



The Impact of Blended and Virtual Learning on Willingness to Communicate and Oral Proficiency in Iraqi EFL Learners: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

This study investigated how blended learning (BL) and virtual learning (VL) impacted Iraqi EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) and their oral proficiency. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, researchers involved 120 students from Karbala University, who were randomly assigned to face-to-face, virtual, and blended learning groups. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-tests, while qualitative insights were gathered from semi-structured interviews with EFL instructors. Findings revealed that both BL and VL significantly enhanced learners' WTC, with no notable differences between the two methods. However, BL demonstrated greater effectiveness in improving oral proficiency compared to VL. The Iraqi EFL teachers generally expressed positive views toward both teaching methods, with a preference for blended learning. The study concluded that while both approaches offered valuable benefits for EFL instruction, the blended learning emerged as a particularly effective method by combining the strengths of virtual and face-to-face teaching. These results could provide insights for developing effective EFL teaching strategies that utilize various learning modalities.

Keywords: blended learning, EFL, oral proficiency, virtual learning, willingness to communicate (WTC), Iraqi EFL Learners

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Introduction

The landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has undergone significant transformations in recent years, particularly with the integration of technology and the emergence of various instructional modalities (Carter & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Kubota, 2016). This study examines the effectiveness of virtual learning (VL) and blended learning (BL) approaches compared to traditional face-to-face instruction for Iraqi EFL learners, focusing on three key aspects of language learning: vocabulary development, willingness to communicate (WTC), and oral proficiency.

Virtual learning has become increasingly popular as a flexible and accessible substitute for traditional classroom education (Okuto, 2023). This mode of learning allows students to engage with materials at their own speed and take advantage of multimedia tools for interactive experiences (Bahiyah, 2023). Studies suggest that virtual learning can improve vocabulary acquisition by offering a variety of linguistic input and practice opportunities (Hampel, 2010). On the flip side, however, it can also present challenges such as a possible decline in motivation and engagement due to the absence of face-to-face interactions (Singh et al., 2021).

In contrast, in-person learning could be argued to be a foundational component of language instruction, providing direct engagement between educators and students (Singh et al., 2021). This format could promote a nurturing environment for communication, enabling learners to practice speaking and listening skills (Navarrete Piguave & Reyes Borbor, 2023). The social interactions in a traditional classroom can play a significant role in boosting students' willingness to communicate, as immediate feedback and support from both peers and instructors, can foster confidence and motivation (Zhang et al., 2018). Nonetheless, conventional face-to-face methods may not fully address the diverse learning styles and requirements of every student (Lee & Liu, 2024).

Blended learning, which merges aspects of both virtual and in-person instruction, has surfaced as a valuable strategy for EFL education (Wright, 2017). This approach capitalizes on the advantages of traditional and digital learning environments, offering a customized and adaptable educational experience (Alamri et al., 2021). Blended learning promotes vocabulary development through a range of teaching methods and resources while also enhancing oral skills by encouraging interaction in both online and offline environments (Wichadee, 2017). Additionally, the incorporation of technology in blended learning environments can improve students' willingness to communicate by providing platforms that encourage collaboration and peer engagement (Al-Samarraie & Saeed, 2018).

As the demand for English proficiency in Iraq continues to grow, driven by globalization and the need for international communication, there is a pressing need to explore innovative approaches to EFL instruction that can enhance learning outcomes (Kadhim & Kamil, 2024). Traditional teaching methods have often been inadequate in meeting the diverse needs of learners, prompting interest in alternative modalities (Bahiyah, 2023; Okuto, 2023).

Furthermore, the research explores the effects of blended and virtual learning on learners' willingness to communicate and oral proficiency development. The social dynamics of face-to-face learning can influence learners' WTC (Zhang et al., 2018), while the integration of technology in blended learning can enhance learners' willingness to communicate by providing platforms for collaboration and peer interaction (Al-Samarraie & Saeed, 2018).

Additionally, the study seeks to investigate the attitudes and acceptance of Iraqi EFL teachers towards virtual and blended learning contexts. As Blignaut and Els (2010) state, teachers should adopt a 'life-long-learning' attitude to have full engagement with ICT-rich education, and an open attitude is required for the acceptance of technology (Van der Spoel et al., 2020).

