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Challenges and Benefits of Blended Learning in University EFL Reading Comprehension: A Mixed-Method Study

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Abstract
This study investigates the challenges and benefits experienced by students in the implementation of blended learning (BL) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading classes. The research focuses on exploring the experiences of first year university students engaged in BL-based reading comprehension. Using a mixed-method approach, data was collected from 36 participants enrolled in a noncredit reading skills course integrated with a BL platform over 16-weeks. Participants completed a 16-item questionnaire, and a subset of ten students engaged in a focus group discussion to delve deeper into the challenges and benefits of BL. Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency, percentages) were employed for quantitative data analysis, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic identification. The findings revealed significant challenges including technology issues, language barriers, and initial confusion with BL tools. Participants emphasized the critical need for reliable technology infrastructure, support for digital literacy, and language assistance to mitigate these obstacles. Despite these challenges, participants acknowledged BL's advantages, particularly its flexibility and accessibility in enhancing reading comprehension. Recommendations arising from the study advocate for personalized learning paths, collaborative activities, clear communication, and ongoing assessment to optimize BL implementation. Thus, this research underscores BL's potential in improving reading skills, highlighting the imperative of tailored support to effectively address implementation challenges. The study could also become more thorough and broadly applicable to other Ethiopian universities by increasing the sample size and extending the intervention period.

Keywords
Blended learning, challenges and benefits, EFL university students, reading comprehension

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INTRODUCTION

The methods used to teach and learn English have become more sophisticated in the current day. Today's millennial students often view the traditional, in-person classroom as boring and uninspiring (Abiy, 2005; Seid, 2012). Proficiency in reading comprehension is a prerequisite for both academic performance and language acquisition while teaching English as a foreign language (Girma, 2020). However, the learning environment is made more challenging by issues including the need for greater access to authentic reading resources, differing student engagement levels, and the diversity of learner needs. The failure of conventional teaching strategies to adequately address these complicated problems has led researchers to look for innovative approaches to improve reading comprehension performances.

Teachers have the responsibility of meeting each student's individual needs while keeping up with the latest developments in the field of education. Universities globally are prioritizing the integration of creative teaching methods to keep up with the evolving landscape of higher education (Kanwal, Zahid, & Afzal, 2023). Among these approaches, Blended learning is a notable strategy that integrates traditional face-to-face instruction with online components (Benjamin-Ohwodede, Mamudu, & Awunor, 2024; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). In addition, as technology advances, this approach is anticipated to become a solution by integrating technology into the teaching and learning process (Taufik & Alam, 2022). Learning and information sharing have changed significantly since technology was introduced into the classroom (Ikhwan & Widodo, 2019).

According to research findings, technology promotes creativity and student-driven learning experiences by providing users with possibilities (Bataineh & Baniabdelrahman, 2006; Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009). There is also support for the usefulness of technology in language instruction since it gives students access to authentic contexts (Gilakjani, 2014; Stanley,2013*).* Thus, technology, according to the research, is essential for teachers to successfully impart knowledge and skills that are suited to their students' requirements and is also essential for autonomous language learning (Morales & Windeatt, 2015).

However, in the contexts of Ethiopian universities, this change has not been all that apparent (Fikadu, 2020). According to him, a major barrier to Ethiopian universities using blended learning strategies is a dearth of knowledge and interest in online learning. Its possible advantages and disadvantages are not well understood. Furthermore, the financial limitations impede the allocation of resources towards the development of content, teacher preparation, and other critical technology infrastructures that are imperative for the successful execution of blended learning.

In addition, there are no explicit regulations or directives from the government that favor the incorporation of blended learning. Implementing blended learning programs is further hampered by the government's lack of incentives and funding. To support the effective implementation and delivery of blended learning projects, it is also imperative that teachers receive thorough training and continuous professional development that is specialized to online teaching (Fikadu, 2020).

Ethiopia's exclusive educational setting underscores a significant deficiency in research regarding blended learning within higher education. Despite the abundance of literature on the issue, the majority originates from Western Nations and often overlooks the intricate sociocultural, technological, and infrastructural contexts characteristic of Ethiopian universities (Kanwal et al., 2023). Thus, there is a clear need for research studies that address several crucial gaps and contextualizes blended learning within Ethiopia's university education system. Firstly, much of the existing literature neglects the nuanced cultural intricacies specific to Ethiopia, which can greatly influence the perception and evaluation of innovative teaching approaches like blended learning. Secondly, there remains a dearth of research on the technological challenges defining Ethiopia's educational landscape, such as unequal access to online resources.

