of the data reveals a clear preference for face-to-face learning over online learning. Students reported a higher mean value of 3.65 for face-to-face mode, compared to 3.06 for the online mode. This suggests that while students appreciate the advantages of BL, they still value the traditional classroom setting and perceive it as more effective for their learning.

These findings align with several previous studies, reinforcing the existing body of

research on student perceptions of BL. Specifically, the positive overall perception of BL is consistent with the findings of Al Zumor et al. (2013), Jashaan (2015), Gulnaz, Althomali & Alzeer (2020), Riano (2020), and Ashraf et al. (2022). These studies collectively demonstrate that students across various contexts tend to recognize the benefits of integrating online and face-to-face modalities in their learning. Furthermore, the finding that students prefer face-to-face learning aligns with the research of Riano (2020). This suggests that despite the increasing prevalence of online learning, students still value the direct interaction, immediate feedback, and collaborative learning opportunities offered in traditional classroom settings. This preference highlights the importance of carefully balancing the online and face-to-

face modes of BL to maximize student satisfaction and learning outcomes.

In short, these findings indicate that students generally perceive BL positively. However, it also underscores the enduring value students place on face-to-face interaction, emphasizing the need for a thoughtful and strategic integration of online and in-person modalities in BL environments. This insight is crucial for educators and curriculum designers seeking

to optimize the effectiveness of BL and cater to the diverse needs and preferences of EFL students.

4.4. The Challenge Faced by Students in BL Context:

This section presents an analysis of the specific difficulties encountered by students within the BL environment, focusing on the obstacles that impacted their learning experience.

Table n°04: The Challenges Faced by Students in BL

N°	Item	Mean	Percent	Response Level	Rank
21	The lack or poor internet connection	4.85	97	Strongly Agree	1
22	The technical issues faced in online instruction	4.79	95.8	Strongly Agree	2
23	The lack of appropriate devices (smart phones and laptop) for online learning	3.91	78.2	Agree	6
24	The lack of student's autonomy and competences to use online learning	3.16	63.2	Agree	9
25	The difficulty of receiving appropriate feedback	3.77	75.4	Agree	7
26	The possibility of violating academic integrity through cheating especially in online learning assessment	4.57	91.4	Strongly Agree	4
27	The lack of sufficient interaction between teachers and students	4.57	91.4	Strongly Agree	4
28	Students' unfamiliarity with ICTs and learning platforms	4.63	92.6	Strongly Agree	3
29	The existence of distractive elements at home	3.77	75.4	Agree	7
30	The possibility of students' feeling socially isolated in online learning	3.03	60.6	Agree	10
Total		4.07	81.5	Strongly Agree	

Table 4 presents the challenges faced by EFL students in their BL experience at Mohammed Lamine Debaghine-Setif 2 University. The overall mean value of 4.07 indicates that, on average, students strongly agree that they encounter a variety of significant challenges in their BL environment. This high mean value across all ten items suggests a pervasive sense of difficulty, highlighting the need for immediate attention and intervention.

These findings are consistent with the challenges identified in several previous studies, including those by Al Zumor et al. (2013), Jashaan (2015), Riano (2020), Rasheed, Kamsin & Abdullah (2020), Al-Jarf, R. (2021), Al-Salman & Haider (2022) and Ashraf et al. (2022). These studies collectively underscore the detrimental impact of poor infrastructure, specifically related to internet connectivity and access to technology, on students' BL experiences. Additionally, they identify the lack of meaningful interaction, the potential for academic integrity violations during online assessments, and ICT illiteracy as major obstacles. These challenges are highlighted in the data from this current study, suggesting that these issues are not unique to a specific context but rather represent broader concerns within BL implementation.

However, this study disagrees with the findings of Gulnaz, Althomali & Alzeer (2020), which reported social isolation as the most significant challenge in BL. In contrast, the current study found social isolation to be the least prevalent challenge, with a mean value of 3.03, ranking it last among the ten identified challenges.

In a nutshell, this study reinforces the prevalence of infrastructural, interactional, assessment-related, and ICT illiteracy challenges in BL, aligning with the findings of several previous studies. However, it also highlights the contextual variability of social isolation as a challenge, demonstrating that its impact may differ across student populations. This difference underscores the importance of context-specific research to inform effective BL implementation

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications:

In summary, this study revealed that EFL students at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine-Setif 2 University generally hold positive perceptions of BL, recognizing its potential to enhance their learning experience. However, a significant finding is their clear preference for face-to-face instruction over the online component. This preference is largely attributed to a number of challenges students face with the online mode, including poor infrastructure, limited interaction opportunities, concerns about online assessment integrity, and ICT illiteracy. These challenges underscore the need for targeted interventions to optimize the BL environment and ensure a more equitable and effective learning experience for students.

The findings of this study carry significant pedagogical implications for educators, administrators, and policymakers involved in the implementation of BL, particularly within the Algerian higher education context:

a)Addressing Technical Infrastructure Deficiencies: To ensure successful Blended Learning (BL), governments must address

poor technical infrastructure by providing reliable internet, ICT equipment, and consistent support. Universities should supplement this by offering on-campus spaces with reliable internet access and computer access for students who have issues at home.

b) Enhancing Online Interaction and Engagement: To enhance online learning, educators should focus on building interactive environments through regular virtual meetings and discussions, collaborative online tools for peer learning, prompt feedback, and online communities to reduce student isolation.

c) Ensuring Valid and Reliable Online Assessment: To maintain academic integrity in online assessments, teachers should implement innovative and secure techniques, such as authentic tasks and diverse evaluation methods. Crucially, teachers need comprehensive training on using these tools effectively.

d) Developing ICT Literacy and Online Learning Skills To ensure student and instructor success in BL, universities must provide comprehensive and ongoing ICT and online platform (e.g., Moodle) training through workshops, tutorials, and resources. Teachers also require continuous digital literacy development to master new online education tools, and should create user-friendly tutorials for students on all platforms utilized in the BL environment. By addressing these pedagogical implications, stakeholders can work collaboratively to create a more supportive and effective BL environment that meets the diverse needs of EFL students and maximizes their learning potential.

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