Applying Blended Learning to English Communication Courses 101 and 102 at BZU/ Palestine (Case Study) *

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تطبيق التعليم المدمج على مساقات مهارات اللغة الانجليزية ١٠١ و ١٠٢ في جامعة بيرزيت (دراسة حالة)

ملخص:

في كل عام تواجه جامعة بيرزيت مشكلة الأعداد المتزايدة من الطلبة الذين يحتاجون إلى دراسة مساقات مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية، وفي محاولة منها لحل هذه الأزمة قررت الجامعة أن تحذو حذو كثير من المؤسسات التعليمية المنتشرة حول العالم، وأن تتبنى خيار استعمال التكنولوجيا في التعليم؛ إذ إن هذا من شأنه تلبية حاجات الطلبة، وتوفير نفقات تدريس هذه المساقات إلى ما يقارب الثلث. ستقوم هذه الدراسة بتقويم تجربة تطبيق التعليم المدمج في مساقي مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية ١٠١ و ١٠٢ في جامعة بيرزيت، علما بأن هذين المساقين ثم دُمجا في مساق واحد يحتوي عنصري التعليم وجهاً لوجه والتعلم الإلكتروني. أما المساق فيهدف إلى تقوية مهارات التواصل باللغة الإنجليزية وخاصة القراءة والكتابة والاستماع والمحادثة، وتقوم هذه الدراسة اتجاهات الطلاب نحو التعليم المدمج في هذا المساق، وكذلك جاهزيتهم وحماسهم وتفاعلهم مع هذا النمط من التعليم باعتباره كلاً واحداً، وفي النهاية ستقوّم الدراسة التجربة بمجملها، وتقدم بعض النتائج والتوصيات.

Abstract:

Faced with the challenge of having a huge number of freshman students who need remedial English courses every year, Birzeit University had to follow the footsteps of many educational institutions around the world and opt for using technology in teaching in order to meet the need for teaching all those students, and cut expenses by reducing the number of teachers needed for those courses to almost the third. This study will closely examine and evaluate the experience of applying blended learning to the remedial courses of English Communication 101 and 102 at Birzeit University. These two courses were merged in one blended learning course that uses both face-to-face material as well as an online component. The course aims to develop and enhance students' communication skills in English language and foster their skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This study will examine students' attitudes towards using blended learning in this particular course. In addition, it will evaluate their readiness, cooperation, enthusiasm, and seriousness towards the new trend. Finally, it will evaluate the experiment as a whole and provide some recommendations and suggestions for the future.

Keywords: Blended learning, online education, e-learning, Birzeit University, integrating technology in EFL teaching, students' attitudes towards blended learning.

1. Introduction:

New trends in education have emerged around the world urged by the tremendous technological advances that took place during the last 20 years. Thus, universities and other educational institutions have to reconsider their traditional methodologies and attempt to put new trend into immediate application where appropriate in their systems. Blended learning is one trend that is becoming widely used for many reasons that will be discussed later in this study. In relation to this, Lim and Morris (2009) state that:

As a result of the advancement in communication and network technologies, more innovative instructional delivery and learning solutions have emerged in order to provide meaningful learning experiences for learners in academic settings. Blended instruction is one of the various methods being used to deliver meaningful learning experiences. The use of blended instruction is growing rapidly because instructors believe diverse delivery methods may significantly enhance learning outcomes as well as increase student satisfaction from the learning experience. (p.282)

Allen, Seaman, and Garrett (2007) state that both fully online and blended course offerings have grown dramatically in American higher education in recent years. However, in Palestine, a country with poor resources, educators tended to stay away from technology-based teaching and learning approaches preferring to stick to traditional pedagogies and remain in their comfort zone. In the last few years, however, Palestinian educators were forced to reconsider this attitude and be more flexible in order to cope with the rapidly changing trends in education locally and internationally. Similarly, Collopy and Arnold (2009) see that "Increasing curricular demands and the desire to provide meaningful, engaging instruction have pressed educators to review and revise their programs. Many have viewed the assets of online learning as a potential solution to meet the seemingly ever increasing state- and accreditation-mandated course content and competencies" (p.85).

One reason for this change in opinion was realizing that new generations are desperate for a drastic change in the educational system, and that they would fully support the idea of integrating technology in the educational process. In Palestine, technology has become the main interest for the young generations, and without doubt neglecting this phenomenon will be like

putting your head in the sand. Higher education institutions in Palestine took the initiative for gradually integrating technology into the scope of education.

Palestinian universities like Al-Quds University, An-Najah University and Al-Quds Open University among other Universities in Palestine started depending on technology in their classrooms, curriculum, and interaction with students. The idea of having blended courses started to be implemented on a larger scale in Palestinian universities.

At An-Najah University, for example, statistics from the ELC there show that e-learning is on the rise at the university especially in the field of business, engineering, and humanities.

In the case of Birzeit University, some courses from different disciples were transformed from traditional to blended courses. Some of them demonstrated evident success and continued to be used in the blended form, while others did not achieve their intended outcomes in the blended learning form and were returned to their traditional form. Other universities in the region are following the footsteps of most educational institutions around the world. For example, Jordanian universities are among those institutions involved in an educational renewal effort to use digital technologies more effectively. The goal of these efforts is to enable the higher educational system to move away from traditional instructional strategies to an e-learning environment that uses computer technologies and the Internet more effectively in each of its programs of study, and one in which the students are more actively engaged in the learning (Ishtaiwa, 2011).

2. Questions of the Study:

The study aims to answer a number of questions related to the efficiency and feasibility of applying BL in teaching English Communication courses for Birzeit University students. ***The study will attempt to answer the following questions:***

- Is the idea of BL well-received by students and instructors at the university?
- Are students ready for this kind of learning?
- Is the model used appropriate for students' level, needs and expectations?
- What are the attitudes of students towards this kind of learning?