By investigating these aspects, the study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of different instructional modalities in the context of Iraqi EFL education. Understanding how virtual and blended learning environments could impact vocabulary knowledge, willingness to communicate, and oral proficiency can inform the design of more effective language programs (Alamri et al., 2021; Wright, 2017). The findings of this research could possibly address a gap in the literature regarding the efficacy of online and blended language teaching courses compared to traditional face-to-face instruction in Iraq, potentially influencing educational practices, curriculum development, and policy-making in EFL education in the region.

Literature Review

In recent years, higher education institutions have experienced a substantial evolution and are facing novel challenges related to the role and integration of technology in academic settings (Altbach et al., 2010). Enhancements such as the adoption of virtual reality and the integration of blockchain technology are but a few examples emblematic of this transformative revolution. A notable example lies in the immersive capabilities of virtual reality (VR), which have been harnessed for diverse applications such as entertainment, vocational training, and education (Chen & Hsu, 2020; Martín-Gutierrez et al., 2017; Vesisenaho et al., 2019). Virtual Reality (VR) has the potential to support language learners through the provision of immersive contextualization derived from simulated environments, as well as the enhancement of meaning-form connections through the use of multiple sensory inputs. Additionally, it has the potential to enhance the learner's autonomy as suggested by Tseng et al. (2020).

Online education seems to have been increasingly embraced by educational institutes and students because of the various advantages it enjoys. It is not location-bound and can offer the opportunities to the individuals seeking to receive the high-quality education, those who may not have access otherwise (Baranik et al., 2017). The main benefits of virtual classes are their interaction, assistance, and flexibility for the learners who have restricted mobility or lack of educational resources (Arbaugh, 2000). These environments have video conferencing technology that provides face-to-face communication (Manegre & Sabiri, 2022).

Language learners who learn online may experience interruptions from poor internet connections or failing programs. This can certainly be a negative experience for them. However, technological advancements are evolving to decrease these interruptions. While online language learning seems to be influential for L2/FL learning when looking at other subjects, many learners like to take simpler subjects online or through distance learning and take important or difficult subjects face to face (Smith Jaggars, 2014). This general viewpoint may change if more difficult subjects are taught through virtual classrooms where the teacher is more present, given that the course is appropriate to be taught online (Manegre & Sabiri, 2020). To make online language learning effective, it is essential to make sure that both students and teachers have acceptable internet connections, that the challenges are dealt with, and that the students and teachers are guided appropriately in the online courses (Manegre & Sabiri, 2022).

Blended learning seems to have shown promising effects on learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in various EFL contexts. Tran and Hoa (2024) found that blended learning substantially improved students' classroom engagement in IELTS orientation courses in Vietnam. This increased engagement suggests a potential positive impact on WTC, as students who are more engaged are likely to be more willing to communicate.

Ali et al. (2023) reported that blended learning had a positive impact on first-year Arab university students' oral production and improved students' engagement. While this study did not directly measure WTC, as the improvement in oral production and engagement could be closely related to WTC, the results might be interpreted to suggest a potential positive effect.

Kartal and Balçıkanlı (2018) explored the changes in Turkish EFL learners' reported willingness to communicate after conducting real-life tasks in a virtual world, which can be considered a form of blended learning. They found that using a virtual world had a positive effect on the reported WTC of participants compared to those who did not use it. These studies suggest that blended learning may have a positive effect on WTC among EFL learners, although more research specifically focused on Iraqi EFL learners is needed.

Virtual learning environments have shown potential in affecting learners' WTC. Lee and Liu (2024) investigated fluctuations in L2 WTC in an online class, finding that EFL learners' levels of L2 WTC are highly dynamic and influenced by various factors in the online environment. This suggests that virtual learning can indeed affect WTC, though the effect may be complex and multifaceted.

Rahimi and Fathi (2024) found that e-tandem, a form of virtual learning, significantly improved EFL learners' WTC compared to conventional classes. This could indicate that certain forms of virtual learning can have a positive effect on WTC. Alqarni (2021) reported higher levels of WTC in online learning contexts compared to face-to-face contexts among Saudi undergraduate EFL learners. This study seems to directly support the potential of virtual learning to positively affect WTC.

