

Exploring University EFL Students' Feedback on Using Blended Learning in Learning Phonetics/Phonology

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ABSTRACT

Blended Learning has been used in the last two decades in different fields of education including learning English as a Foreign Language. Part of implementing Blended Learning is the design of language courses that takes into consideration students' feedback in relation to using this relatively new approach. The present study explores university students' feedback in relation to learning English phonetics/phonology. The design of the study utilizes the quantitative approach. A questionnaire is constructed in order to elicit the students' preferences related to using Blended Learning in learning the subject of English phonetics/phonology. The questionnaire includes different topics selected from the students' specified syllabus. Seventy-two third-year students from the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul have participated in answering the questionnaire. These students used Blended Learning in the previous academic year 2021-2022. The results of the study show that the students prefer to learn audio exercises in the online of Blended Learning, while suprasegmental topics, like stress, seem to be less preferred. An inverse relation has been discovered between the complexity of the activity or the skillful training it requires and the students' online learning preferences; the more complex or skillful training the activity requires the less preferred to be learnt online by the students.

KEYWORDS: EFL Students, Feedback, Blended Learning, University Level, English Phonetics/Phonology

INTRODUCTION

Introductory Remark

Students' experience with Blended Learning (BL) dates back to the beginning of the Twentieth Century (Mackinven, 2015). BL has been used in different areas of education, especially higher education. Garrison and Kanuka (2004:96) stress the role of BL in higher education owing to its online learning component. Garrison and Vaughan (2008:5), on the other hand, show that the increase of the use of the Internet, and especially communication technologies, needs to better understand the strengths of such technologies by mixing the best of F2F learning with that of the online environment. Alammary, Sheard and Carbone (2014:440) indicate that BL "has been growing in demand and popularity in higher education and has become a widespread teaching phenomenon".

The utilization of BL has also been investigated in relation to different subjects, including learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Morgan and Conway-Herron (2010), for example, deal with English writing. Tan (2012) deals with English listening comprehension. Simonova (2018) examine English grammar. While Liu, Zhu, Jiao, and Xu (2018) investigate English pronunciation.

A good course design will take care of the learners' preferences and needs so that the course will be of benefit to them, especially when dealing with a specific subject like phonetics/phonology. However, little is known in the literature concerning the use of BL from the learners' viewpoint in relation to learning this subject. Roff (2017) examines students' satisfaction in BL environments. Sheerah's (2018) study explores EFL students' perceptions on the use of BL. Chapman (2019) deals with BL and the motivation to learn the English language. However, no attempt has been made to link learning English phonetics/phonology with BL. Thus, the present study attempts to investigate students' experiences in using BL by exploring their feedback in relation to learning English phonetics/phonology at the university level.

WHAT IS BLENDED LEARNING?

Blended Learning (BL) has been defined by many researchers. One view, for example, indicates that BL means a blend of training involving the instructor with some online activities (Bielawski & Metcalf, 2003:xix). Another view deals with defining BL from two angles, viz. learning experience and implementation. BL is the mix of face-to-face (F2F) and online experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004:96). Self-study is another dimension that is added to the definition of BL (Heinze, 2008:xiv). Here, the concept of learner autonomy is clearly emphasized. This concept of the student controlling time, place and pace is also stressed by Staker (2011:5). In general terms, BL is defined as combining F2F education with technology use (Mishan, 2013:288).

In addition to having different definitions of BL, there are different types that can be used to implement it. Depending on students' experience of BL, Staker (2011:7-8) includes the following types of BL:

Face-to-Face Driver. The teachers are responsible of the material F2F. Online learning is only supplementary.

Rotation. The students rotate between online and F2F learning.

Flex. Online learning provides most of the material.

Online Lab. All the course material are based on an online platform.

Self-Blend. Students choose to take one or more online courses to enhance the F2F learning.

Online Driver. Both platform and teacher are provided as online delivery of learning.

Horn and Staker (2015:37), on the other hand, propose four main types of BL. These are:

Rotation model (which is subdivided into a. station rotation, b. lab rotation, c. flipped classroom and d. individual rotation).

Flex model.