- What are the recommendations for the future?
- How efficient is BL for the students?
- What are the points of strength and points of weakness of BL from students' point of view?
- What are the challenges and difficulties that accompany this type of learning?
- Does the infrastructure at the university sufficiently support this kind of learning?

3. Theoretical Background:

3.1 What Is Blended Learning?

Blended learning (BL) or (sometimes called hybrid) education has been defined in many ways and by different authors. However, almost all definitions shared the core concept of BL which is mixing two components: face-to-face teaching and online education.

Rossett and Frazee (2005) believe that blended learning "integrates seemingly opposite approaches, such as formal and informal learning, face-to-face and online experiences, directed paths and reliance on self-direction, and digital references and collegial connections, in order to achieve individual and organizational goals" (p. 2).

Sharma (2010) gives three relevant definitions for BL. The first definition combines face-to-face and online teaching, whereas the second definition includes a combination of technologies. Finally, he defines it as a combination of methodologies regardless of the learning technology used. Furthermore, Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2004) define BL as "a type of education which combines various models of traditional and distance education and makes use of all types of technology. In other words, blended learning has come to be understood as a combination of conventional classroom instruction and e-learning. Blended Learning processes are thus articulated by combining online learning and traditional approaches in various degrees" (P. 3)

By the same token, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) provide this definition for BL: "At its simplest, blended learning is the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences. (p. 96).

Other authors like "Gülbahar and Madran (2009), Rovai and Jordan (2004), Thorne (2003), and Yildirim (2007) define blended learning as "a mixture of online learning or web-based training with face-to-face communication and more traditional methods of learning and teaching" (cited in Aguilar, 2012, p. 168).

It might seem that many authors have harmonious definitions of BL and have reached a consensus regarding its basic concepts. However, this might not be the case. Many authors expressed their dissatisfaction with the term 'blended learning' and offered various explanations and concerns. For example, Westbrook (2008) argues that the term will disappear in the near future due to its ambiguity, multiplicity of meanings, and redundancy (cited in Aguilar, 2012). Similarly, Oliver and Trigwell (2005) state that the term 'blended learning' is 'ill-defined' and 'inconsistently used'. In addition, they see that in spite of its increasing popularity, the term is incoherent and redundant. Moreover, its lack of clarity will jeopardize future studies and research in this field since there is no common conception of its meaning.

Graham (2006) sounds more optimistic. He states that regardless of what we decide to call blended learning in the future, the phenomenon of blended learning is here to stay. Thus, it is crucial that we understand how to create effective blended learning experiences that incorporate both F2F and computer-mediated elements.

3.2 Benefits and Challenges:

Teachers who advocate integrating modern technologies into traditional teaching can talk for hours about the benefits of BL for students, teachers, and academic institutions. On the other hand, we find many educators and learners who prefer to dig their heals in and refuse to give up the 'good old' ways of education.

As a matter of fact, BL has many benefits that no one can deny. One major benefit is its flexibility and unconventionality. It offers a margin of freedom for learners to work independently for a while away from the traditional everyday classroom setting. Students can enjoy the luxury of working at their own convenience anywhere they like. This is very alluring especially for learners who come from a traditional education background. It is a way for breaking out of the traditional "chalk and talk" learning environment and living a totally new educational experience.

Another important benefit for BL learning is that it offers the advantages of mixing both online and traditional classroom education. The blend can provide a well-balanced learning environment allowing the two methods of learning to mix and make up for the shortcomings of each method. Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2004) state that the weaknesses and strengths of online environment and the weaknesses and strengths of face-to-face education integrate in blended learning.

Similarly, O'Connor, Mortimer, and Bond (2011) share this view and argue that "blended learning is thus a flexible approach to course design that supports the blending of different times and places for learning, offering some of the conveniences of fully on-line courses without the complete loss of face-to-face contact. The result is potentially a more robust educational experience than either traditional or fully on-line learning can offer" (p. 64).

Rastegarpour (2011) also argues that "BL provides various benefits over using any single learning delivery medium alone. A single delivery mode inevitably limits the reach of a learning program or critical knowledge transfer. Whereas, a virtual classroom is inclusive of remote learner" (p.41).

A third benefit for BL is that it offers a variety of learning methods. It is more likely that learners will learn better when the methods of learning are varied and when the routine of the learning process does no longer exist. In addition, blended learning has a lot to offer for learners with different learning styles, different needs, different levels and speed. Therefore, the blended approach might be a better learning environment for different learners. Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2004) argue that e-learning provides an environment where the learners can study regardless of time and place restrictions according to their learning speed. In addition, they see that the factors such as learners' individual differences, personal characteristics and learning styles have significant impacts on the learning environment.

Singh (2003) indicates that a single delivery mode limits the reach of a learning program or critical knowledge transfer in some form or fashion. Therefore, combining different delivery modes has the potential to balance out and optimize learning.

Finally, BL proved to be very cost effective for both learners and educational institutions. Graham (2006) argues that BL systems provide an opportunity for reaching a large, globally dispersed audience in a short

period of time with consistent, semi-personal content delivery. Cost savings are usually due to cost reductions in physical infrastructure and improved scheduling efficiencies

Despite the aforementioned benefits BL can provide, it is fraught with potential pitfalls.

The number one potential mishap when thinking about blended learning is students' resistance to the whole idea of blending. No matter how much enthusiasm the teacher and the course designers might have towards the blended course, what really matters is the students' satisfaction and cooperation. Despite being part of the 'net generation', many students still prefer to stay in their comfort zone when it comes to education. Students' resilience and lack of interest can be very frustrating for enthusiastic teachers.

Biligin (2013) mentions that if students use an online program for the first time, they will show a lot of discontent especially if they are not used to it. It seems that although students today are very technology oriented in their daily lives, they may not be as eager in their learning (cited in Hockly, 2014).