However, Al-Amrani and Harrington (2020) found that some aspects of online social contexts, including limited keyboard skills and lack of immediacy, had negative effects on learners' L2 WTC. This highlights the potential challenges of virtual learning in relation to WTC. Considering the above studies, one may conclude that virtual learning can affect WTC, but the effect may depend on various factors and the specific implementation of virtual learning.

There seems to be limited research directly comparing the effects of blended and virtual learning on WTC. However, some studies provide insights into the relative effectiveness of these approaches. Zhou (2023) compared e-tandem (a form of virtual learning) with conventional in-class speaking tasks and found that the e-tandem group outperformed the conventional group in terms of speaking skills and WTC. Although it did not directly compare blended and virtual learning, the results implicitly suggested that virtual learning could be more effective than traditional in-class methods.

Kartal and Balçikanlı (2018) found positive effects of a virtual world (which can be considered a form of blended learning) on WTC. This suggests that blended approaches incorporating virtual elements can be effective in improving WTC. More research is needed to directly compare the effects of blended and virtual learning on WTC, especially in the context of Iraqi EFL learners.

Regarding the relationship between blended learning and proficiency development in ELT contexts, some studies have shown positive effects. Teng and Zeng (2022) found that blended learning had a significant effect on the improvement of oral accuracy and fluency among Chinese middle school students learning English. Ali et al. (2023) reported that blended learning had a positive impact on first-year Arab university students' oral production. Ali et al.'s study could be considered particularly relevant to the present study as it was conducted in an Arab EFL context, which may have similarities to the Iraqi context. Alsowayegh et al. (2019) demonstrated positive effects of using blended learning activities in supporting the improvement of students' learning on listening and speaking at the elementary level. These studies suggest that blended learning can have some positive effects on oral proficiency development, although more research specific to Iraqi EFL learners is needed.

Research has shown mixed but generally positive effects of virtual learning on oral proficiency development. Hoang et al. (2023) found significant improvements in overall oral proficiency, including fluency, coherence, lexical resource, and pronunciation, after a virtual reality intervention with EFL students. Zhou (2023) also found that online language exchanges improved the speaking skills of Chinese postgraduate students in an advanced English program. However, some studies have highlighted challenges. Al-Amrani and Harrington (2020) noted that some aspects of online social contexts could negatively affect learners' communication.

As far as the issue of teachers and students' perspectives on virtual and blended learning is concerned, while there is limited research specifically on Iraqi

EFL teachers' attitudes, some studies provide insights in this regard. Van der Spoel et al. (2020) found that Dutch teachers' perceptions of using technology in their classes changed significantly after experiencing online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. This could suggest that teachers' attitudes can evolve with exposure to virtual learning environments.

Ebadi et al. (2020) investigated Iranian university students' attitudes toward a learning management system, finding generally positive perceptions. While this study focused on students, it could provide context for the acceptance of virtual learning platforms in a Middle Eastern setting. Kerimbayev et al. (2020) reported that teachers in Kazakhstan and Slovakia found that using a learning management system provided new ways and tools for instruction, suggesting positive attitudes toward virtual learning tools. Regarding blended learning, Ali et al. (2023) noted that instructors faced barriers such as limited technological infrastructure and uneven digital literacy when implementing blended learning in Arab EFL classrooms. This highlights potential challenges that may influence teachers' attitudes. These studies suggest that teachers' attitudes toward virtual and blended learning can be influenced by their experiences, available infrastructure, and perceived benefits. However, more research is needed specifically on Iraqi EFL teachers' attitudes and acceptance of these learning contexts.

The present study was an attempt to examine the effectiveness of a VL English program in comparison with the same course being presented as BL and Face to Face in the university context. The study was set out to scrutinize the following research questions:

- RQ1. Does blended learning have any significant effect on the WTC of Iraqi EFL learners?
- RQ2. Does virtual learning have any significant effect on the WTC of Iraqi EFL learners?
- RQ3. Is there any significant difference between blended and virtual learning in affecting WTC?
- RQ4. Does blended learning have any significant effect on the oral proficiency development of Iraqi EFL learners?
- RQ5. Does virtual learning have any significant effect on the oral proficiency development of Iraqi EFL learners?
- RQ6. Is there any significant difference between blended and virtual learning in affecting oral proficiency development?
- RQ7. What are Iraqi EFL teachers' attitudes toward the VL and BL learning contexts and acceptance of VL and BL English classes?

