

'I Couldn't Join the Session': Benefits and Challenges of Blended Learning amid COVID-19 from EFL Students

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Received: June 17, 2020 Accepted: July 19, 2020 Online Published: July 22, 2020

doi:10.5539/ijel.v10n5p221 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v10n5p221>

Abstract

COVID-19 has changed the process of teaching considerably, as educational institutions around the world moved to adopt blended learning initiatives to ensure continuity, while managing the spread of this infectious disease. All Saudi Arabia's universities have continued to deliver courses via digital platforms. This study draws on traditional views about blended learning (Sharma, 2010) and examines the pedagogical changes to English courses implemented at King Saud University following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to explore the benefits and challenges of blended learning during the spread of COVID-19 from the perspective of English as a foreign language (EFL) student. Qualitative data were collected from two focus group sessions, and one-to-one interviews with twelve students taking a general intensive English course at King Saud University over a six-week period. The results reveal that blended learning benefited the EFL students by supporting their writing skills and encouraging them to search online, as well as by matching their circumstances and being economical. It also identifies that the challenges EFL students faced included technological problems, flaws in the instructor's performance, difficulties with online tests, attitudes to online learning and limited resources, and the university council's decisions. The paper concludes with recommendations to exploit the benefits identified, and overcome the challenges of blended learning when teaching English in an EFL context.

Keywords: benefits, Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, blended learning, challenges, COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia, EFL students

1. Introduction

COVID-19 is a contagious disease that has spread around the world and affected various aspects of daily life. This disease, also known as coronavirus, was classified as a pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (2020). The affected countries, including Saudi Arabia, reacted to contain the spread of the infectious virus by introducing either partial or total lockdown of the population. Consequently, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia suspended face-to-face teaching and ordered educational institutions to continue educating students via digital platforms (Al Thaqafi, 2020). Universities and schools in Saudi Arabia rapidly adopted virtual classroom teaching, and have been delivering education online since 9th March 2020. Students at King Saud University (as did all university students in Saudi Arabia) completed their final assessments on time as planned at the end of April 2020. However, at the beginning of the process of implementing learning via online platforms Obaid (2020) raised concerns regarding the potential challenges facing Saudi students, cautioning:

The name of international virtual learning platform Blackboard Learn has been trending on Saudi Twitter over the past couple of days. Many university students have complained about poor Internet connection in their area, problems logging on to the platform and accessing lectures, and the lack of ability to upload assignments or even understand their instructors.

Thus, this study aims to investigate the benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning methods to deliver English courses, in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context, at King Saud University during the COVID-19 crisis.

1.1 Significance of the Study

This research is thought to be one of the first to explore the use of blended learning in an EFL context during the

coronavirus pandemic. It is also a response to the call made by Al-Qahtani (2019) to research the perceptions of Saudi students regarding receiving virtual EFL classes. It illuminates EFL students' views of the benefits and challenges they experienced when accessing virtual classes and using other elements of blended learning. Being aware of and understanding these benefits and challenges might assist policy makers, instructors, and senior people in educational institutions in Saudi Arabia and other countries to produce rules and make decisions to effectively organize the process of blended learning to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

1.2 Research Questions

The current research answers the following questions:

- 1) What are the benefits of implementing blended learning in English courses amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) What are the challenges of implementing blended learning in English courses amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Blended Learning

Blended learning pedagogies have been used by scholars for language teaching for several decades. According to Sharma (2010), the concept of blended learning was first introduced around 1990 in relation to language teaching when it was given three definitions: "a combination of face-to-face and online teaching, a combination of the technologies and a combination of methodologies" (ibid, p. 456). He asserted that the first definition is the classic view of blended learning, wherein traditional face-to-face language teaching classes are combined with sessions delivering additional supplementary course materials via online platforms. The course materials used in virtual classes variously comprise synchronous and asynchronous tools, chats, discussion blogs and are accessed via a virtual management system such as Blackboard. The second definition refers to courses in which no direct face-to-face interaction takes place between the instructor and the students, as teaching is delivered in distant learning settings, via emails and virtual classes online. This definition included e-learning, a purely distant learning format in which instructors never meet their students in the physical world. Sometimes, the label 'e-learning' is used as a synonym when referring to blended learning (Ja'ashan, 2020). The third definition proposed by Sharma (2010) is broad and refers to a combination of pedagogic methods that involve diverse technologies.