Another major challenge that might face BL education is the teachers themselves and their reluctance to indulge in technology and integrate it in their teaching. Many teachers especially those from older generations are hesitant when they are asked to use technology in their classes. Some feel threatened that their lack of technological abilities will be easily exposed by their tech-savvy students. This gap is referred to by Prensky (2001) as the 'digital native and digital immigrant divide'. Preskey considers it "the single biggest problem facing education today" and he raises a very important question "what should happen? Should the Digital Native students learn the old ways, or should their Digital Immigrant educators learn the new? Unfortunately, no matter how much the Immigrants may wish it, it is highly unlikely the Digital Natives will go backwards" (p.3)

Therefore, educators, supported by their organizations, should take this issue seriously and take the initiative to change and work harder to develop their technological skills in order to fit in the new teaching environment.

Finally, other factors might play a role in the success or failure of any blended learning environment, such as learners' background and readiness, course design, instructor, access to technology and so forth.

3.3 The Perfect Blend:

Researchers have been trying to put guidelines and suggest different ways to make the blend as effective as possible. Some researches expressed the blending process by using numbers and percentages. ***For example, Dudeney and Hockly (2007) list three possible course designs for BL in language learning environments:***

- A 100 per cent online language learning course, where the course is not unlike a coursebook online.
- A blended language learning course, where 75 per cent is delivered online and 25 per cent face-to-face.
- A face-to-face language learning course with additional online materials, where online tools are used to support and extend face-to-face lessons. (cited in Tomlinson and Whittaker, 2013)

On the other hand, some researchers in the field believe that there is no 'specific recipe for mixing ingredients of the blend'. The amount of traditional classroom, synchronous classroom, and self-directed work is prescribed by the learning objectives (Hofmann, 2006).

However, designing a blended course with no clear framework, structure or guidelines will certainly back fire and defeat the purpose of the whole idea. Sharma and Barrett (2007) think that a blended learning course that lacks a principled approach may seem broad and lack focus. This in turn can end up as rather a "mish-mash" and learners may suffer "the worst of both worlds" (p.8)

4. Empirical Studies:

The field of teaching foreign languages can make great use of the blended leaning pedagogy as learning a foreign language requires exposure to different kinds of recourses and learning experiences. In fact, using technology in this particular field is not something new. For decades, teachers of foreign languages have used cassette recorders inside their classrooms; they have used VCR players to show movies and documentary films; they have used microphones to record listening materials; they have also asked their students to purchase walkman cassette players to listen to songs and dialogues in foreign languages. Nowadays foreign language classrooms are equipped with CD players, LCD projectors, laptops, white boards, WiFi and

all other technologies essential for the language learning process. The use of technology in this field should be encouraged and effectively applied to enhance the learning and practice process. Moreover, no one can deny the importance of f2f interaction with the instructor in foreign language learning situation. Consequently, making the decision to blend in such a setting would perfectly make sense. Hauck and Stickler (2006) state that:

Since its beginnings in the 1960s, the use of computers in language teaching has moved from the initial computer as- tutor approach—based on a behaviorist learning model and reflected in repetitive drills—to communication and interaction via the computer, that is, CMC. Ubiquitous connectivity among learners has allowed the move from this cognitive approach to learning to an integrative, sociocognitive approach combining traditional language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing with electronic literacy skills such as learning to interact with others through the use of a variety of technological tools as an integral part of language teaching. (p.464)

However, some researchers were doubtful and concerned about the efficiency of using BL in teaching a foreign language. Blake, et al. (2008) mention that "although the foreign-language profession routinely stresses the importance of technology for the curriculum, many teachers still harbor deep-seated doubts as to whether or not a hybrid course, much less a completely distance-learning class, could provide L2 learners with a way to reach linguistic proficiency" (p. 114).

Multiple studies have been conducted to evaluate the use of technology in language teaching and learning. In her study, Bañados (2006) described the elements of the BL model, issues about implementation, and results obtained in the piloting of a first module of an English program at the Universidad de Concepcion, Chile. The English program aimed to develop integrated language skills with a focus on learning authentic communication. The study concluded that the overall results were very favorable and showed high levels of satisfaction among students. The results also reflected substantial improvement in the students' language skills. The results supported the success of BL level model implemented.

In a study conducted by Osaily (2012), the researcher identified the challenges of implementing e-learning from the perspective of Hebron Educational Region learners at Al-Quds Open University in Palestine. The

study showed that most significant obstacles were poor level of English language and 'shortage of computers inside the lab which impede the learner's participation. The study showed no statistically significant differences in the challenges that can be attributed to the following variables: the year of study, gender, owning a computer, & proficiency in using the internet. Based on the study, the researcher suggested some recommendations such as: improving the technical infrastructure and facilities; supporting the notion of e-learning among teachers and students; and intensifying English language courses.

Another study by Al-Shaer (2010) explored the feasibility of using new technologies in teaching/ learning EFL at Al- Quds Open University (QOU). The study revealed that most EFL tutors and students at QOU felt highly motivated, had the basic computer skills, showed strong preference, and pinned high expectations on using new technologies in their EFL classes. The researcher also concluded that it seems logical to combine the current mode of teaching/ learning at QOU (i.e. face- to- face meetings, print materials and textbooks) with the various modes of e- learning.

In a study conducted by Hijjawi and Gaulle (2013), the researchers analyzed the Palestinian students' representations and practices of ICT implementation in three university courses of foreign languages in a blended learning mode. The courses were "Remedial English" at Birzeit University, developed for RUFO project; "English 1" and "French 1" at An-Najah National University, developed for QIF project. The question of the study was is it enough to afford digital tools to "digital native" students to ensure a better learning process and a more autonomous learner? In their interviews, students clarified that they faced some troubles managing the learning process. The researchers classified these difficulties into three main aspects related to: personal representations, sociocultural habits and psychological obstacles; pedagogical posture and attitude; and technical difficulties. Finally, the researchers concluded that "to have a self- reliant student, it's not enough to implement ICT. "It is necessary to change the educational paradigm and shift from a teaching-centered model to a learning- centered one" (P.37). They also realized that "what hinders learners in the first place is the fact of not being in a directive relationship which is usually a situation of dependence on the teacher. However, they understood the importance of self-management of time and progression of learning and self-assessment to make the most of this training and achieve their goals" (ibid, P.42).