A la carte model

Enriched virtual model.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One important aspect in designing any course or syllabus is to take into consideration the learners' preferences and needs so that the course outcomes meet those of the learners (Viktorovna & Viktorovna, 2020). BL has been used by course designers with different aspects of EFL (Joosten, Weber, Baker, Schletzbaum & McGuire, 2021). However, teaching the subject of English phonetics/phonology has not received a lot of attention; especially from the students' perspective. Therefore, this study explores second year EFL learners' experience in relation to using BL in learning English phonetics/phonology who are enrolled for the bachelor degree. It tries to see what kind of preferences that these students have when dealing with the subject from a BL perspective as far as the online component of BL.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the present study is to investigate EFL students' feedback in relation to using BL in learning English phonetics/phonology at university level. The students are third year learners enrolled for the bachelor degree in the academic year 2022-2023. The study attempts to examine students' preferences that are related to their learning needs that they have experienced through using BL in learning English phonetics/phonology.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question of the present study is: What are the EFL learners' preferences that are related to the specific topics of English phonetics/phonology in the online component of BL? More specifically, which topics are preferred to be taken online by the students and which are preferred to be taken F2F?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

A recent study by Abed (2021) has explored English language students' preferences concerning online vs. F2F learning. It used both quantitative and qualitative. Although the quantitative analysis showed that the

students preferred F2F learning over online learning, the qualitative results revealed that the students were more comfortable with online communication and setting. Thus, the present study hypothesizes that EFL students prefer English phonetics/phonology topics to be taken online more than F2F.

Design of the Study

The present study utilizes a quantitative model of research. A questionnaire has been constructed addressing EFL university learners of English phonetics/phonology (see Appendix 1). The details of the methodology followed in this study are presented in the following subsections.

7.1 The Questionnaire

A questionnaire is constructed in order to extract EFL students' feedback in relation to their preferences of the topics of English phonetics/phonology that they studied in the academic year 2021-2022.

The questionnaire is considered a very important tool in collecting research data. It is regarded as the central data collection tool in making surveys (Dörnyei, 2007:101). One type of questionnaires is called self-administered questionnaire in which the respondents themselves complete the questionnaire. This type has several advantages like being cheap and quick to administer, no interviewer effects, no variability on the part of the interviewer, and suitable for respondents (Bryman, 2016:221).

The construction of a questionnaire includes four steps (see Lodico et al, 2006:159): 1. Designing and developing the questionnaire, 2. Selecting the sample, 3. Piloting the questionnaire, and 4. Administering the final questionnaire.

7.1.1 Designing and Developing the Questionnaire

The main aim of the questionnaire is to obtain students' feedback in using BL in learning English phonetics/phonology in the academic year 2021-2022. It measures the students' preferences of aspects of phonetics/phonology that are included in the online component. The questionnaire is designed to cover phonetics/phonology content of their course. Thus, the questionnaire items are selected from the course book assigned to the students which is Roach (2009). In addition, the first researcher has taught the subject in the previous academic year using BL and has used this experience in selecting the items of the questionnaire. The questionnaire is given to a panel of experts in the field in order to assess its content validity and provide any suggestions, modifications and/or comments.

The "Likert scale" is used for the construction of the questionnaire. It consists of statements which the respondents are asked to show whether they "always", "sometimes" or "never" agree with by choosing one of the responses. The present study employs the close-ended type of questionnaire. It is easy, in this type of questionnaires, for the answers to be coded and analyzed. The respondents can also answer them easily and quickly (see McKinley & Rose, 2019:329).

7.1.2 Selecting the Sample

The sample of the questionnaire comprises third-year students at the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul. These students studied phonetics/phonology in the second year in the academic year 2021-2022 using BL. Seventy-two students participated in the questionnaire; fifty-one females and twenty-one males. Their ages range between 19-29 years.

7.1.3 Piloting the Questionnaire

A number of students are used for piloting the questionnaire. Thirty students (other than the sample of the study) participated in the pilot study; thirteen males and seventeen females. Necessary changes are made according to the feedback received from the pilot questionnaire.

7.1.4 Administering the Final Questionnaire

The final version of the questionnaire has been administered by the first researcher. A paper version of the

questionnaire is used. The questionnaire is administered in the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul in the first semester of the academic year 2022-2023.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

8.1 Results

The questionnaire contains 10 topics selected from the subject of English phonetics/phonology that is taught in the second year. These topics are selected from the syllabus of the second year using Roach's (2009) textbook. The students studied this subject in the academic year 2021-2022 using BL. The topics are:

Audio exercises.

Diagrams of the articulators like tongue, palate, larynx, etc.

Segmental aspects (like vowels and consonants).

The phoneme.

Types of transcription.

Syllable structure and syllable division.

Stress and levels and placement of stress.

Weak forms.

The problem of analyzing /tʃ/ and /dʒ/.

Aspects of connected speech like rhythm, assimilation, elision and linking.

The students are asked to express their preferences concerning having these topics online in the BL. The statistics of the questionnaire are given in Appendix 2. According to the results of the statistics, the topics presented in the questionnaire have been rearranged. The new order of the topics complies with the students' preferences (see the last column in Appendix 2). The new arrangement is presented in Figure 1 below (the percentages have been approximated to the nearest digit).