Method

Participants

The study included 120 Iraqi EFL learners enrolled at Karbala University, Iraq. Participants were randomly assigned to three groups of about 40 students each. The sample included both male and female students.

Instruments

The following instruments were used in the present study:

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT)

The OQPT was used to assess participants' English language proficiency and categorize them into low proficiency (LP) and high proficiency (HP) groups.

Pre-Tests and Post-Tests

IELTS-style examinations were administered before and after the treatment to evaluate participants' vocabulary knowledge.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with a sample of 10 EFL instructors to gather qualitative data on attitudes towards VL and BL learning contexts. Questions focused on perceived advantages, challenges, and impacts of BL and VL on engagement, learning outcomes, and motivation.

Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design with a quasi-experimental approach. Three groups were established:

1. Face-to-face (FACE TO FACE) group (control)
2. Fully online instruction (Virtual Learning - VL) group
3. Blended Learning (BL) group (combination of face-to-face and fully online instruction)

Procedure

Intact English language classes were randomly assigned to three groups: Face-to-Face, VL, and BL. In week one, participants took the OQPT. In week two, vocabulary pre-tests were administered. The treatment lasted one semester (30 sessions) based on the following plan:

- FACE TO FACE group: Traditional classroom instruction
- VL group: Instruction via Zoom platform
- BL group: Combination of face-to-face and online instruction

Vocabulary post-tests were administered after the treatment. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected instructors.

Data Analysis

Paired-Sample t-tests and Independent Samples t-test were utilized to analyze data quantitatively. Thematic analysis and content analysis of interview data were used to explore learners' attitudes toward VL and BL learning contexts. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 22.

Results

The First Research Question

The first hypothesis stated: Blended learning does not have an effect on the WTC of Iraqi EFL learners. According to the normality of the variables, a Paired-Sample T-test would be used. First, descriptive statistics are presented and then their variance equality is examined. Table 1 shows the pre-&-Post WTC mean values of the experimental Group 1:

Table 1

Pre-&-Post-WTC Mean Values of Experimental Group 1

		Paired Samples Statistics			
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test EXP1 WTC	3.017	40	.244	.038
	Post-test EXP1 WTC	3.289	40	.222	.035

In the above table, the pre-and-post-test mean scores are equal to 3.01 and 3.28 respectively in the first experimental group. Table 2 indicates paired-sample T-Test of first experimental group's Pre-&-Post-WTC.

Table 2

Paired-Sample T-Test of First Experimental Group's Pre-&-Post-WTC

		Paired Samples Test					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Paired Differences		Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval				
		Mean	SD			Lower	Upper		
Pair 1	Pre-&-post-test EXP1 WTC	-.272	.364	.057	-.388	-.155	-4.725	39	.000

According to Table 2, the significance level of the test is 0.000 which is less than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis is not accepted. In other words, blended learning has a significant effect on the WTC of learners. According to the mean scores and upper and lower border of the test, it can be stated that the learners' WTC scores in the post-test are higher than the pre-test. In other words, the BL approach has improved learners' WTC.

The Second Research Question

In this section, the second hypothesis is tested:

H0: Virtual learning does not have a significant effect on the WTC of Iraqi EFL learners.

According to the normality of the variables, a Paired-Sample T-test would be used. First, descriptive statistics are presented and then their variance equality is examined.

Table 3

Pre-&-Post-WTC Mean Values of Experimental 2 Group

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test EXP2 WTC	2.966	40	.273	.043
	Post-test EXP2 WTC	3.269	40	.273	.043

In Table 3, the pre-and-post-test mean scores are equal to 2.96 and 3.26 respectively in the first experimental group.

Table 4

Paired-Sample T-Test of Second Experimental Group's Pre-&-Post-WTC

Paired Samples Test										
Pair		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)		
		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				Lower	Upper
Pair 1	Pre-&-post-test EXP2 WTC	-.3028	.3437	.054	-.4127	-.1929	-5.572	39	.000	

According to Table 4, the significance level of the test is 0.000 which is less than 0.05, and the null hypothesis is not accepted. In other words, virtual learning has a significant effect on WTC of learners. According to the mean scores and upper and lower border of the test, it can be stated that the learners' WTC scores in the post-test are higher than the pre-test. In other words, the VL approach has improved learners' WTC.