Another related study by Adas (2012) aimed at investigating An-Najah National University students' perceptions towards blended learning environment using OCC (Online Course Container) in view of their achievement level and frequency of online participation. The study included (92) students enrolled in a general English course (10103) offered at the Language Center at the university. A questionnaire was designed to measure the students' attitudes towards blended learning using the (OCC) in terms of: the process, ease of use, and content. The study concluded that "in general the students' attitudes towards BL were positive in terms of the three domains revealing that there was a direct relation between the achievement level and the students' positive views. Moreover, there were significant differences in the students' positive attitudes due to the frequency of online participation. The more frequently the students participated on the forum, the more positively their views were shaped" (p.47).

Pardo-Gonzalez (2013) carried out a long-term study that extended over years to monitor and evaluate the experiment of incorporating blended learning in an undergraduate English course at the Universidad de los Andes in Colombia. The blended course was 'Autonomy and Orality' a fourth level of English intermediate course. The idea of the project was to take a course that had proved to be successful and to alter the teaching conditions. The outcome was intended to reflect the result of gradual incorporation of ICT through an ongoing process, which had six major stages: analysis, follow-up, revision, design, evaluation, and use. Every year the course passed through a complete cycle and triggered the work of the following year in terms of number of users, elements incorporated in the blend and benefits to the students. The study statistics showed that number of students, instructors, and groups using the blend increased significantly from the first year to 2010, when growth seemed to be stabilizing. ***The researcher gave valuable advice for designing and implementing blended course such as:***

- Use an existing face-to-face course as the basis for the blend.
- Use the context (campus limitations, infrastructure) to promote the use of blended learning.
- Begin with instructors that are willing, even if they are not technology oriented.
- Trained instructors will help you promote the blended learning idea to other courses.

- Students and instructors will change the roles they have in a face-to-face classroom.
- A large-scale project is achieved step-by-step; therefore clear goals per year are necessary.
- Add technological changes gradually. You cannot juggle with too many variables at the same time.

Eydelman (2013) described her experience with the blended academic writing course second year students at the Novosibirsk State University in Russia. In her study, she discussed how the course was blended and addressed some of the issues that emerged in the process of designing and teaching it. The researcher's recommended that it is important to train students and help them to learn to use the learning environment by offering activities that will allow them to learn to use the wikis more fully. In addition, it is necessary to make the students aware of the time management issues that can interfere with the learning process. Students should be encouraged to take more control over some aspects of the learning environment.

Finally, Hockly (2014) conducted a study on the use of technology in English language teaching with focus on low-recourse contexts. The study closely examined some attempts to employ technology in EFL classrooms in countries like Nigeria, Egypt, and Turkey. The study examined the challenges and limitations caused by the low-recourse environments. The researcher concluded that despite challenges and difficulties such as access to limited hardware and infrastructure, there are many examples of teachers, institutions and nations using digital technologies effectively in low-recourse contexts. She also concluded that there is no single technology that works best in low-resource contexts as many factors will determine how to work most effectively with digital technologies. These factors include (lack of) teacher training, class size, educational beliefs, students' motivation, access to resources, culturally appropriate material, and political realities.

5. Methods and Procedures:

5.1 Context:

In the case of English communications 101 and 102 courses, they have always formed a challenge for the university as a huge number of students are placed in these two courses every year based on their achievement in the

language proficiency placement test required by the university. As a result, the university needed a big number of teachers to teach those students, a number of teaching assistants to help, not to mention too many classrooms and teaching facilities. Moreover, the university administration was concerned about the quality of teaching those students need. As mainly false beginners, and low intermediate students, they needed more than in-class teaching to make a noticeable difference in their language level in such a short period of time. Therefore, the university was convinced that making the blend might give those students an advantage. As a blended learning course can expand students' exposure to language through online tasks and assignments that have to be done outside the classroom in complete autonomy on the side of the student, BL would be very effective in this case.

The shift to BL English Communications 101/102 course was piloted during the second semester of the academic year 2013/12014 to be applied later on a larger scale during the first semester of the new academic year. As a result of this decision, a committee was formed to implement the decision and prepare the outline and the material for the merged courses in order to transform them to one blended learning course. The committee had to choose what had to be taught in the online part as well as the f2f part. Some suggestions were in favor of buying a software for teaching English language with all material and evaluation standards ready for use. After examining some products, the committee decided that these programs do not exactly match students' levels and needs. In addition, buying these programs needs special arrangements and most of them were overpriced and not affordable for many students. Thus, the committee decided using a free website for teaching English language that somehow matches students' needs and interests. After examining different components of the website, the committee approved using it alongside with f2f material that was also prepared for the course.

It was decided to pilot the course on half of the 102 course sections and have the other half study the traditional course. On the other hand, all 3 sections of English Communications 101 were obliged to take the new (blended course). The English Communications 102 sections were chosen randomly. The blended course students met with their instructors twice a week for f2f instruction in a regular classroom. In addition, Students were asked to spend about 2 hours per week using the website chosen for online learning.

One hour weekly was assigned for supervision and follow-up where students met with their instructors in the computer lab. The website students were asked to use was: www.learnamericanenglishonline.com. This website is a free website for teaching English. It has seven levels of instruction classified according to students' levels. The website has been used by learners from all over the world since 2003. It provides videos, lessons, exercises, and quizzes on grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and listening. In addition, there are other useful sections such as: the listening lab, pronunciation, think in English, word of the day, reading rooms, American slang, today's expression, correct or incorrect, writing lessons, conversation practice, blog, and chat.