Furthermore, research on Ethiopian students' attitudes, experiences, and preparedness for blended learning in English language education, particularly in reading comprehension, is insufficient. There is a lack of established best practices and research-driven recommendations specifically tailored to the higher education context in Ethiopia. Moreover, comprehensive studies examining how blended learning affects Ethiopian students' proficiency in reading comprehension, despite its crucial role in developing other language skills (Anderson, 2012), are notably absent. Addressing these research gaps is essential for understanding both the potential benefits and challenges of blended learning in Ethiopia and for offering informed guidance on its effective implementation. Narrowing these gaps will significantly contribute to advancing Ethiopia's higher education system. Consequently, the main objective of this study was to assess the benefits, challenges, and suggestions for optimizing a blended learning (BL) method to enhance university students' reading comprehension.

Thus, this study investigates the multifaceted aspects of blended learning (BL) in the context of reading comprehension instruction among university students. Firstly, it examines the challenges that students face when engaging with blended learning methods for improving reading comprehension skills. Secondly, the research explores the perceived benefits of blended learning from the perspective of language learners, highlighting how they perceive its effectiveness in enhancing reading comprehension. Lastly, the study identifies participants' key recommendations for the future implementation of blended learning strategies aimed at optimizing reading skills in educational settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The method of teaching and studying the English language in general, and reading comprehension in particular, has been completely transformed by blended learning, which blends traditional in-person instruction with online educational resources. This innovative approach has had a significant impact on the intelligence and comprehension of students in higher education (Masduqi, 2016*)*.With its interactive and personalized nature, blended learning provides a more engaging and effective learning experience, ultimately leading to improved reading comprehension skills (Alnoori & Obaid, 2017).

The capacity to access a variety of digital resources is one of the main effects of blended learning on reading comprehension. According to Huang, Zhou, & Wang (2006) and Kheirzadeh & Birgani (2018), students in higher education can now explore a wide range of online resources, including e-books, websites, and virtual libraries, that are customized to their individual reading levels and interests. Students can practice reading in a variety of forms due to the availability of numerous materials, which also allows for a more individualized learning experience. Their exposure to a variety of writing styles, genres, and views thus improves their comprehension skills.

Moreover, Stefan (2016) stressed that a participatory and collaborative learning environment is fostered through blended learning. According to Ateş Çobanoğlu, Esin, Yücel, Uzunboylar, & Ceylan, (2017) and Weaver, Spratt, & Nair (2008) BL promotes a greater degree of engagement among students, between students and instructors, between students and content, and between students and the course interface. Consequently, students can interact with their instructors and classmates more deeply through group projects, video conferences, and online discussion boards (Driscoll, 2002). Through these exchanges of ideas, viewpoints, and interpretations, students are able to comprehend the reading content on a deeper level. Collaborative exercises also help students clarify their ideas and present arguments for their positions, which improve their comprehension abilities to a greater extent.

There can be no doubt about the effect that blended learning has on reading comprehension among students at the tertiary level. Blended learning helps students become more proficient readers by giving them access to a variety of digital resources, regular practice, and an environment that encourages collaboration (Kheirzadeh & Birgani, 2018). Students at universities can enhance their ability to think analytically, improve their ability to remember information and interact with the subject matter more deeply, all of which will increase their general intelligence and chances of success in the classroom and beyond.

In addition, rapid and radical changes in new technologies had a significant impact on all elements of language utilization. As for Verezub & Wang (2008) and Szymańska & Kaczmarek 2011), hypertext and hypermedia can be used for the purpose of studying foreign languages thanks to digital technology. Although understanding hypertext can occasionally be challenging, using effective reading strategies can help. One advantage of reading hypertexts on the internet is that readers can obtain authentic content, as reading what is frequently known to as authentic materials is one of many language learners' main goals. In their study, Verezub & Wang (2008) stated how employing online hypertexts can help language learners comprehend the texts more fully.

Rahimi & Rezaei (2011) also did longitudinal research on physical and digital reading comprehension and came to the conclusion that when students are exposed to digital texts that have connections to other websites with additional reading content, their reading is promoted to a greater extent. In order for learners to become successful readers in a foreign language, according to Szymańska & Kaczmarek (2011), there must be access to online texts that allow for authentic responses to what they have read. However,

they found that, in regards to text retention and interpretation, employing texts that were both printed and virtual helped students in a blended lecture course.