The Third Research Question

In this section, the third null hypothesis corresponding to RQ3 is tested: There is no significant difference between blended learning and virtual learning regarding WTC. According to the normality of the variables, an Independent Samples t-test was used. First, descriptive statistics are presented and then their variance equality is examined.

Table 5

The WTC Group Statistics between BL & VL Learning

	Group Statistics				
	Exp	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-test WTC	BL	40	3.2898	.22205	.03511
	VL	40	3.2694	.27397	.04332

According to the information of above table, mean scores related to the WTC of learners in the first experimental (BL) and second experimental (VL) groups are equal to 3.28 and 3.26, respectively, in the pre-and-post-tests. One of the presuppositions of the Independent Samples t-test is the homogeneity of variances, for which Levene's Test was used.

Table 6

Independent T-Test of Post-Test WTC

		Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Dif.	Std. Error Dif.	95% Confidence Interval		
									Low	Up	
Post-test WTC	Eq. Va. assumed	.045	.833	.365	78	.716	.020	.056	-.090	.13	
	Eq. Va. not assumed			.365	74.793	.716	.020	.056	-.09	.13	

According to Table 6, the significance level of the test is 0.833, which is larger than 0.05, and the assumption of variance equality can be accepted. Based on the first row of the table and p-value=0.716, which is more than 0.05, it can be stated that there is no significant difference between learners' WTC scores in the first (BL) and second (VL) experimental groups.

The Fourth Research Question

In this section, the fourth null hypothesis corresponding to RQ4 is tested: H0: Blended learning does not have a significant effect on oral proficiency development.

According to the normality of the variables, the Paired-Sample t-test is used. Table 7 illustrates the pre-&-post-oral mean values of first experimental Group.

Table 7

Pre-&-Post-Oral Mean Values of First Experimental Group

		Paired Samples Statistics			
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test exp1 oral	21.9250	40	1.96622	.31089
	Post-test exp1 oral	29.6250	40	4.28885	.67813

In Table 7, the pre-and-post-test mean scores are equal to 21.92 and 29.62, respectively, for the first experimental group. Table 8 displays paired-sample T-Test of the first experimental group's pre-&-post-oral proficiency development.

Table 8

Paired-Sample T-Test of First Experimental Group's Pre-&-Post-Oral Proficiency Development

		Paired Samples Test					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Paired Differences		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-&-post-test exp.1 oral Prof.	-7.700	5.175	.818	-9.355	-6.045	-9.411	39	.000

According to Table 8, the significance level of the test is 0.000 which is less than 0.05, and the null hypothesis is not accepted. In other words, blended learning has a significant effect on the oral proficiency of learners. According to the mean scores and upper and lower border of the test, it can be stated that the learners' oral proficiency scores in the post-test are higher than the pre-test. In other words, the BL approach has improved learners' oral proficiency.

The Fifth Research Question

In this section, the fifth null hypothesis corresponding to RQ5 is tested: Virtual learning does not have a significant effect on oral proficiency development.

According to the normality of the variables, the Paired-Sample t-test is used. First, descriptive statistics are presented and then their variance equality is examined. Table 9 shows the pre-&-post-oral mean values of second experimental group.

Table 9

Pre-&-Post-Oral Mean Values of Second Experimental Group

		Paired Samples Statistics			
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test exp2 oral	20.9500	40	2.38532	.37715
	Post-test exp2 oral	26.1000	40	4.90316	.77526

In Table 9, the pre-and-post-test mean scores are equal to 20.95 and 26.10, respectively, in the second experimental group. Table 10 below displays paired-sample T-Test of second experimental group's pre-&-post-oral proficiency.

Table 10

Paired-Sample T-Test of Second Experimental Group's Pre-&-Post-Oral

		Paired Samples Test					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Paired Differences							
		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pre-&-post-test exp2 oral	-5.150	5.650	.893	-6.96	-3.343	-5.765	39	.000

According to Table 10, the significance level of the test is 0.000 which is less than 0.05, and the null hypothesis is not accepted. In other words, virtual learning has a significant effect on the oral speaking of learners. According to the mean scores and upper and lower border of the test, it can be stated that the learners' oral speaking scores in the post-test are higher than the pre-test. In other words, the VL approach has improved learners' oral speaking.