5.2 Sample and Population:

The participants involved in this study included first year students who came from different fields of study including, but not exclusively, biology, mathematics, engineering, law, business, education, and nursing. These students need to learn English due to the foreign language requirements established by the University. In addition, they are obliged to improve their command of English language as it is essential for them in their academic life. It is noteworthy that these students are technologically literate and are all capable of dealing with the requirements of the BL course in terms of equipments needed and technology related skills. The sample included 210 students out of the total 360 students who studied the blended course. Eight random sections out of the 12 sections that use the pilot BL course were chosen. Each section included about 25-27 students. The sections chosen were taught by different instructors. Table (1) shows the distribution of the sample according to gender.

Table (1)

Distribution of Students According to their Gender

Gender	Student total	Percentage
Male	89	42%
Female	121	58%
Total	210	100%

Table (2)

Distribution of Students According to the Place of Residence

Place of residence	Student total	Percentage
city	59	28%
town	37	18%
village	105	50%
Refugee camp	9	4%
total	210	100%

Table (3)

Distribution of Students According to their Language Level

Level of English language	Student total	Percentage
Very poor	20	10%
Poor	31	15%
average	101	48%
Good	56	27%
total	208	100%

5.3 Instruments and Materials:

Quantitative research methodology was utilized to carry out this study. The researcher employed a survey methodology to collect and analyze the data. The survey contained Likert scale items. Questionnaires were administered by course Instructors in class at the end of the semester. The quantitative data was prepared for analysis using the statistical package for research software program SPSS. The comments and open ended questions will be analyzed as well.

In addition the researcher used the qualitative method by including open-ended questions to generate additional comments on students' own experiences and evaluation of the whole process.

5.4 Validity and Reliability:

The researcher consulted a number of experts in the field of educational research and BL in order to evaluate the questionnaire. Their comments and

feedback were taken into consideration when designing the questionnaire and finalizing it.

Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire items. The data indicated an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 72% for 30 questions each question was a 5-point Likert item from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" and 76% for questions with variables. This implies that the reliability is quite acceptable.

The questionnaires with a cover page that included consent forms and general information section were distributed to students. Students and Instructors names were not required anywhere on the questionnaire for the sake of confidentiality and objectivity. Consent forms clarified the purpose of the study and encouraged students to participate effectively and objectively to help evaluate the experiment. Confidentiality was stressed in this section well.

6. Results:

The questionnaire distributed among the sample had 4 main domains. The first domain asked students about their attitudes towards BL in general (see table 4).

Table (4)

Domain 1: Learners' Attitudes Regarding BL

No.	Question	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	No opinion %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
1	BL is more convenient and flexible than traditional learning.	12	36	13	25	14
2	BL needs more time and effort compared to traditional learning.	28	43	6	21	3
3	I feel that I have benefited a lot from the BL experience.	13	35	21	22	9
4	H can organize my time and do my online HW and assignments on time.	6	32	19	35	8
5	Online learning is boring.	28	22	20	22	10
6	I wish this experiment was implemented on all other courses at the university.	9	15	20	28	27

No.	Question	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	No opinion %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
7	I am not used to study on my own and hold responsibility of my learning.	9	25	18	35	12
8	I prefer traditional learning over BL.	28	25	21	18	7
9	I consider myself to be more fortunate than students who learn in the traditional way.	12	33	16	24	15
10	The course played a role in increasing my motivation for learning English.	15	36	20	19	10
11	I consider BL to be a waste of time.	7	17	21	40	15
12	BL saves time and money.	10	24	22	28	17

Most students agreed that BL increased their motivation to learn English, and that it was more convenient and flexible than traditional learning. Furthermore, most students felt luckier for taking the BL course than their counterparts in the traditional learning sections. Most students also agreed that they have benefited a lot from the BL experience. On the other hand, the majority agreed that BL needs more time and effort than traditional leaning. In addition, 45% of students disagreed compared to 34% of students agreed that BL saves time and money. Moreover, the majority of participants disagreed with the idea of implementing BL through all courses at the university and the majority preferred traditional learning over BL. Finally, the majority felt that online learning was boring.

Table (5)

Domain 2: Learners' Attitudes Towards The Website

www.learnamericanenglishonline.com

No.	Question	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	No opinion %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
1	The website is so useful that I feel it improved my English language a lot.	10	43	22	18	6
2	I have not faced any technical problems while using the website.	14	48	13	19	7
3	The learning material in the website is classified and categorized in a well-organized manner.	18	58	14	6	3

No.	Question	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	No opinion %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
4	The more I use the website the easier it becomes for me to deal with it.	22	52	17	8	1
5	The website covers all language skills I want to learn.	16	44	23	11	6
6	The two-week period was not enough to cover every level and move on to the next level.	23	27	21	25	4
7	My level of English helped me deal with the website and understand what I have to do.	12	52	16	17	3
8	The website is complicated and difficult to use.	5	12	18	47	19
9	I advised my friend who want to improve their English to use this website.	11	40	21	13	14

The majority of students agreed that the website was useful and improved their language a lot. In addition, most students agreed that the website was well-organized and not difficult to use. The majority agreed that it covers all language skills, and that they have not faced any technical problems while using it. Moreover, most students reported that they have recommended the website to friends who need to improve their English language. On the other hand, the majority disagreed that the period of time given to finish each online level was not enough.