Therefore, in addition to the range of resources, blended learning provides higher education students with ample opportunities for continuous practice and reinforcement. Online platforms often include interactive exercises and quizzes that enable students to actively engage with the reading material (Benjamin-Ohwodede et al., 2024). These activities not only facilitate the development of critical thinking and analytical skills but also allow for immediate feedback, enabling students to address any misconceptions and reinforce their understanding (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The constant practice and reinforcement provided by blended learning contribute to a deeper level of comprehension and retention of the material.

Generally, as to Marsh (2012), blended language learning presents several benefits, including enhanced personalized learning support, a tailored learning experience, promotion of independent and collaborative learning, facilitation and motivation for learning beyond classroom boundaries, catering to various learning styles, provision of a platform for target language practice outside class, a less pressured environment for language practice, adaptable study schedules to accommodate student needs, and assistance in fostering crucial twenty-first-century learning skills.

However, Sikora & Carroll (2002) observed that students enrolled in higher education express dissatisfaction with fully online learning. Cai & Yao (2010) outlined several challenges, including mistrust, lack of motivation, and feelings of isolation. Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland (2005) and Shurygin & Sabirova (2017) also underscored the drawbacks of passive classroom instruction and the significance of teachers' roles in e-learning initiatives. Galvis (2018) suggested that organizations must adjust to the technological, methodological, and cultural demands of blended learning. Boelens, De Wever, & Voet (2017) emphasized the necessity of addressing interaction, flexibility, and learning environments before implementing blended learning. Al-Amin, Rabbi, & Islam (2021) and Srivastava & Dey (2018) highlighted issues such as insufficient connectivity and a lack of resources.

In a nutshell, the use of blended learning could have an impact on reading skills and enable students to employ blended learning and improve their reading abilities. It permits far more flexible learning for students, as well as increased depth and richness in their academic pursuits. Therefore, one may see that using blended learning in the learning and teaching of the English language, particularly for reading comprehension performance, would be noteworthy.

RESEARCH METHOD

The current study employed a mixed research design to analyze data collected from 36 first-year social science students, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The main aim was to investigate the benefits of BL-based reading comprehension and the challenges encountered when using BL in EFL reading classes. According to Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh (2002) and Lin &Yang (2011) a mixed methods approach is advantageous

when researchers require quantitative data, with qualitative data providing supplementary insights. Data from quantitative as well as qualitative sources were required to answer the research questions of this study. According to Kioumarsi (2018), employing quantitative data is inadequate for achieving a greater comprehension of causal mechanisms since a significant understanding of the content is necessary. Students' opinions of BL-based reading comprehension as well as the difficulties they encountered when utilizing a BL to enhance their reading ability were thus examined in this mixed research design.

Addis Ababa University (AAU) was selected as the research setting using the convenience sampling approach due to its institutional readiness, internet infrastructure, availability of the LMS/Moodle software, and willingness to support the research implementation throughout the semester. This approach was chosen because it simplifies the study process by allowing the researcher to select participants according to their accessibility (Kumar, 2011). Additionally, purposive sampling was utilized to choose first-year students who were assigned to the College of Business and Economics (CBE) social science freshman program and who employed BL-based reading comprehension in EFL reading classes once the university was chosen. One section from the college was considered during the 2023/24 academic year.

After a 16-weeks BL intervention, students who participated in the project and learned reading through blended learning approach completed a questionnaire regarding the advantages and challenges encountered during this process. Subsequently, ten participants were chosen via systematic random sampling from this group to engage in a focus group discussion about the benefits and challenges of BL-based reading comprehension. In addition, data were gathered through closed and open-ended questionnaire, along with focus group discussions. The closed-ended questionnaire comprised sixteen items structured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The questionnaire was adapted from Tang & Chaw (2013) and Abu & Shaath (2012) and were divided into two categories: Blended Learning Benefits (9 items) and Challenges of Blended Learning (7 items).

To investigate the difficulties and advantages students encountered when utilizing BL for reading comprehension, quantitative data were gathered through closed-ended questionnaire and further analyzed using descriptive statistics. Besides, the open-ended and FGD qualitative data were analyzed and interpreted qualitatively based on predefined themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the first section, the collected quantitative and qualitative data were presented and analyzed; findings were also reported and discussed.

The objective of the first research question was to investigate challenges that students faced when integrating BL-based reading comprehension into their reading classes. Descriptive analyses such as frequency and percentage were used to address the study's first research question. As a result, the extent to which these challenges influenced participants' reading processes while using a blended learning-based reading

comprehension instruction was investigated. Participants in the study, as evidenced by their responses, experienced different challenges at the start and during the intervention session; their quantitative responses and analysis of each item of the questionnaire are presented below.