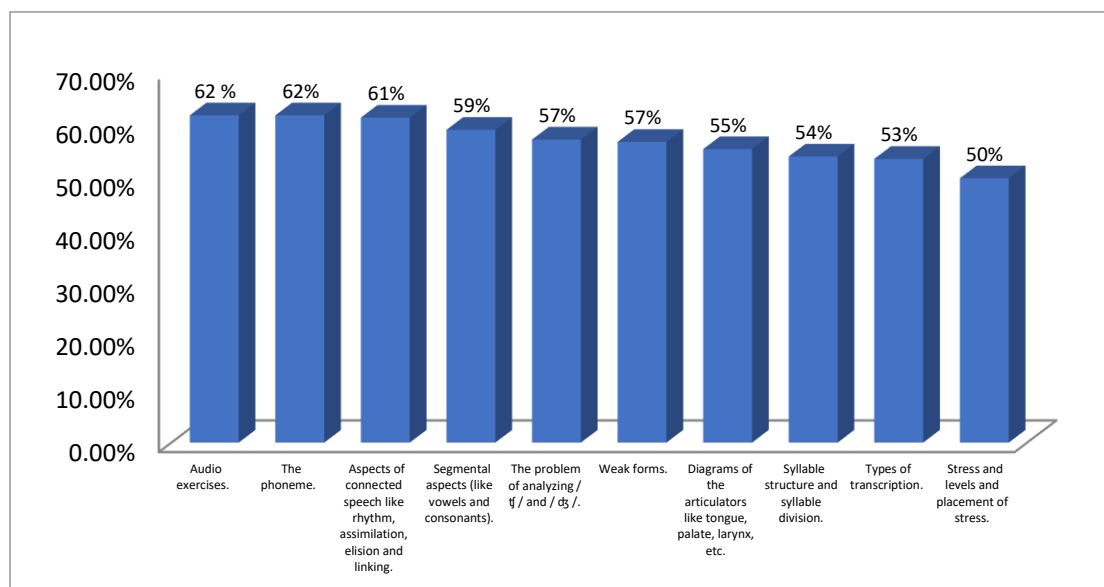


Figure (1). Arrangement of the topics of phonetics/phonology according to the students' preferences.

As can be seen from Figure (1), the topics of audio exercises and the phoneme have scored the highest percentage of the students' preferences (62% each). In other words, students have the highest preference to learn these topics online. The topic of aspects of connected speech also scored close (61%). Segmental aspects like vowels and consonants have been less preferred to be learnt online (59%). Even less preferred to be studied online are the topics of the analysis of the two phonemes /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ and English weak forms (57% each). Learning diagrams online seems to be less preferable (scoring 55%). Similarly, learning syllable structure and syllable division appears to be less preferred online (54%). With types of transcription, the preference percentage is 53%. Finally, learning stress online seems the least preferred by the students scoring only 50%.

DISCUSSION

Audio exercises seem to be most preferred to be taken online by students. This is not surprising since the students have their own audio devices that they can use when listening to the exercises (mostly earphones). This facility encourages any BL course designer to include any audio activities in the online component of the BL course. The same thing can be applied to the subject of the phoneme which, although seems to be an abstract topic, has scored 62% preference to be learnt online. The reason could be related to the students having this topic demonstrated online with some pictures (like the analogy that compares the phonemic system with the game of chess). Using online material seems to have a great influence on students' preferences.

With somehow closer percentage of preference comes the subject of aspects of connected speech (like rhythm, assimilation, elision, and linking). Such topics have also been chosen by the students to be learnt online. Again, material from the Internet can play a vital role in explaining different issues that are related to these topics. Segmental aspects like vowels and consonants have less preference than the previous subjects (with 59%). The reason could be attributed to the students' need to be in direct contact with the instructor in order to master the production of vowels and consonants. When things get closer to analytical areas, students' preference gets lower. This is true with the subject of analyzing the two English phonemes /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. This area seems to call for more F2F learning than online. The subject of English weak forms appears more like learning vowels and consonants in that it calls for more direct contact with the language instructor in order to learn these forms. When it comes to diagrams, it seems that online learning is less preferred. The students seem to prefer to deal with diagrams in F2F more than online; this could be attributed to the fact that drawing is a skill that needs interaction between the learners and instructors. The more complex the subjects get the more preference is away from online and towards F2F. This is clear with the subject of the syllable and syllable structure. Again, the students seem here to be in need of F2F interaction with the instructor to be able to comprehend the subject. With the subject of transcription, students' preference gets lower. This subject is similar to the segmental aspects and weak forms in that it requires some sort of interaction between the learners and instructors since learning how to transcribe is not an easy task. Finally, the last subject which is related to suprasegmental phonology (i.e. stress) is least preferred to be learnt online. This could be attributed to the fact that this is one of the new subjects for the students and they require more F2F interaction with the language instructor than online.

The most important thing to be noted from the discussion above is that the students' preferences get lower the more the subjects get more complex or need more skill learning. This kind of inverse relation can be schematically presented as in Figure (2) below.