The classic view of blended learning pedagogy is shared by many EFL scholars (Al Bataineh, Banikalef, & Albashtawi, 2019; Alsowayegh, Bardesi, Garba, & Sipra, 2019; Bukhari & Basaffar, 2019; Gulnaz, Althomali, & Alzeer, 2020). These scholars view blended learning as describing situations in which students meet their instructors in a face-to-face setting as well as engaging in activities posted online, such as online test, tasks and assignments. According to this definition, online activities are supplementary to face-to-face teaching and do not include synchronous virtual classes.

More recently, Alowedi (2020) outlined a classic approach to blended learning but included synchronous virtual classes. She opined that blended learning combines a variety of methods including face-to-face teaching in the classroom, teaching synchronous lessons via virtual classroom spaces in which the instructor meets her students in real time, and having English learning materials uploaded to a Learning Management System (LMS) such as Blackboard. Virtual classes can then be recorded and subsequently posted on the LMS as part of the EFL course materials to be viewed as asynchronous classes.

In this paper, the term blended learning is used to refer to the type of learning implemented to deliver English courses at King Saud University, involving synchronous virtual classes and online tests via digital platforms, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also refers to the use of English learning materials as related to the required textbooks uploaded on Blackboard to supplement students' learning and achievement. It is important to emphasise that instructors and students had met in person before the spread of coronavirus, and so had experienced seven weeks of face-to-face teaching, during which time using Blackboard as part of the English course was not obligatory. After face-to-face teaching was withdrawn on 9th March 2020, the instructors and students met in real time in virtual classes on digital platforms until the end of the academic year. All enrolled students were directed to use the official LMS offered by King Saud University, which is Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. The students were also invited to use licensed digital platforms technically supported by King Saud University.

2.1.1 Blended Learning in the EFL Context

This section reviews seven recent studies addressing the use of blended learning with university students in EFL contexts. These studies drew on quantitative measures, experimental, mixed methods or quasi-experimental

research designs to explore the effectiveness of blended learning on improving English language skills, or to elicit the views of EFL students regarding the influence of blended learning. These studies are discussed in detail below.

Initially, Al Bataineh et al. (2019) drew on a mixed methods approach to elicit the views of students who used Moodle at Irbid National University. They investigated the effects on the grammar performance of EFL Jordanian students when using blended learning, as well as exploring the views of the students themselves. They drew on a quasi-experimental design, in which students were pre and post tested. Their study involved 28 students divided into two groups: 15 students in the control group and 13 students in the blended learning group. The students in the blended learning group completed structured interviews. The study revealed that the post test results of the students in the blended learning group were higher than the post test results of the students in the control group. The researchers found that blended learning offered EFL students a flexible setting, easy access to learning materials through smartphone and portable devices, assisted them in understanding grammatical rules, and attracted their attention. Blended learning provided options for immediate feedback, and the students preferred online assessment to traditional methods. Blended learning also encouraged interactions between the students themselves and their instructors. Blended learning improved the students' digital skills and they also benefitted from accessing English language learning materials from websites.

Mixed methods was also used by Bukhari and Basaffar (2019) when targeting students at King Abdulaziz University, although the authors did not mention the name of the e-learning platform. They investigated the effectiveness of integrating blended learning in intensive English courses on motivation, interaction and autonomy among female EFL students. They collected the perceptions of 120 students and their mixed methods consisted of a questionnaire containing closed-ended and open-ended questions. They found that incorporating blended learning in intensive English courses was flexible, convenient, and provided an interactive educational setting. They also observed that blended learning boosted the students' motivation, increased their confidence to practice English online, and assisted them to become independent learners, enhancing teacher-students interaction. Their study revealed that the students' English level and their computer competency did not affect their perceptions, and that students advised the use of blended learning when physical attendance proved impossible.