Table 1: Participants Challenges in Using Blended Learning

	Agreement Level	Frequency	%
1. Low internet speed and connectivity problems were the challenges with blended learning online resources.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	5	13.9
	Neutral	0	0
	Agree	17	47.2
	Strongly Agree	14	38.9
	Total	36	100
2. I feel troublesome at the very beginning of using the blended learning.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	6	16.7
	Neutral	5	13.9
	Agree	15	41.7
	Strongly Agree	10	27.7
	Total	36	100
3. Blended learning-based reading comprehension gives me less knowledge than traditional classroom instruction.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	20	55.5
	Neutral	5	13.9
	Agree	6	16.7
	Strongly Agree	5	13.9
	Total	36	100
4. I find BL difficult to take part in online discussions and forums because of my limited computer expertise.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	19	52.8
	Neutral	3	8.3
	Agree	6	16.7
	Strongly Agree	8	22.2
	Total	36	100
	Strongly Disagree	0	0

	Disagree	0	0
	Neutral	6	16.7
5. BL needs me as a learner to have high-self responsibility and digital literacy.	Agree	17	47.2
	Strongly Agree	13	36.1
	Total	36	100
6. I feel confused at the beginning about how to use a BL.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	6	16.7
	Neutral	3	8.3
	Agree	17	47.2
	Strongly Agree	10	27.8
	Total	36	100
7. When using the blending approach to learning, language is an obstacle to me.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	8	22.2
	Neutral	6	16.7
	Agree	14	38.9
	Strongly Agree	8	22.2
	Total	36	100

The table shown above indicates that 86.1% of the participants experienced difficulties with poor internet speed and connectivity while using online resources for blended learning, whereas 13.9% of them disagreed. In reference to items 2 and 6, 69.4% and 72.2% of participants respectively, reported that they got confused when they first started utilizing the method. On the other hand, 16.7% of participants in both questions stated they had no trouble integrating blended learning into their reading instruction. As can be seen in item 3 above, 55.5% of respondents had a favorable opinion about this new approach.

Furthermore, because of their lack of computer experience, 38.9% of respondents said that blended learning made it difficult for them to participate in online forums and chats. This suggests that further assistance or instruction in digital literacy may be necessary. Whereas 52.8% said their lack of computer proficiency did not prevent them from participating. However, 83.3% stressed the need to have a high level of digital literacy and self-responsibility in the approach, with 16.3% remaining undecided. In addition, Item 7 shows that about two-thirds of respondents (61.1%) say that when employing the blended approach to learning, language presents a barrier. This implies that certain participants' ability to benefit from blended learning may be hampered by language hurdles, underscoring the importance of language support.

Generally, the data reveal how important it is to deal with technical problems, offer sufficient assistance for any discomfort, and emphasize digital literacy and self-

responsibility in blended learning settings. According to these results, there may be opportunities for intervention and enhancement to improve the participants' overall experience and the efficacy of blended learning.

To address the second research question, a set of nine questions was administered to students to gauge their beliefs regarding the advantages of using BL in reading classes to enhance their comprehension skills. They were assessed how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale, as shown in the table below.

Table 2: Advantages of Using Blended Learning

	Level of Agreement	Frequency	%
1. Blended learning (BL) enhances my interest to read.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	5	13.9
	Neutral	0	0
	Agree	17	47.2
	Strongly Agree	14	38.9
	Total	36	100
2. I find blended learning more convenient than face to face learning.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	5	13.9
	Neutral	8	22.2
	Agree	12	33.3
	Strongly Agree	11	30.6
	Total	36	100
3. BL helps me to think in-depth about my reading comprehension skills.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
	Neutral	3	8.3
	Agree	22	61.1
	Strongly Agree	11	30.6
	Total	36	100
4. I can comprehend the reading materials better because of blended learning.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
	Neutral	6	16.7
	Agree	17	47.2
	Strongly Agree	13	36.1
	Total	36	100
5. Blended learning helps me to do my reading activities more effectively.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
	Neutral	3	8.3
	Agree	25	69.5
	Strongly Agree	8	22.2
	Total	36	100

6. It is more efficient to combine online learning with traditional in-class instruction than to use one-way information distribution.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
	Neutral	2	5.5
	Agree	19	52.8
	Strongly Agree	15	41.7
	Total	36	100
7. I feel happy when I take the reading comprehension lessons through blended learning.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
	Neutral	3	8.3
	Agree	17	47.2
	Strongly Agree	16	44.5
	Total	36	100
8. A blended learning reading session keeps me focused.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
	Neutral	3	8.3
	Agree	19	52.8
	Strongly Agree	14	38.9
	Total	36	100
9. In the future, I would prefer to use BL as one of my learning instructions.	Strongly Disagree	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
	Neutral	0	0
	Strongly Agree	20	55.6
	Agree	16	44.4
	Total	36	100