Table (6)

Domain 3: Learners' Attitudes Regarding the Role of the Instructor

No.	Question	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	No opinion %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
1	The teacher closely follows up with what we learn online.	34	50	7	5	5
2	What I learn with my teacher f2f enhances what I learn online.	20	51	14	10	4
3	F2f classes are more beneficial than online learning.	28	36	23	10	2

No.	Question	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	No opinion %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
4	I wish there were no f2f classes and just the online part.	7	11	14	33	34
5	The role of the teacher in this course was insignificant.	4	7	17	36	35

Table (6) shows that 84% of students agreed that the instructor followed up with what they learned online during f2f classes, while 10% disagreed. The majority agreed that what they learned from the f2f teacher enhanced what they learned online. In addition, 71% disagreed that the role of the instructor was insignificant, while 11% agreed. The majority disagreed to having only the online part and cancelling the f2f component.

In addition, the majority of students agreed that f2f classes were more beneficial than the online part.

Table (7)

Domain 4: Learners' Attitudes Towards Evaluation Methods

No.	Question	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	No opinion %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
1.	F2f Quizzes evaluate my performance effectively.	27	50	9	11	4
2.	I wish the evaluation process was done through the website and not by the teacher.	11	21	20	33	16
3.	I feel that my grade accurately reflected the effort I put in both f2f and online learning.	13	36	20	21	9
4.	The website helps me evaluate and assess my performance.	11	47	19	17	6

Table (7) shows that 77% of students agreed that f2f quizzes evaluated their performance effectively, whereas, 15% disagreed. Most students agreed that their grades accurately reflected their effort and that the website helped them evaluate their performance on their own. In addition, 49% did not prefer to be evaluated through the website and not by the teacher.

Regarding general questions, students' answers revealed that the majority

did not spend more than 3 hours per week studying online. (see figure 1)

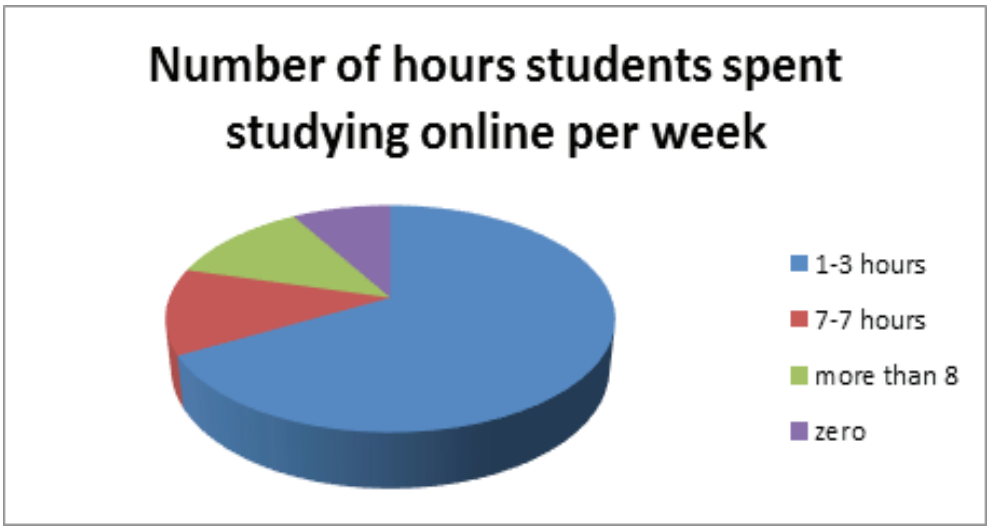

Figure (1)

the distribution of hours spent on online learning by students per week

Furthermore, students were asked about the devices they used in their online learning.

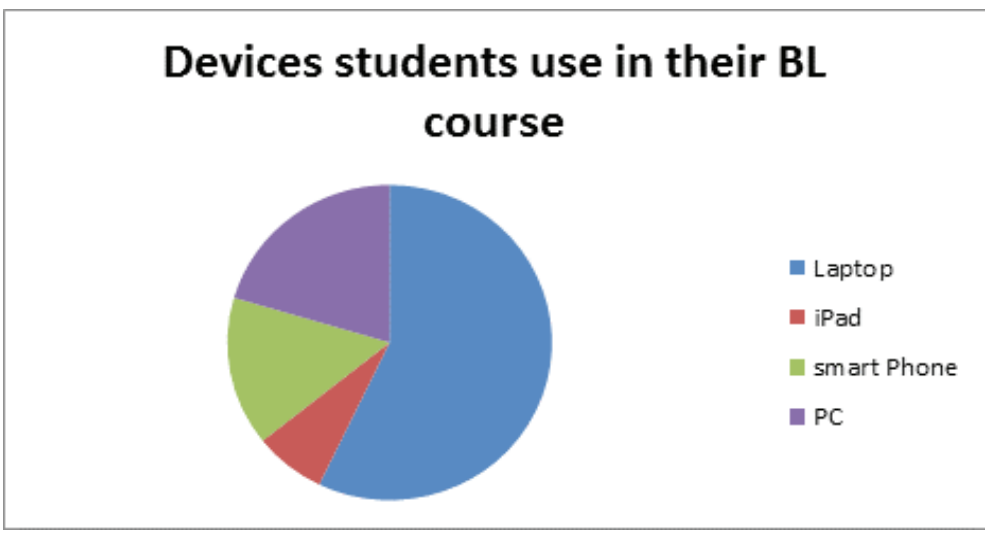

Figure (2)

Devices students used in studying for their blended course.

The results show that the majority of students used laptops and PCs for their online studying.

When asked about the place where they study for the online part, the answers were as shown in the table below:

Table (8)

Places Where Students Learn Online.

Place of studying	Percentage of students
At home	79%
At the university	13%
At the internet cafe	5%
elsewhere	3%

The table above indicates that the majority of students studied online at home. Only 13% did their online tasks at the university.

Table (9)

Students preferred sections in the website

www. learnamericanemnglishonline.com

Grammar Lessons	75.2
Reading	31.0
Dictation	13.3
Videos	35.7
Basic Vocabulary	37.6
Word of the Day	9.0
Listening Lab	9.0
Chatting	12.4

From the table above, it is clear that students preferred grammar lessons, vocabulary, videos, and Reading sections.

