



STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD BLENDED LEARNING IN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract: The scope of this article is an investigation into students' attitudes toward blended learning and related concepts (e.g. paperless and traditional classroom). There were 162 students who participated in this study (100 females and 62 males, with the mean age of 18.80 and its standard deviation of 1.16). The study revealed that students prefer blended learning to traditional classroom in EFL context. However, they liked to take English exams in paper-and-pencil form, rather than in digital form. As for submitting English assignments online or personally, their opinions were divided. They also similarly trusted to analog and digital English teaching/learning materials. Students had a moderately positive attitude toward infographics and paperless classroom within EFL environment. Their English proficiency levels were in a positive correlation with their preferences toward blended learning for EFL purposes. The obtained results were discussed in line with contemporary approaches in educational sciences. Additionally, some recommendations for future work in this field were made.

Key words: blended learning, paperless classroom, technological devices, English as a foreign language (EFL)

1. Introduction

Contemporary education has to go hand in hand with the global development in various areas of human activity. Information and communication technologies (ICT) spread across almost all segments of modern society (international relations, economy, health service, leisure time, education, etc.). A relatively new concept of learning and teaching arose from the ICT influences on education. This is *blended learning*, defined as a combination of instructional modalities, especially face-to-face and online learning (Tayebnik & Puteh, 2012). Thus, blended learning is a mixture of traditional and paperless (digital) classroom. It is probably a better way of delivering teaching materials and feedback for the new generations of students in all levels of education.

Attitudes toward blended learning, according to some authors, can be examined within the following six learning aspects: learning flexibility, study management, technology, online learning, online interaction, and classroom learning (Tang & Chaw, 2013). Attitudes investigated in such a way are indicators of student's readiness for blended learning. Interestingly, students who generally have positive attitudes (and great levels of motivation) toward learning also have more positive attitudes toward online learning in blended courses (Zhu, Au, & Yates, 2013). In general, applying blended learning model to the classroom activities has a significantly positive impact on students' attitudes to this system of learning (Al-Shaer, 2013; Lin, Tseng, & Chiang, 2017). Attitudes toward blended learning are similar to those toward the usage of social media for academic purposes (Acar, 2013). Learners' satisfaction with a course delivered by the means of blended learning is closely linked to their attitudes to this type of instructional setting. It is usually measured by using self-report questionnaires (Bowyer & Chambers, 2017).

Some important and pedagogically relevant benefits of blended learning were listed. It generates interest in the class, enhances students' language skills, fosters deeper learning, motivates students, as

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well as makes them inspired, active, and more involved in technology (Abdelhak, 2015). It was determined that blended learning yielded better academic performance compared to learning delivered only online (Slomanson, 2014). Students prefer this type of learning and instruction to the traditional one and it seems blended learning is a more effective way of enhancing students' critical thinking skills and their interest in a particular school subject or academic course they are enrolled in (Korkmaz & Karakuş, 2009).

This kind of learning is applicable to English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. Furthermore, research revealed that it increases students' motivation and their frequency of participation in classroom activities (James, 2016). Better academic achievements were found in experimental studies, where the group exposed blended learning outperformed the group which was taught by traditional methods (Almasaeid, 2014; Fakhir, 2015). However, some EFL students think blended learning makes them socially isolated and is sometimes difficult to do, frustrating, or a waste of time (Ja'ashan, 2015).

The present study attempts to examine students' attitudes and perceptions of blended learning applied to English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. In this attempt, several research questions were formulated:

1. What do students like more, traditional classroom or blended learning?
2. What do students like more, taking English exams in digital or paper-and-pencil form?
3. What do students want more, to submit English homework online or by hand?
4. Which teaching (instruction) materials do students trust more, digital or analog?
5. What are students' attitudes toward infographics as a teaching tool and paperless EFL classroom?
6. Is students' previous enrollment in English online courses connected with their attitudes toward blended learning of English?
7. Are students' English proficiency levels and years spent in learning English related to their attitudes to blended learning in EFL classroom?

2. Methodology

This study was a cross-sectional one because we gathered data at a specific time point. It was a correlational study as well due to the investigation of relationships between various variables relevant to blended learning.