According to the data in the table above, participants generally have a positive attitude toward blended learning (BL) and how it improves reading comprehension abilities. 38.9% highly agree and 47.2% agree that BL increases their interest in reading, making up a considerable 86.1% of participants. This implies that BL acts as a stimulator, increasing students' desire to interact with reading materials. In addition, 63.9% of participants said they preferred BL over face-to-face classes, indicating that they found it to be a convenient method of learning. Notably, when it comes to the convenience of BL, 30.6% highly agree, 33.3% agree, and 22.2% are neutral. The range of answers suggests that participants have different opinions about how convenient BL is. Remarkably, 91.7% of participants said that BL encouraged them to think deeply about their reading comprehension abilities, which is evidence of the cognitive benefits of the practice. The observed cognitive benefit of BL in fostering a more profound comprehension of reading materials was highlighted by this agreement.

More significantly, participants think that integrating traditional in-person education with online learning is more effective than depending solely on one-way information sharing. Preference for a mixed learning model is shown by a noteworthy

94.5% of respondents who support this strategy in order to improve their learning efficiency. Participant associations with BL extend beyond cognitive characteristics; 91.7% of individuals reported feeling happy during BL reading comprehension classes. This affective component suggests a fulfilling and happy learning experience, adding another level to the benefits of BL that are thought to exist.

Furthermore, as can be seen in item 8, the 91.7% agreement rate shows that BL provides participants in staying focused throughout reading sessions. This demonstrates how BL is thought to assist focus and attention during learning activities. One interesting conclusion is that all participants (100%) agreed that they would want to see BL used in future learning instructions. A majority of participants, 44.4 % agreeing and 55.6% strongly agreeing, indicate that they would like to use BL in their future educational activities.

To sum up, the feedback provided by the participants provides a thorough and optimistic view of how blended learning might improve reading comprehension abilities. The results highlight how the many benefits of BL—such as its motivational, cognitive, affective, and future-focused aspects—take into account the learning environment and present a positive picture of its integration.

The data garnered from the open-ended questions and focus group discussions was analyzed and interpreted as follows:

There were three open-ended questions presented in the questionnaire. The purpose of these questions was to obtain the participants' opinions regarding the advantages and difficulties of implementing BL-based reading comprehension during the intervention. They were also asked to respond to a question regarding how they thought the method should be applied in the future. Besides, an assessment was carried out to determine the advantages and difficulties of using BL for students' reading comprehension as well as any potential recommendations for using the method to help them improve their reading comprehension in the future. Consequently, the data collected through open-ended inquiries and focus group discussions were qualitatively coded and analyzed as follows to determine the challenges and benefits faced by participants with relation to the blended learning method.

Incorporating BL into the reading comprehension process has been advantageous; yet, certain users have needed help. One respondent stated, “Technical problems and connectivity issues were the problems that I encountered in using the software during my reading comprehension process, which led me to frustration at the beginning.” Some participants experienced difficulties when navigating the features and understanding the BL interface at first, which affected their level of comfort with the platform overall. As another participant expressed, “Using the features and understanding the BL interface initially created a challenge for me.” In addition, several respondents expressed concerns about the learning difficulties related to the digital resources and platforms utilized in blended learning; they had trouble dealing with online educational settings, obtaining and submitting activities, and adjusting to new technologies. This demonstrates the necessity

of providing extensive guidance and assistance to make sure those students can interact with the digital components of their reading comfortably.

The difficulty with time management was another prevalent issue in the responses from the participants. Many participants mentioned that it was difficult to balance the demands of blended learning's online and in-person components. This involves having trouble managing asynchronous learning activities, meeting deadlines, and balancing a number of obligations. One respondent expressed, “It was difficult to balance both the offline and online activities on time within blended learning contexts.” another respondent also stated “Meeting due dates and combining a number of duties required efficient time management skills.”

Moreover, some participants expressed concern regarding the dearth of interpersonal communication within the blended learning framework. Emphasizing the value of interactive and collaborative components of learning, some students expressed a wish for additional possibilities for in-person interactions with classmates and instructors. This issue was brought up by a respondent, who said, “I need more face-to-face classroom interaction with my classmates and instructor that the blended learning approach offers.” This shows that even if online components provide flexibility, blended learning programs must preserve a feeling of interpersonal interaction.