Similarly, Alowedi (2020) used mixed methods comprising a questionnaire containing open and closed ended questions in research targeting students at Saudi Electronic University (SEU). She carried out a study to describe the process of incorporating blended learning in specialized English courses, and to explore the perceptions of EFL students regarding their experiences. Her study employed 63 students majoring in the English and translation department, and used Blackboard as a platform. She found that in general, the attitudes of EFL students towards using virtual classes for specialized English courses were positive. She revealed that students were confident in using the technology, were pleased with their teacher's performance, satisfied with the technical support provided by SEU and preferred taking virtual classes. She lists the reasons students found it motivating to attend virtual classes; i.e., the teachers' interaction, ability to record lectures and watch them when needed, ability to monitor the current situation, and that the discussion board and online chat functions provided them with opportunities to learn and practice the language.

In a study conducted at King Abdulaziz University, Alsowayegh et al. (2019) used experimental research methods. They explored the effects of using blended learning via Blackboard to supplement EFL students' listening and speaking skills. They involved 38 students from the Foundation Year and these students were divided into two groups: a control group consisting of 20 students and a blended learning group consisting of 18 students. All the students had placement tests before engaging in their foundation year, their English level was A1, and they were required to take a final test as part of their academic assessment for the listening and speaking course. Students in the blended learning group were asked to fill in a questionnaire. The study found that students in the blended learning group scored higher than the students in the control group in the final test, and that blended learning enhanced the students' listening and speaking skills. They found that the students were motivated by the teacher's recommendations regarding suitable websites to consult to learn English, demonstrating the teacher's role in providing assistance to improve listening and speaking skills, and outlining how teachers used their students' online activities to provide appropriate feedback in the face-to-face environment. Their study also revealed that blended learning activities support self-paced student progress.

The pros and cons of blended learning were explored by Hamad (2017), who targeted students at King Khalid University. She investigated the pros and cons of blended learning via Blackboard and aligned her evidence with EFL students' outcomes. Her participants were 22 students majoring in the English department, and she asked them to complete a questionnaire regarding their views on the effectiveness of blended learning relative to their

performance in English. She also employed two types of tests: online and paper based. She found that the scores when the students took the online tests outperformed those on the paper test. She also found that blended learning assisted students in obtaining lesson materials more readily, learning from the mistakes of their peers in online discussions, and found content delivery appropriate to their learning styles. She pointed out that blended learning allowed students to feel secure and dependent and the majority were pleased with the feedback they received from the online tests.

A similar study was conducted by Ja'ashan (2020), who targeted students and teachers at Bisha University. He explored the challenges and prospects of blended learning, as viewed by students and teachers. He used the label 'e-learning' as a synonym with blended learning, to refer to a course that combines traditional in-class teaching with an online platform where an instructor uploads learning material. His study employed two questionnaires to collect the views of 36 teachers and 261 students taking an English course in the English department. He found that the time required for the exams and assignments was insufficient, and the digital platform resulted in problems accessing course content, and students were pleased with the automatized correction of their online tests and happy with the feedback they received online. The students were also generally satisfied with the course content as they were able to have constant access to the materials. However, he found that students struggled with their home internet access and were dissatisfied with the software at home. He also found that the speaking skill did not improve with the implementation of blended learning.

The views of teachers and students were also explored by Gulnaz et al. (2020), who targeted participants at Taif University. They explored the positive and negative impacts of blended learning on the educational process, as viewed by teachers and students who used the Cambridge Learning Management System. They employed 200 EFL students (100 males and 100 females) and 8 teachers. The EFL students completed a questionnaire and 8 teachers participated in a structured interview. They found that blended learning activities improved interactions between the students and the teacher, offered more flexible learning opportunities, improved the students' language skills, increased their confidence, and motivated them to log in to other social media accounts. They also found that the students reported experiencing technical problems when their system had not updated.

All previous studies were conducted with students at university level in an EFL context in Saudi Arabia using questionnaires, except for that of Al Bataineh et al. (2019), who used structured interviews with learners in Jordan. The current study drew on qualitative methods being: focus group and individual interviews. Participants in the previous studies employed blended learning via a single platform. For example, Blackboard was used by Alsowayegh et al. (2019), Alowedi (2020) and Hamad (2017), whereas Moodle was used by Al Bataineh et al. (2019) and the Cambridge Learning Management System was used by Gulnaz et al. (2020), and the two studies did not mention the name of the platform (Bukhari & Basaffar, 2019; Ja'ashan, 2020). However, the participants in the current study used two platforms Blackboard Collaborate Ultra and Zoom, and five reported the use of Microsoft Teams once. The data in these studies were collected in a normal academic term and the data in the current study were collected with students who spent half the academic year enjoying a normal life and the other half struggling with the impact of the coronavirus crisis.