2.1. Participants

A total of 162 students participated in the present study, out of which 100 (61.7%) were females and 62 (38.3%) were males. Their mean age was $M = 18.80$ and its standard deviation was $SD = 1.16$. Age ranged from 17 to 24 years of age. All students attended National Kazakh University. Sixty-three students (38.9% of the total sample) were at the first year of their study, 77 participants (47.5% of the total sample) were at the second year of their study, whereas the rest of the sample ($N = 22$, i.e. 13.6%) was at the third and higher year of their study. The average number of years students' spent in learning English was $M = 6$ ($SD = 3.46$), and its range was one to 16 years. The sample distribution by English levels of proficiency was displayed in Figure 1.

As can be seen (Figure 1), English skills and knowledge of the most of the participants were at the upper intermediate level – B2 ($N = 88$, i.e. 54.3% of the total sample). Next, 44 participants' English competencies were at the intermediate level – B1 ($N = 44$, i.e. 27.2%). Fifteen participants (9.3%) reported the pre-intermediate level of English competencies (A2), 13 participants (8%) reported the advanced level (C1) whereas only two participants (1.2%) indicated the elementary level of English proficiency (A1). None of them indicated proficient English knowledge and skills (that is, C2 level of English proficiency).

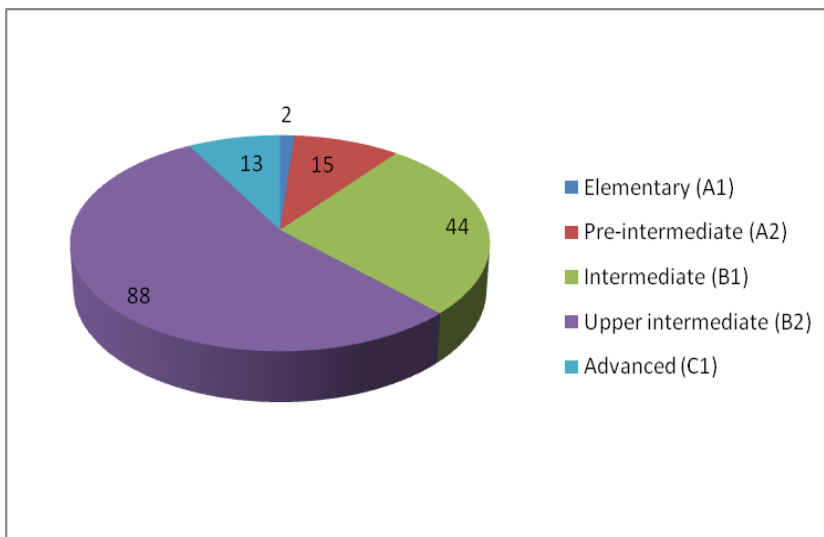


Figure 1. Participants by their English level proficiency

Students were also asked to provide the number of English online courses they had been enrolled in. Their answers were displayed in Figure 2.

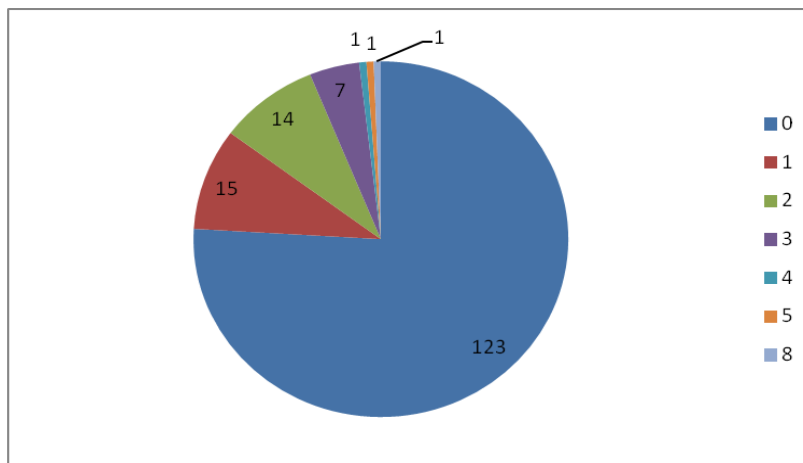


Figure 2. Sample structure by the number of English online courses

As was shown above (Figure 2), 123 (i.e. 75.9%) participants have not been enrolled in any of English online courses. Fifteen (9.3%) participants had experience with a single English online course, 14 (8.6%) participants have been enrolled in two English online courses, seven (4.3%) participants reported three such courses and three participants reported four, five, and eight English online courses.

2.2. Instruments

The questionnaire administered in this study consisted of 16 questions. The first five questions were of a more general nature, where participants were asked to provide information on their age, gender, year of study, number of years spent in learning English, and English level proficiency (elementary – A1, pre-intermediate – A2, intermediate – B1, upper intermediate – B2, and advanced – C1). The other questions were referring to blended learning and its components (traditional and online methods of instruction, paperless classroom, submitting assignments by hand or online, etc.).