The Sixth Research Question

In this section, the sixth null hypothesis corresponding to RQ6 is tested:

H0: There is no significant difference between blended and virtual learning regarding oral proficiency development.

According to the normality of the variables, an Independent Samples t-test is used. First, descriptive statistics are presented and then their variance equality is examined. Table 11 displays the oral group statistics between BL & VL learning

Table 11

The Oral Group Statistics between BL & VL Learning

	Exp	N	Group Statistics		
			Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Oral	BL	40	29.62	4.288	.678
	VL	40	26.10	4.903	.775

According to the information in above table, mean scores related to the oral speaking of learners in the first experimental (BL) and second experimental (VL) groups are equal to 26.10 and 29.62 respectively in the pre-and-post-test. One of the presuppositions of the Independent Samples t-test is the homogeneity of variances, for which Levene's Test was used. Table 12 shows independent T-Test of Post-Test Oral proficiency.

Table 12

Independent T-Test of Post-Test Oral Proficiency

		Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Dif.	Std. Error Dif.	95% Confidence Interval	
									Lower	Upper
Oral Prof.	Eq. Va. assumed	1.35	.24	3.42	78	.001	3.525	1.029	1.474	5.575
	Eq. Va. not assumed			3.42	76.64	.001	3.525	1.029	1.473	5.576

According to Table 12, the significance level of the test is 0.249 which is more than 0.05. Thus, the assumption of variance equality could be accepted. Based on the first row of the table and $p\text{-value}=0.001$, which is less than 0.05, it can be stated that there is a significant difference between learners' oral proficiency scores in the first (BL) and second (VL) experimental groups. According to the mean scores and upper and lower borders of the test, it can be stated that the learners' oral proficiency scores in the first (BL) experimental group are higher than the second (VL) experimental group. In other words, the BL approach has improved learners' oral proficiency.

The Seventh Research Question

Based on the interview results provided, "What are Iraqi EFL teachers' attitudes toward the VL and BL learning contexts and acceptance of VL and BL English classes?", Iraqi EFL teachers generally showed positive attitudes towards both VL and BL contexts, recognizing their potential benefits while also acknowledging the challenges they present. However, there seems to be a preference for Blended Learning over purely Virtual Learning. Here's a summary of their attitudes:

Attitudes Towards Blended Learning

- Teachers view BL positively, seeing it as a flexible and effective approach that combines the benefits of both face-to-face and online instruction.
- They appreciate BL for its potential to enhance student engagement, provide diverse learning modalities, and offer personalized learning experiences.
- Teachers value the improved communication and immediate feedback opportunities in BL environments.
- They recognize BL's potential to foster collaboration and community building among students.

Attitudes Towards Virtual Learning

- Teachers acknowledge VL's benefits in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and the provision of diverse online resources.
- They appreciate VL's potential to reach a wider audience and its scalability.
- However, they express concerns about reduced interaction, potential isolation, and challenges in maintaining student engagement in fully virtual environments.

Acceptance of BL and VL English classes

- Teachers appear more accepting of BL English classes, viewing them as effective in fostering language acquisition due to the combination of in-person interaction and online resources.

- While they accept VL as a viable option, especially in situations where in-person learning is not possible, they seem to prefer BL for its balanced approach.
- Teachers recognize that the effectiveness of both BL and VL depends on factors such as proper implementation, student needs, and learning objectives.

Challenges and Concerns

- Teachers express concerns about technical issues, the need for self-discipline from students, and potential disparities in access to technology in both BL and VL contexts.
- They highlight the importance of maintaining student engagement and motivation, particularly in VL environments.
- Assessment challenges and ensuring academic integrity in online components are areas of concern for teachers.

In conclusion, Iraqi EFL teachers showed a positive attitude and acceptance towards both BL and VL English classes, with a preference for BL due to its perceived balance between traditional and online learning methods. They recognized the potential of these approaches to enhance language learning while also being mindful of the challenges they present. The teachers' attitudes suggest openness to incorporating technology in language instruction, but with a preference for maintaining some level of face-to-face interaction to support effective language acquisition.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insights into the effects of blended learning and virtual learning on the willingness to communicate (WTC) and oral proficiency of Iraqi EFL learners. Both BL and VL approaches demonstrated significant positive effects on WTC, aligning with previous research in various EFL contexts. This corroborates the findings of Tran and Hoa (2024), who reported that blended learning substantially improved students' classroom engagement in IELTS orientation courses in Vietnam, suggesting a potential positive impact on WTC.