3. Methodology

This study drew on qualitative research methods, using focus group interviews and individual interviews as "individual interviews and focus groups can give a more in-depth understanding on how learners perceive integrating BL in their curriculum" (Bukhari & Basaffar, 2019, p. 203). The application of two qualitative methods aligned with the aim of the study and assisted the researcher to attain a thorough understanding of the benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning on an English course during COVID-19, from the point of view of EFL student.

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were twelve students attending an intensive English course in level 1 or in level 2 during COVID -19 pandemic at College of Applied Studies and Community Service at King Saud University. All participants had seven weeks of face-to-face teaching, and 7 weeks of virtual synchronous classes in an intensive English course at level 1 or level 2, and they were required to meet for nine hours each week. The participants were recruited by asking an EFL instructor to send a WhatsApp message to one of her students inviting her to participate after the end of the academic year 2019—2020, and requesting that she invite her classmates. The researcher was aware of research ethics and that participants have the right to know the aim and topic of any research, the methods used, the duration of the data collection, confidentiality, anonymity and that they can withdraw from the research at any time (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Thus, the WhatsApp message included the previous information and the name of the researcher with her mobile

number. The participants then contacted the researcher via WhatsApp to volunteer, and the researcher presented herself to these participants, answering queries about the topic and asking them if they had taken an intensive English course during COVID-19. Those potential participants who had not taken an intensive English course during the COVID-19 pandemic were then removed from the sample. The researcher protected the identities of the participants and invited them to choose pseudonyms.

3.2 Sampling Procedure

This study used 'snowball sampling' (Dörnyei, 2007; Morgan, 2008) whereby the researcher asks one participant to invite others who share the required characteristics. The first participant Noura, had taken an intensive English course during COVID-19 and so invited her classmates to participate in the study.

3.3 Data Collection

Focus groups and individual interviews were used to collect data over a six-week period starting mid-May 2020. A focus group was used "to bring forth different viewpoints on an issue" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 82) and the individual interview method was appropriate to the aim of the study. It is important to clarify that data were collected during the partial lockdown imposed in Riyadh to contain COVID-19, and during a period where two meters social distancing was required, making conducting face-to-face focus group and interviews impossible. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in synchrony, and in text form, and are referred to as online interviews (Cohen et al., 2018). The researcher asked the participants their preferred way to conduct the focus group and individual interviews, and they chose WhatsApp. The researcher also asked them about the language they preferred to use, and they chose Arabic. Two focus group sessions were conducted with the WhatsApp group, and each session had 6 participants, while the individual interviews were conducted separately via WhatsApp with twelve participants.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data in this study were analyzed drawing on qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2016) and content analysis techniques (Cohen et al., 2018). These analysis approaches are assisted by ATLAS.ti; a computer package for processing qualitative data (Friese, 2014). ATLAS.ti offers the ability to attach a code to text segments, add notes to those segments, link codes and provided a visual network of codes to enable the researcher to create themes. Answers to research questions were created from these themes. Themes were generated after interpreting the data and applying Saldaña's (2016) techniques for creating them.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the study results and discusses them with respect to the research questions and previous literature.

4.1 Research Question 1: What Are the Benefits of Implementing Blended Learning in English Courses amid the COVID-19 Pandemic?

The data analysis suggests that implementing blended learning in English courses benefited EFL students by: 1) supporting their writing skills, 2) encouraging them to search online, 3) matching their circumstances, and 4) being economic financially.