Correlations were computed among hours spent on the online components, gender, level of the students and some items from the questions in the tables above. The hours of online use correlational analysis appeared to be statistically insignificant. On the other hand, there have been some statistical significant differences between males and females in the first domain as more males (50.6%) agreed that BL is more convenient compared to (45.5%) females. 43.1% of male students agreed that they can organize their time to do online

homework compared to 35.8% female students. In addition, correlations were computed among students' level and his/her attitude towards BL. The results showed that students who classified their level as (very poor) tended to disagree with statements like: 'the website is so useful that I feel it improved my English language a lot' by 35%, whereas only 13 % of students who classified their level as "poor" disagreed with this statement. Furthermore, 30% of students with 'very poor' level agreed with the statement 'My level of English helped me deal with the website and understand what I have to do', whereas 63% of students who labeled their level as 'average' agreed with the same statement. This is similar to what Osaily (2012) concluded in her study about poor level of English language being the most significant obstacle to BL (see section 4).

In addition, students were asked to answer these two questions:

1. Mention major points of strength and major points of weakness of BL.
2. Do you have any other comments you would like to mention about the BL experience?

The answers were as follows:

Major points of strength:

- BL saves time and effort
- BL encourages students to be autonomous, responsible, and independent.
- BL is different, modern, exciting and untraditional.
- BL helps improve language skills through intensive online material including exercises, quizzes and assignments.
- BL uses many different ways for teaching and improving language skills and does not use the traditional methods that were used at school.
- BL is very beneficial and remarkably improves language skills.
- The BL course was very useful for students in terms of learning vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and reading skills.
- BL helps focus on things that teachers need a lot of time to cover in class.
- BL is much more convenient.
- BL allows self-assessment and enhances students' technology skills.
- Students like the BL course because it allows some kind of flexibility and doesn't require spending a lot of time on campus for attending f2f

classes every day.

- The BL course helps encourage students to continue with the online part on their own even after the semester is over.

Major points of weakness:

- BL is not suitable for students with very poor language level because it is hard for them to cope with the online part and do all the assignments on their own.
- Two f2f classes per week are not enough
- Students are not used to being independent and need the teacher to be there all the time not only half the time.
- There is no strict control over the online part, so students do not feel the urge for going online and doing what they have to do. Therefore, there is a big chance of procrastination and cramming later on.
- Access to the internet is not available in all students' homes, and not all students have laptops or other devices that enable them to do the online part.
- Studying alone is boring and not very encouraging.
- Some students do not have the technological and the language competency to deal with the online component.
- BL causes a lot of distraction for the student.
- BL makes the students neglect other courses they are studying because it needs a lot of time and effort.
- The BL does not allow the students to see their teachers very often.

7. Discussion:

In general, the results above show that students are divided about the BL 102/102 English Communications course. A quick look at the results shows that students are excited about the BL experience, however, they are still afraid of the whole idea. There is almost a consensus among students that the BL course was convenient, flexible, very beneficial and unconventional. Moreover, the majority of students said that the course increases learner's autonomy, independence, and time management. This is similar to what Hijjawi

and Gaulle (2013 concluded in their study as they found out that students understood the importance of self-management of time and progression of learning and self-assessment (see section 4). On the other hand, the results of the first domain which asked students about their attitudes toward BL show that most students felt that the course needed more time and effort than traditional courses and that studying online on their own was boring. Students also disagreed that the course saved them any money.

The results of the second domain which evaluated the website www.learnamericanenglishonline.com showed that students were satisfied with the website. They also seemed to like the online component. However, they complained that the time given to complete each level in the online part was not enough and that they were very overwhelmed to the extent that they had to ignore other courses they were studying during the semester. Most students described the website as well-organized, interesting, and very beneficial for improving all language skills in a new way. As a third world country, Palestinian educational system at schools is still not equipped with technological devices; therefore first year students are usually not used to any kind of technology integration in education. For this reason, many students were excited about studying grammar, vocabulary, and spelling in totally different ways than what has been used to during their previous 12 years at school. Students also mentioned that the website was easy to use and that they had no technical problems while doing the online part.

As for the role of the instructor, it is clear that the majority of students were more than satisfied with the role their instructors played in this course in terms of follow-up, guidance and evaluation. As part of the culturally inherited beliefs which see the teacher as a mentor and a very respected and knowledgeable person, students still cling to the existence of the instructor and refuse the idea of letting go of this milestone of the educational process. The majority of students see f2f classes to be more beneficial than the online part and object to cancelling the f2f component. This is similar to what Hijjawi and Gaulle (2013) mentioned in their research explained earlier (see section 4) "what hinders learners in the first place is the fact of not being in a directive relationship which is usually a situation of dependence on the teacher." (p.

42) Similarly, Rastegarpour (2011) states that "There are varieties of reasons why learners dislike enrolling in an online course, but major amongst them is the impersonal nature of interacting with the computer. Another major reason for their reluctance is the "impersonal approach versus interactivity in a live classroom experience." (p. 43)

Assessment is one of the most important issues in BL courses. According to Carman (2005) "Assessment is one of the most critical ingredients of blended learning, for two reasons: 1) It enables learners to 'test out' of content they already know, fine-tuning their own blended learning experience, and 2) It measures the effectiveness of all other learning modalities and events."(p.5). Regarding evaluation, students in general were satisfied with the evaluation process and felt that it was fair and reflective of their efforts. In addition, the majority of students disagreed with a hypothetical question about evaluation to be done online without the interference of the instructor. This shows that students are still educationally and emotionally attached to their teacher who, in many cases, will be more compassionate and understanding when grading than a machine.