In brief, the replies provided by the respondents regarding their struggles with blended learning indicate a complex range of obstacles that include technological problems, the learning curve related to digital tools, time management, and the requirement for face-to-face interaction. In order to overcome these obstacles, a complete strategy that includes enhanced technology infrastructure, extensive training programs, efficient communication techniques, and deliberate initiatives to promote a feeling of sociability inside the blended learning setting could be needed.

Regarding the question, “What benefits does using BL bring to your learning process in reading comprehension?” Majority of the respondents emphasized how much BL stimulates their interest in reading. One of the respondents revealed, “Blended learning makes my reading becomes enjoyable and stimulating when technological components and different videos are incorporated into it." In addition, using BL had significantly improved the students’ learning experience in reading comprehension. As one respondent also mentioned, “I am more engaged and focused, and the process is more fun because the method has increased my participation.”

Instant feedback was also another significant benefit. One respondent said “Using BL tools helps me understand things better and reinforces my comprehension skills because I get immediate feedback during online discussion forums and chats”. As another respondent put it, “The incorporation of YouTube videos and forums help me to remember the information,” this in turn improves retention.

One key advantage that the majority of participants mentioned was flexibility, which enables participants to access information whenever and wherever it suits their schedules. One of the respondents said, “I can arrange my reading into my schedule because I can access the materials anytime, anywhere.” A relevant and personalized

learning experience is guaranteed by the personalized content that is based on learning styles and preferences. Another respondent also stated, "I like that BL platforms provide personalized content according to my interests and learning style."

BL facilitates engaging discussions with classmates by creating possibilities for collaborative learning. As mentioned by one respondent, "BL helps sharing knowledge, which allows me to participate in group discussions which help our understanding of the reading passage and its activities." Respondents also emphasized how BL has a favorable effect on the growth of digital literacy abilities. Beyond the immediate topic, learners acknowledge that one important benefit of utilizing BL is that they acquire skills that are relevant to the digital world.

Regarding this, another participant said, "BL helps me become more comfortable with technology and improves my computer skills so I can use it for education instead of wasting time on unnecessary things." This suggests that BL not only improves reading comprehension but also gives students the tools they need to successfully navigate the digital world, and use the platform for educational purposes. Generally, as expressed by the respondents, the many advantages of BL improve engagement, personalization, feedback, retention, flexibility, collaboration, accessibility, and interest throughout the reading comprehension learning process.

To answer the question, "What do you recommend in using blended learning (BL) in your learning of reading skills?" participants provided their views on how to make the most of BL environments to improve reading skills. As mentioned by one participant, e-books and multimedia content can make for a more immersive and captivating reading experience when combined with interactive internet resources. Many responses supported individualized learning paths. One participant claimed that adaptive technologies are necessary for effective reading skill development because they allow for the customization of exercises and information to cater different learning styles.

Moreover, it is generally advised to conduct frequent evaluations and provide quick feedback. In this regard, one respondent stated, "Timely feedback helps students comprehend their strengths and areas that need improvement, and assessments are essential to measure reading proficiency." Thus, participants' suggestions included online discussion forums, virtual reading clubs, group projects, Peer engagement, and collaborative learning opportunities were identified as crucial recommendations.

Furthermore, success in BL for reading skills was emphasized as requiring clear communication and guidance from instructors. A clear set of norms for online discussions, clear directions for accessing and using digital reading resources, and transparent expectations were stressed by the participants. In addition, everyone agreed that a balanced approach was crucial. One participant made the following recommendation: "A comprehensive reading skill development activities should be provided by combining traditional reading materials with digital resources."

The use of technologies created explicitly to improve reading abilities was also highlighted; recommendations ranged from audio books to language learning applications. Additionally, respondents suggested offering tools and assistance for

developing digital literacy. According to one respondent, "Training sessions and instructions can empower students in accessing online platforms and utilizing technology successfully for reading skill improvement." All things considered, the suggestions show a variety of methods to maximize BL for reading abilities, including incorporating technology, individualized instruction, group projects, and a balanced approach.

To sum up, the suggestions made by the participants revolve around the following themes: cooperation, engagement, assessment, personalization, clear communication, and a thoughtful and equitable use of technology. Each of these components aims to provide a strong and effective blended learning environment that supports the development of the reading skills reported by respondents.

Examining students' opinions about BL-based reading comprehension and the difficulties they encountered when utilizing the BL approach was the main goal of the focus group discussion. Six questions were used as the guidelines for the discussion. These questions were split into three groups for the analysis. Ten members of the group who participated in the BL-based reading comprehension intervention were chosen using a systematic random sampling procedure. The following sections provide an analysis of the focus group discussions.