Implementing blended learning benefited EFL students by supporting their writing skills. The students had more writing opportunities than in the traditional classroom, and the online tests compelled them to use accurate English. Many participants reported that they write in English in the chat box during the virtual classes for two reasons: 1) to answer in writing when the instructor demands an answer in text form, or when their mic does not work, and 2) to communicate that they are having a sound problem. Cottoncandy illustrated that she writes in English in the chat box because her mic does not always work properly, stating that she does so to inform others about this technical problem and to answer questions raised by the instructor. She emphasized that she ensures that her spelling and grammar is accurate, as all her classmates can see from her writing. Maram commented; "I write in the online class more than I used to in the face-to-face classes" as her instructor demands their answers are written in the chat box. In focus group (1), Maram said; "the instructor makes us compete. The fastest in answering in the chat box gets the mark". Taking tests online compelled the students to pay attention to using accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation, because tests on Blackboard automatically correct the answers and show the marks at the end when the test is complete. During focus group (1), Eithar explained that she pays more attention when answering tests online to using correct spelling and grammar. Maram agreed with Eithar and explained that electronic online correction marks the answer as wrong if a small letter is used instead of a capital letter. Razan added that she puts extra effort into memorizing accurate spelling before tests, and does not expend the same effort when preparing for traditional tests. This is evidence that the chat boxes, one of the components

of virtual classrooms on Blackboard, were used in a creative way by EFL students to practice their writing skills. It also proves that online tests have had a positive impact on improving the students' punctuation, spelling and grammar skills. This result adds to the string of findings that blended learning supports EFL students' language skills (Al Bataineh et al., 2019; Alsowayegh et al., 2019; Bukhari & Basaffar, 2019; Gulnaz et al., 2020) and the finding of Al-Qahtani (2019) who reported that virtual classes enhanced the language learners' communicative skills. This result also corresponds with the result from Alowedi (2020), who found that blended learning provides additional learning opportunities to EFL students.

Encouraging EFL students to search online for information was another benefit noted. Lavender reported that learning via online platforms encouraged her self-reliance and commitment to searching for desirable information. Maram, from focus group (1), reported that taking English courses online inspired her to search using google to find the content of the English lessons before the class. She explained that she studies the lesson before class and immediately after class she searches YouTube for English learning materials to assist her in understanding what she covered during the English class. Apparently, the environment of blended learning, i.e. a platform accessed via an internet connection, encourages students to exploit the potential of other websites to improve their English language proficiency and stimulates them to search for learning materials to fulfil their academic aims. Similar results were found by Alsowayegh et al. (2019) who reported that students were motivated to search other social media accounts, and was also found by Al Bataineh et al. (2019) who reported that blended learning improved students' digital skills. This result was also confirmed by other researchers (Bukhari & Basaffar, 2019; Hamad, 2017) who found that students were motivated to learn independently.

Implementation of blended learning to deliver English classes fitted well with students' circumstances. The classes were not restricted to a specific place or platform, and access was flexible in terms of time. Moreover, it was the only way for students to continue their formal education in view of the social distancing measures imposed to contain the spread of coronavirus. The participants in focus group (1) explained that blended learning benefitted those with family responsibilities, such as child care, as they could learn from wherever they were, while also fulfilling their obligations. The participants in focus group (2) illustrated that blended learning gave the students an equal opportunity to attend via three different platforms: Blackboard virtual classes, meetings on Zoom and meetings on Microsoft Teams. Razan reported that her instructor uses meetings on Zoom and Blackboard virtual classes simultaneously and asks students who cannot join the virtual classes on Blackboard to click on a link to join the meeting on Zoom. Lavender reported that meeting on Zoom is better than the Blackboard virtual classes in terms of sound and picture quality. Many participants reported that the times set for classes were flexible, and that they could change the lecture time freely without any negative consequences. These results reveal that blended learning offers the potential to tailor the process of language learning to meet students' needs and individual situations. These findings are in agreement with those of previous studies (Al Bataineh et al., 2019; Alowedi, 2020; Alsowayegh et al., 2019; Altunay, 2019; Bukhari & Basaffar, 2019; Hamad, 2017; Ja'ashan, 2020), which asserted that blended learning offers a flexible setting for learning English and is appropriate to the students' learning styles.