The improvement in WTC across both modalities may be attributed to reduced anxiety in online and blended environments, increased opportunities for communication through diverse channels, and enhanced preparation time for formulating responses. This is consistent with Alqarni's (2021) study, which reported higher levels of WTC in online learning contexts compared to face-to-face contexts among Saudi undergraduate EFL learners.

When comparing the effects of BL and VL on WTC, no significant difference was found between learners' WTC scores in these approaches. This finding contrasts with the results of Zhou (2023), who found that e-tandem outperformed conventional in-class speaking tasks in terms of speaking skills and

WTC. However, it's important to note that Zhou's study compared virtual learning with traditional in-class methods, not blended learning.

In terms of oral proficiency development, both BL and VL approaches showed significant improvements in learners' oral proficiency skills. This aligns with the findings of Teng and Zeng (2022), who reported that blended learning had a remarkable effect on the improvement of oral accuracy and fluency among Chinese middle school students learning English. Similarly, Hoang et al. (2023) found significant improvements in overall oral proficiency, including fluency, coherence, lexical resource, and pronunciation, after a virtual reality intervention with EFL students.

However, when comparing the effects of BL and VL on oral proficiency development, a significant difference emerged, with BL showing higher scores. This suggests that the combination of face-to-face and online components in BL may provide a more comprehensive environment for developing oral proficiency. This finding is supported by Ali et al. (2023), who reported that blended learning had a positive impact on first-year Arab university students' oral production and improved students' engagement.

The study also explored Iraqi EFL teachers' attitudes toward VL and BL learning contexts and their acceptance of these modalities. Teachers generally recognized the advantages of both approaches, which is consistent with the findings of Van der Spoel et al. (2020), who noted that Dutch teachers' perceptions of using technology in their classes changed significantly after experiencing online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, our study also revealed challenges similar to those identified by Ali et al. (2023), who noted that instructors faced barriers such as limited technological infrastructure and uneven digital literacy when implementing blended learning in Arab EFL classrooms.

Despite these challenges, the overall attitude appears to be positive, with a willingness to adapt to these new teaching modalities. This aligns with the findings of Kerimbayev et al. (2020), who reported that teachers in Kazakhstan and Slovakia found that using a learning management system provided new ways and tools for instruction, suggesting positive attitudes toward virtual learning tools.

In conclusion, while both BL and VL offer significant benefits for EFL learning, blended learning emerges as a particularly promising approach, combining the advantages of both virtual and face-to-face instruction. This study could contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of these modern learning environments in enhancing WTC and oral proficiency among EFL learners, while also highlighting the need for further research to optimize their implementation in various educational contexts.

Conclusion

The findings of this study could provide some insights into the effectiveness of blended and virtual learning approaches in EFL contexts, particularly for Iraqi learners. Both BL and VL demonstrate significant potential in

enhancing willingness to communicate and oral proficiency development. The comparable effectiveness of BL and VL in improving WTC suggests that the integration of technology and online components plays a crucial role in encouraging learners to engage in communication. This finding could be particularly relevant in contexts where traditional face-to-face instruction may be limited or challenging to implement.

However, the superiority of BL in developing oral proficiency highlights the importance of maintaining some level of face-to-face interaction in language learning. The cooperation between online and in-person components in BL appears to create an optimal environment for oral skill development. Teachers' generally positive attitudes toward these approaches, despite acknowledging challenges, indicate a readiness to embrace innovative teaching methods. This openness is crucial for the successful implementation of BL and VL in EFL contexts.

In conclusion, while both BL and VL offer significant benefits for EFL learning, blended learning emerges as a particularly promising approach, combining the advantages of both virtual and face-to-face instruction. As education continues to evolve, especially in light of global changes and technological advancements, these findings could contribute to providing a foundation for developing effective EFL teaching strategies that leverage the strengths of diverse learning modalities. Future research could further explore the long-term impacts of these approaches and investigate ways to optimize their implementation in various educational contexts.

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