Using the following guiding questions, 10 participants engaged in focus group discussions to identify the main challenges faced during the BL-based reading comprehension experiment.

1. What were the challenges you observed from this type of learning?
2. What did you find the most challenging about a blended-based reading lesson?

Participants were questioned about the most difficult things they faced during the blended-learning based reading instruction. Managing the lesson's online and offline components was brought up by one of the discussion participants (P6). She said, "It was difficult to maintain a balance between the traditional and digital resources. Our tendency to feel as though we were managing a lot of things at once was stressful." Regarding the technological element, another participant (P5) gave his viewpoint, saying,

> *The technical problems were a big obstacle for me. We encountered challenges during the blended reading courses, including connectivity issues and internet speed even, ehhh... I forgot my password in the middle, and also I saw some students who did not have enough computer skills so these were some of the difficulties we faced during the program.*

In addition, participants had an informative discussion about the difficulties associated with BL reading instruction. The technical challenges faced by certain students, which include problems with internet connectivity and utilizing online platforms, became a repeated issue. The majority discussants expressed difficulties adjusting to new technologies and mentioned the learning curve that comes with using digital tools. The inability of participants to balance the demands of the online and offline components resulted in issues meeting deadlines and handling various obligations, which raised the issue of time management as another major concern. According to discussants,

managing both traditional and digital resources, resolving technical problems, keeping students engaged online, and maybe losing one-on-one attention were the most difficult parts of blended-based reading classes.

After the BL-based reading comprehension intervention was over, Ten FGD participants tried to discuss the advantages using the following questions as a guide:
1. Do you think that the blended approach helped you with your reading comprehension? Why or why not?
2. What were the advantages you obtained from BL-based reading comprehension?
3. What did you like the most about BL?

Participants in the FGD thoughtfully discussed how the blended learning (BL) approach affected their reading comprehension. Participants emphasized the flexible nature of the blended learning model, stressing the beneficial effects of combining conventional face-to-face instruction with digital resources on their comprehension of reading materials. A participant (P4) expressed, "I believe the blended method, which combined traditional and internet resources, had improved my reading comprehension. The online materials allowed me to interact with varieties of content, and I could get clarification on any questions during the face-to-face class." Some mentioned how easily accessible online resources were, enabling them to review the content on their schedule and improving understanding and retention. Majority of Participants agreed that the mixed method offered a comprehensive education that accommodates different learning preferences and styles.

Participants also discussed the unique benefits they experienced from the blended learning strategy, particularly in reading comprehension. The capacity to access reading resources at any time and from any location was praised by participants, who identified flexibility as a recurring theme. One participant (P8) said;

> *I think online material access was very flexible and changed my learning. Since it has improved my understanding and given me the freedom to review the reading materials whenever it is convenient for me. Of course, a variety of resources like interactive forums, chats, and quizzes—as well as e-books, YouTube videos, Google Docs, and other documents helped me to develop my reading comprehension.*

Moreover, the focus group participants stated a range of favorable opinions about blended learning (BL), emphasizing its diverse value. Digital resources were highlighted for their accessibility and convenience, which allowed readers to connect with the content on their timetables. "Having the opportunity to read at my own pace was great; it gave me ownership of my learning process," said one participant (P10), encapsulating this feeling. Positive and pleasurable learning experiences were also attributed to the collaborative options provided by BL, like group projects and online conversations. Regarding this, another discussant (P7) highlighted, "I liked the teamwork part. Reading and watching the texts and videos online and then discussing them in class opened my eyes to new ideas, improved my understanding, and stimulated my critical thinking." Personalized learning experiences were also appreciated by participants since online

platforms could adjust to each student's level of capability, allowing exercises and content to be tailored accordingly. A variety of resources that catered to various learning preferences were made available through the accessibility of multimedia materials, which was said to be advantageous.

As a result of the focus group discussion, it was concluded that participants had a generally positive opinion of blended learning (BL). The main benefits of BL were the opportunity for collaboration, the ease of access and convenience of digital resources, and the freedom to learn at one's own pace. All of the participants agreed that the creative blending of conventional and digital elements had a favorable effect on their reading comprehension. A comprehensive and pleasurable learning environment was created by combining the flexibility of BL with customized learning experiences and a variety of multimedia resources. Overall, the examination of participant preferences, perceptions of the effect on reading comprehension, and analyses of the benefits of BL illustrated the diverse appeal of this pedagogical approach.