Participating in blended learning English classes is more financially viable for students than attending face-to-face ones. Participants explained that virtual classes were economical for them in terms of both time and expenses. Cottoncandy reported that she had previously spent three hours commuting to university and that attending online classes saved her time. The yellow girl reported a similar benefit. She mentioned that going to university costs a lot as she lives far away from it and so attending online saved her money. Maram reported that offering online classes could reduce the traffic congestion and that only a device is needed to attend classes, there is no need to attend wearing fashionable clothes and make up. It appears that using blended learning benefitted the students who formerly spent considerable time commuting to the campus and saved them the associated expenses. This finding accords with Sharma (2010) who stated that "[blended learning] was in part adopted as a cost-saving measure" (ibid., p.456) and supports the result of Hamad (2017) which states that blended learning is economical.

4.2 Research Question 2: What Are the Challenges of Implementing Blended Learning in English Courses amid the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Analysis of data suggests that the EFL students who participated in this research encountered challenges related to: 1) technological problems, 2) instructor's performance, 3) online tests, 4) the attitudes and limited resources of students, and 5) the university council's decisions.

The first challenge was related to the technical problems that arise when implementing blended learning. The devices students had available to access the virtual class session were not necessarily compatible with

Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, the platform hosting the session. For example, Renad stated: “problems come more when I use desktop computer, I cannot use the mic and I could use it with iPhone”. A similar compatibility issue occurred between the device used and the online test hosted by Blackboard, as was reported by participants. Cottoncandy, in focus group (1), mentioned that the tests on Blackboard could not be accessed by smartphone and a desktop computer is required. In addition, compatibility issues related to devices led to problems when attending the virtual session on Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. These problems included absence of sound, intermittent session access, as well as students’ inability to join the session. Participants in focus group (1) reported that sound problems were recurrent, and ranged between having no sound when refreshing the page, noise when more than one student opens her mic and bad sound quality. The participants explained that they muted their mics during the session and unmuted their mics to participate. Razan said; “Blackboard kicks me out of the session if I open my mic for more than five minutes”. The majority of the participants reported difficulties attending sessions on Blackboard Collaborate Ultra held in the morning; i.e., between 8 am and 2pm. This finding contradicts a study by Gulnaz et al. (2020) which reported that EFL students at Taif University had no problems logging on to the platform hosting their blended learning, and a study by Alsowayegh et al. (2019) who stated that no technical problems were reported when logging on to platforms. However, it confirms evidence reported by Ja’ashan (2020), who mentioned problems accessing content online and Altunay (2019) who mentioned technical problems when using distant learning. During the COVID-19 crisis, all colleges at King Saud University have moved to virtual synchronous classes and technical problems related to Blackboard could be attributable to the large volume of users accessing virtual synchronous classes on Blackboard Collaborate Ultra simultaneously.

Besides these technical problems, the instructor’s performance was numbered among the challenges. The participants reported that some instructors were not cooperative, changing the time of the class without prior notice, and not coordinating with other instructors, thereby overwhelming their students with assignments. Maram stated; “I woke up at 7 am and discovered that the class time is changed to 7 pm. She even gave us more homework”. Wafa reported a similar challenge arising because of the spread of the class timetable throughout the entire day; in particular emphasizing that instructors did not appear to know the class times and test dates set by other instructors. The participants reported that some instructors were not adequately trained to use the technology associated with virtual classes. Renad reported that her instructor uses PowerPoint presentations when explaining grammar in the face-to-face classes, and did not know how to do the same in the virtual settings. Renad also had to attend a class listening to the instructor’s voice explaining grammar because the instructor did not know how to share her screen with them via the session provided by Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. Maram and Razan also reported a similar problem in focus group (1). Maram said:

[T]he instructor was not skillful in using technology and we couldn’t hear any sound once, because the instructor’s mic was muted, and we couldn’t see the presentation because she did not know how!

Razan added to Maram’s response saying, “+ our instructor”. Managing class time was another problem associated with instructors. Many of the participants highlighted that instructors spent more time in virtual classrooms as compared to traditional classrooms. Razan reported that English classes used to take 90 minutes and with virtual classes this increased to 3 hours. Razan went on to stress that this was largely due to other students repeatedly asking the instructor for further explanations. Another problem related to the instructors’ performance was their inability to recognize the voices of some participants, meaning they could not identify which of their students was speaking. M.M. explained that her instructor did not recognize her voice and the voices of the other students and had to ask them to provide their names before participating in virtual classes. The instructor’s performance during the synchronous virtual classes undoubtedly impeded the effectiveness of blended learning during coronavirus crisis. The evidence suggests instructors’ need to improve their coordination with other instructors, their digital skills and their teaching methodologies to fit the online environment. This result contradicts results presented by Alowedi (2020), who claimed EFL students were pleased with their teachers’ performance.