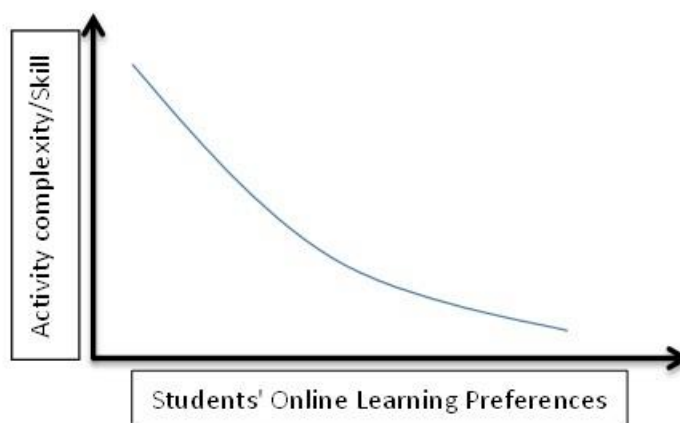


Figure (2). Inverse relation between students' online learning preferences and activity complexity and skill.

Moreover, it can also be pointed out, in relation to the results of the questionnaire, that all students'

preferences are within the 50-62 range. In other words, the lowest preference percentage does not go below 50%. This finding goes in line with the hypothesis of this study (see section 6). That is, even though the topic of stress scored the lowest score in preference, it is still preferred to be learnt online (the preference is not under 50%). Thus, the general tendency is an inclination for online learning which supports the hypothesis of the study; i.e. students do prefer topics to be taken online more than taking them F2F.

However, the same observation can be noted with regards to the highest preference percentage (that of the audio exercises 62%), which is not very high. The students seem to be inclined to learn these topics online, and have ordered the topics according to their preferences. Yet, they appear to be reluctant as far as dealing with these topics online (the highest preference percentage scored only 62%). As Abed (2021) has indicated, this can be taken as a sign for a future preference to online learning.

CONCLUSION

Learning in the 21st century has shifted in different ways. In one way, the role of the learner has become more central in the process of learning. Another shift that has occurred is the adoption of BL to enhance learning. In order to cope with these changes, it has become necessary for educators to examine learners' new needs when considering course design. In addition, new ways of thinking are required in teaching, especially when dealing with EFL.

The present study has focused on examining EFL students' preferences in relation to learning different topics that are related to the subject of English phonetics/phonology. It tackled second year learners enrolled for the bachelor degree. The aim was to investigate their needs that are related to learning English phonetics/phonology which can be implemented in designing a BL for teaching the subject. In order to achieve the research aim, a questionnaire is used to explore students' feedback. The focus was to see which topics the students preferred to take online and which ones they preferred to take F2F in a BL course that dealt with English phonetics/phonology.

The results of the study revealed an inverse relation between students' online learning preferences and activity complexity and skill learning. In other words, the more complex the activity is or the more skillful training it requires, the less the students preferred to learn it online. The analysis of the questionnaire that has been constructed to elicit these preferences has also shown that the students are liable to online learning as part of BL which supports the hypothesis formulated by this study. However, these students need more motivation and experience in using the Internet as a resource of learning.

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APPENDIX 1

The Questionnaire

Please use a check mark (✓) to indicate your choice.

No.	Item	Always	Sometimes	Never
	Phonetics/phonology content			
	I prefer to have the following topics online:			
1.	Audio exercises.			
2.	Diagrams of the articulators like tongue, palate, larynx, etc.			
3.	Segmental aspects (like vowels and consonants).			
4.	The phoneme.			

5.	Types of transcription.			
6.	Syllable structure and syllable division.			
7.	Stress and levels and placement of stress.			
8.	Weak forms.			
9.	The problem of analyzing / ʃ / and / dʒ /.			
10.	Aspects of connected speech like rhythm, assimilation, elision and linking.			

APPENDIX 2

Statistics of the Questionnaire

No.	Item	Sharpness	Weight percentile	New arrangement
	I prefer to have the following topics online:			
1.	Audio exercises.	1.849	61.63%	1
2.	Diagrams of the articulators like tongue, palate, larynx, etc.	1.658	55.27%	7
3.	Segmental aspects (like vowels and consonants).	1.767	58.90%	4
4.	The phoneme.	1.849	61.63%	2
5.	Types of transcription.	1.603	53.43%	9
6.	Syllable structure and syllable division.	1.616	53.87%	8
7.	Stress and levels and placement of stress.	1.493	49.77%	10
8.	Weak forms.	1.699	56.63%	6
9.	The problem of analyzing / ʃ / and / dʒ /.	1.712	57.07%	5
10.	Aspects of connected speech like rhythm, assimilation, elision and linking.	1.836	61.20%	3