Participants provided valuable suggestions for enhancing the blended learning experience in order to address the challenges raised, in response to the guiding question: "What would you recommend incorporating blended learning into the development of reading skills?" Important actions included enhancing the technology infrastructure, offering thorough instruction on digital technologies, and setting up effective means of communication. As one participant (P9) put it, "Improving the technological infrastructure is very important, and for a successful learning process, equipment, and reliable internet access are necessary." As stated by another participant (P3), "Offering detailed guidance on the digital resources utilized in blended learning can have a major impact because students could adjust more readily if they were given clear instructions and tutorials." Participants also suggested ways to improve time management, like establishing reasonable deadlines for activities and providing assistance to students who need help.

Participants' opinions on the potential use of blended learning in the future exchanged as the discussion progressed. A majority of participants expressed that they were willing to stick with this learning paradigm going forward, acknowledging its possible advantages once issues are resolved. The adaptability and reach of blended learning were emphasized as strong arguments in favor of its implementation in future academic projects.

In a nutshell, the focus group discussion provided insight into the complex nature of the difficulties encountered in blended-learning reading classes. These challenges included technological issues, the learning curve of digital tools, and difficulty with time management and social contact. To tackle these issues, the participants offered helpful recommendations that emphasized the significance of establishing network initiatives, thorough training, infrastructure development, and clear communication. Despite the challenges, participants made it apparent that they want to learn more about the potential of blended learning—as long as the issues they discovered were resolved and the process of learning as a whole was enhanced.

The synthesis of responses from both open-ended questions and focus group discussions revealed participants' overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards blended learning (BL). They particularly appreciated the convenience and accessibility of digital resources, which empowered them to engage with reading materials on personalized schedules. Autonomy emerged as a recurrent theme, with participants expressing a sense of control over their learning journeys. Collaborative opportunities facilitated by BL, such as online discussions and group projects, were also praised.

Furthermore, the focus group discussion highlighted the positive impact of BL on reading comprehension, emphasizing the versatility of the blended model, the accessibility of online resources, and the flexibility it offered for accessing learning materials anytime and anywhere. The personalized learning experiences and adaptive platforms of BL were praised for tailoring content to individual proficiency levels, collectively highlighting the multifaceted appeal of BL in creating a positive and effective learning environment.

CONCLUSION

The findings and discussion from this study shed light on the challenges, benefits and possible recommendations of using BL for reading comprehension in educational settings. Through both quantitative and qualitative analyses, key insights were revealed.

Participants encountered various challenges with BL implementation, including issues related to low internet speed and connectivity problems, initial confusion and trouble at the beginning, perceived lower knowledge gain compared to traditional instruction, difficulty in participating in online discussions due to limited computer expertise, the need for high self-responsibility and digital literacy, confusion about using BL tools, and language barriers hindering learning. These challenges underscore the importance of addressing technical issues, providing adequate support and training for digital literacy, and offering language assistance to optimize BL experiences.

Despite challenges, participants recognized several benefits of BL in enhancing reading skills. BL was found to stimulate interest in reading, provide convenience compared to face-to-face learning, foster in-depth thinking about reading comprehension, improve comprehension of reading materials, enhance reading activities' effectiveness, enable efficient combination of online and traditional instruction, evoke happiness during learning, support focus during reading sessions, and create a preference for BL in future learning. These positive perceptions highlight BL's potential to engage students personalize learning experiences, and improve comprehension outcomes.

The recommendations provided by participants for future BL implementation emphasize several key skills essential for enhancing reading comprehension. Participants highlighted strategies to foster critical thinking through interactive online discussions and multimedia resources. They also emphasized the importance of personalized learning paths to cater to individual reading levels and interests. Additionally, participants suggested integrating collaborative projects and peer feedback mechanisms to strengthen comprehension and analytical skills. These recommendations underscored the

significance of adaptive learning technologies and ongoing formative assessments to monitor progress and tailor instruction effectively. Overall, participants' insights aim to optimize reading skills development by leveraging BL's flexibility and interactive learning environments.

In conclusion, the study highlights the varied experiences of participants with BL-based reading comprehension. Despite encountering challenges such as technical issues and initial confusion, participants perceived significant benefits in terms of increased interest, convenience, deepened comprehension, and overall satisfaction with BL. Their recommendations emphasize the importance of addressing challenges through enhanced technology infrastructure, comprehensive digital literacy training, and effective communication strategies. By embracing these recommendations, language experts and educational institutions can harness the potential of BL to create engaging and effective learning environments for enhancing reading comprehension skills.

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