The third challenge concerned the online tests administered via Blackboard. Many participants reported that online tests via Blackboard were affected negatively by two issues: the limited time allowed for the test and their inability to resume the test when their internet connection is weak or shuts down. The participants in focus group (1) reported that the time of the test was short and was restricted to a limited time frame, which ran out before they could answer all the questions, and so they lost marks. Some of the participants reported that when their internet connection is lost, they could not return to the test and there was a deduction against their test marks when this occurred. Norah, in focus group (2), mentioned that her mother unplugged the Wi-Fi device in her home, and as a result she received zero out of five in her online test. It appears that the content of the online test

did not present a challenge but the way it was administered to the EFL students was a barrier to success, and this may have negatively influenced on the students' performance overall. This result contradicts previous studies (Al Bataineh et al., 2019; Hamad, 2017; Ja'ashan, 2020), which found that EFL students preferred online tests and were pleased with the relatively rapid correction of the test and how they received their grades. However, the finding regarding having a limited time to complete online tests accords with that of Ja'ashan (2020), who cautioned that the time allocated for completion of online exams was insufficient.

The attitudes of EFL students were among the challenges identified. Some participants had negative attitudes about the value of using blended learning for English courses. Some of these negative attitudes were transient and only emerged at the beginning of the process of using virtual classes in English. For example, Ragad explained in focus group (1) that she was skeptical at the beginning regarding the effectiveness of taking classes without going to the university, but changed her mind after experiencing the process. Maram and Razan agreed with Ragad, and added that they became increasingly anxious as the assignment load accumulated. M.M. reported a similar feeling and explained that this was her first experience of attending virtual classes, and that she associated this type of learning with coronavirus and social distancing measures. Ebtisam clarified that she was intimidated initially by the idea of moving online, as she did not have the required skills to use technology for learning. Ashwag stated that she had negative attitudes at the beginning because she was not prepared mentally and physically. However, not all negative attitudes were temporary; other participants sustained their negative attitudes throughout the period of course delivery. All the participants in focus group (2) reported that face-to-face teaching is better than attending virtual classes. They cited the absence of the eye contact between themselves and the instructor as the main reason for their preference for face-to-face teaching. It seems that non-verbal language was essential to the process of learning for this group of participants. Ashwaq illustrated that she did not feel confident when she had her speaking assessment because the feedback she received was not thorough. Wafa expressed that she did not feel comfortable attending virtual classes. Razan and Cottoncandy reported a similar attitude with regard to focus group (1). Razan clarified that attending virtual classes requires more effort, while Cottoncandy stressed that she got distracted easily. These findings could relate to other factors influencing the students at the time; e.g., insecurity arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the discomfort associated with the total lockdown imposed in Riyadh as part of the precautionary measures to contain the spread of coronavirus. The findings relating to the students' preference for traditional face-to-face classes are in agreement with results reported by Al Bataineh et al. (2019), Altunay (2019), Harb and Krish (2020) and Hamad (2017) who claimed students preferred traditional classes, contradicting Alowedi's (2020) finding that students prefer virtual online classes. The evidence that suggests the students did not feel confident or comfortable with blended learning contradicts previous studies (Alowedi, 2020; Gulnaz et al., 2020) that reported EFL students were secure and confident when using blended learning tools.

A further challenge mentioned were the students' limited resources. The participants illustrated that their resources for learning online was limited, as some did not own a computer, had a poor internet connection and were required not to leave their houses due to the 24-hour lockdown imposed in Riyadh. M.M. explained that she does not own a computer and had to attend classes via her smartphone. The yellow girl stated; "I live in a new area in Riyadh with poor intermittent internet coverage" and due to the 24-hour lockdown period she could not attend some of her virtual classes, because she could no longer visit her grandmother's house to access a strong internet connection. Either explained that her computer was broken during the 24-hour lockdown and so she could not go out to fix it, and accordingly she lost marks in her online test because it was not compatible with her smartphone. This indicates that the students limited resources negatively affected their access to blended learning and presented a challenge. The finding stating that students limited resources and not owning computers can present a challenge is in agreement with result reported by Altunay (2019), who stated that students who did not have a computer were unable to attend all virtual classes from their houses and attended some virtual classes in the laboratories at campus. The finding that poor internet connection can be a significant barrier is in line with previous research. For example, Altunay (2019), Hamad (2017) and Ja'ashan (2020) found that their students complained about having internet connection problems.