Results and students' comments also show that there is a direct relationship between students' levels and their overall satisfaction. The results revealed that the BL course was not very successful with students of very poor language level because it was hard for them to handle the online part and do all the assignments on their own. This was a huge challenge since 25% of participants categorized themselves as (poor and very poor in English language).

Another challenge was lacking access to the internet. As shown in table (2), 50% of participants live in villages. Not all villages in Palestine have good internet services; therefore, many students complained that they were not able to study at home because they had no internet service. Other students reported that they had no laptops or PCs at home or any other device which can enable them to do the online part. This confirms what Aborisade (2013) concluded in his study as he pointed out that: "poor technology infrastructure and inadequate facilities exert great pressure on the most willing students and staff, in terms of effort, time and finance" (p.40). However, The University

tried to make up for this lack by providing computer labs on campus that will serve all students. Unfortunately, the number of computer labs is not sufficient and serves a very limited number of students. In addition, in most cases computers at these labs are very old and overused to the extent that makes them not very efficient. As a result, some students were obliged to go to an internet café to study, and that cost them a lot of money. In addition, other students said that they had to visit relatives who have access to the internet in order to do the online part. What is good is that the majority of students had the luxury of studying at home at their own pace and convenience as 79% of students said that they studied at home (see table 8).

It is clear that many students thought that the two f2f classes per week were not enough. Again students are still attached to the idea of having frequent meetings with their teacher as that will make them feel safe and give them the impression that they are learning. Collopy and Arnold (2009) have a similar view on this as they stated "some students desire the face-to-face support from a professor to help them clarify and understand the content" (p.87).

Another challenge is the issue of commitment. There is no strict control over the online part, so students do not take it very seriously. Usually first year students are not mature and responsible enough to be in charge of their own learning. In this case, many students will postpone or even neglect the online part and give priority to do the work for other courses.

Boredom was another dominant issue among the results. Students felt 'bored' while studying online on their own. They prefer to be taught by a teacher and enjoy the company of other students in the classroom. One student wrote in a comment that "whenever I turned on my computer to study English online, I found myself logging in to Facebook and forgetting all about learning English!"

Some students complained that BL causes a lot of distraction for the student. Students are used to sitting quietly, listening to a teacher, and taking some notes to study during the semester. Suddenly, they found themselves in a situation in which they had to go to two f2f classes, attend a follow-up one-

hour class with the teachers in the computer lab, learn from a website, carry out many online tasks, and finally study for quizzes and exams. This made them feel overwhelmed and distracted.

8. Conclusion:

This study revealed that the attitudes of learners towards the experiment included both positive and negative points and that is pretty much normal in any newly applied practice. What counts here is to try to evaluate the whole experiment and to come up with a future plan that will draw on these results and benefit from them. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) argue that:

"There is considerable intuitive appeal to the concept of integrating the strengths of synchronous (face-to-face) and asynchronous (text-based Internet) learning activities. At the same time, there is considerable complexity in its implementation with the challenge of virtually limitless design possibilities and applicability to so many contexts" (p. 96)

Blended learning is a growing trend that is gaining supporters every day. It is even favoured by many researchers and educators over pure e-learning because it still keeps that little connection with traditional face-to-face instruction. Some people might think that BL is merely a transitional phase between traditional and complete online learning, but obviously this is not the case. Allen, Seaman and Garrett (2007) believe that:

"There is a belief among some that blended courses hold at least as much promise as fully online ones. However, the path of evolution from face-to-face learning to fully online courses is not transparent. It is becoming clear that blended learning is generally not part of an institutional transition strategy from face-to-face to fully online courses, but rather a discrete option which institutions choose on its own merits" (p.1).

The positive attitudes should be enhanced and encouraged and the negative remarks should be taken into consideration for improvement. As it is a totally new experience, resistance was expected. Rastegarpour (2011) argues that when the e-learning is introduced to enhance the classroom learning, it is possible to get much resistance from both teachers and students.

This resistance is due to lack of knowledge about potential capabilities. In addition, social resistance from the environment can be controlled by assisting and training teachers and students.

9. Recommendations:

Based on the results of this study, some recommendations for the future might be:

- Plan well for the blending and try to find a bend that incorporates more f2 interaction since students are still not used to the idea of BL. The best blend in this case would be the blend suggested earlier in this study by Dudeney and Hockly (2007)"a face-to-face language learning course with additional online materials, where online tools are used to support and extend face-to-face lessons. (cited in Tomlinson and Whittaker, 2013). It is also better to use an already existing f2f course material as the basic component of the BL course and then add the supporting online component. This is similar to what Pardo-Gonzalez (2013) recommended as mentioned earlier in this study (see section 4) to use an existing f2f course as the basis for the blend.
- Put the student first. All the idea behind blending is to improve the learning experience. Therefore, the blended course design must take into consideration students' preferences as well as their concerns while designing future blended courses.
- Set realistic goals for the BL experience and do not put high expectations that will exhaust the learner, the teacher and the course designers.
- Make the transition gradual. A sudden leap to BL might be overwhelming for all.
- Equip the learning environment with all that is needed for the new way of learning. Lack of resources is one of the major challenges that encountered students in this study. Therefore, if the university is planning to apply this experiment on a larger scale, it is certainly asked to provide sufficient computer labs, Wi-Fi, technicians, and all necessary requirements.
- Teachers should have the ability to assess and evaluate what students

do online. Lack of teacher's direct supervision was one of the major problems faced by the teachers. Therefore, a system that allows teacher's full control and supervision on the online component is highly recommended.

Finally, BL is not a quick fix to educational challenges or a magic wand that can suit any course and any context and make it successful in no time. On the contrary, designing a BL course that will suit the needs and expectations of the learners, satisfy them, and add to their learning experience is a challenging job that should not be taken lightly. Similarly, O'Conor, Mortimer, and Bond (2011) believe that while blended learning does offer the prospect of improved student learning outcome, it is not without a cost, and cannot be taken as a simple panacea for all future course design.

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