The last challenge identified related to the university council's decisions as issued during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the participants were displeased with two decisions in particular: (1) that attendance at virtual classes is not obligatory, and (2) that the G.P.A of all university students in level 1 will not be included in their academic transcription. The participants claimed that making attendance optional does not motivate engagement with learning. Moreover, the participants in level 1 regarded the second decision as unfair as they undertook great efforts to attend all classes to get high marks. Nevertheless, those who actively engaged in classes and submitted their assignments on time were treated the same as other students who expended little

effort. Razan in focus group (1) reported that some students in level 1 failed to attend the virtual classes and shared a story about her two colleagues. The first colleague asked one of her relatives to attend the English virtual class on her behalf and pretend to have a technical problem when the instructor asked a direct question; this colleague even went on to brag about having her relative answer a question by writing in the chat box. The second colleague joined the virtual class and muted her computer and then went back to sleep. Razan said:

Why do I have to accept an NP [no grade pass] just like everyone else? I took 99 out of 100 and I am treated as a student who took 60! This is not fair!

This indicates that the process of blended learning itself was not a challenge, but the rules governing the process of academic learning when blended learning was implemented during the coronavirus crisis did.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the benefits and challenges that EFL students encountered when blended learning was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, from the students' perspective. Blended learning in English courses in the form of virtual synchronous classes, online tests and learning materials posted on Blackboard benefited EFL students by supporting their writing skills, and encouraging them to search more widely online, as well as matching their circumstances and being more economical than attending traditional face-to-face classes. The challenges that EFL students encountered included: technological problems, instructor's performance, online tests, individual attitudinal issues and limited resources, and the university council's decisions.

Understanding both the benefits and challenges could assist policy makers and instructors in making practical decisions in future to effectively improve the implementation of blended learning in university English courses and other courses.

Based on the benefits identified, offering synchronous lectures in English courses is advised. However, policy makers should provide clear guidelines for all educational organizations to follow. The general principle is that synchronous classes should not exceed 25% of the total designated time for each English course, and no longer than an hour is required for each meeting. It is also advised that instructors and policy makers outline how to use virtual synchronous classes in emergency cases, and explain this to students at the beginning of each course. This could benefit the teaching process when physical attendance to university is suspended due to severe weather warnings or other emergencies.

Based on the challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1) The problems associated with instructors' performance could be resolved by providing training workshops hosted by language teaching professionals specialized in blended learning techniques and methods.
- 2) The two problems associated with online tests on Blackboard were losing marks when internet connections shut down and the restrictions on test time could also be eliminated. These two problems were attributed to measures followed by instructors to prevent cheating when administering tests via Blackboard. The students answer the online test away from the classroom, and instructors attempt to prevent cheating by enabling certain features of Blackboard tests. Instructors determine the settings of their tests by selecting the 'force completion' feature and by setting a specific time frame in which to perform the test. Students, as found in the current study, do not have a stable internet connection and when the internet becomes weak or shuts down, Blackboard ends the test by force and corrects the test automatically. Instructors could resolve this problem by not choosing the force completion feature offered in Blackboard. The students in this study could not finish the online test in the time limit set by the instructor, and this could be resolved simply by allocating more time to complete the test.
- 3) The problem of an intermittent internet connection could be resolved by offering asynchronous classes. The participants in this study attended synchronous classes, which are virtual and live, taking place in real time. Synchronous classes could be recorded and uploaded to Blackboard as asynchronous classes to give students with internet connection problems, and other students, a chance to view (review) the lectures and pause them to suit their individual needs.
- 4) The negative attitudes of EFL students could be addressed by providing workshops to equip them with the requisite skills to enable them to use technology in a virtual classroom, and to raise their awareness of the technical support available at their educational institution.

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