Some of the questions included a five-point Likert's scale by which we intended to measure the degree/level of students' preference for some aspects of blended learning or to examine their attitudes toward several segments of this teaching/learning approach. The full text of the questionnaire was appended at the end of this article.

2.3. Procedure and data processing

Students were filling out the questionnaire during their regular class time. For this activity, they needed up to 15 minutes. All students agreed to participate in this research and the researcher told them their answers will be used for scientific purposes only.

Statistical procedures employed in this article included the calculation of standard descriptive statistical values (arithmetic means, standard deviations, as well as maximum and minimum values), chi-square test, paired-samples t-test, and correlational analysis).

3. Results

First, we were interested in students' preferences toward either traditional classroom or blended learning. The results of paired-samples t-test were displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Traditional classroom vs. blended learning with regard to EFL

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD	M _{diff}	t	df	p
Traditional classroom	1	5	3.29	1.06	-0.45	-4.352	161	.000
Blended learning	1	5	3.74	0.95				

Referring to the figures in Table 1, EFL students preferred blended learning ($M = 3.74$) over traditional classroom ($M = 3.29$). The difference between the obtained arithmetic means ($M_{diff} = -0.45$) was statistically significant ($t(161) = -4.352, p < .001$). In addition, the range of the obtained data was 1 to 5 (in both variables). Participant's preferences varied more in the case of traditional EFL classroom ($SD = 1.06$ vs. $SD = 0.95$).

As per the second research question, we displayed the results of the same type of t-test for examining students' preferences toward taking English exams in digital and paper-and-pencil form (Table 2).

Table 2. English exams in the digital vs. paper-and-pencil form

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD	M _{diff}	t	df	p
English exams in digital form	1	5	3.18	1.30	-0.54	-3.540	161	.000
English exams in paper-and-pencil form	1	5	3.72	1.16				

As can be noticed (Table 2), students reported more willingness to take English exams that are in paper-and-pencil form ($M = 3.72$), compared to those in digital form ($M = 3.18$). This difference was statistically significant ($t(161) = -3.540, p < .001$). Additionally, the range of participants' answers (estimates) was the same in both cases, from 1 to 5. Participants answers for taking English exams in digital form varied more than their ratings related to taking English exams in paper-and-pencil form ($SD = 1.30$ vs. $SD = 1.16$, respectively).

Table 3. Submitting English assignments online vs. personally

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD	M _{diff}	t	df	p
Submitting English assignments online	1	5	3.35	1.29	0.13	0.859	161	.392
Submitting English assignments personally	1	5	3.22	1.24				

As shown in Table 3, students liked slightly more to submit English homework online ($M = 3.35$), compared to doing this activity by hand/personally ($M = 3.22$). However, the obtained difference ($M_{diff} = 0.13$) was not statistically significant ($t(161) = 0.859, p > .05$). As in the previous case, the range of students' answers, expressed in numerical form, was 1 to 5. Looking at standard deviations, can be

noticed that students' ratings were more variable for submitting English assignments online ($SD = 1.29$), compared to submitting this kind of assignments personally ($SD = 1.24$).

We also examined which English teaching materials do students trust more, digital or analog (Table 4), by using chi-square test.

Table 4. *Digital vs. analog English teaching materials*

Type of English teaching materials	f	%	χ^2	df	p
Analog	79	48.8	0.753	1	.099
Digital	83	51.2			
Total	162	100			

Figures from the Table 4 indicated that there were 83 (51.2%) students who reported they trust digital materials (in English) more than analog ones. On the other hand, 79 (48.8%) students trust analog materials more than digital ones. The difference between these frequencies was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.753, p > .05$).

Table 5. *Students' attitudes toward infographics in EFL and paperless EFL classroom*

Attitude toward...	Min	Max	M	SD
...the introduction of infographics as a teaching tool in the English classroom	1	5	3.34	0.92
...establishing paperless classroom (i.e. learning solely with technological devices) for the purposes of learning English	1	5	3.40	1.04

Generally speaking, students' expressed positive attitudes toward the application of infographics ($M = 3.34$) to EFL context and establishing paperless classroom ($M = 3.40$) for the EFL purposes (see Table 5). These attitudes were, in fact, moderately positive because the theoretical mean of the 5-point scale(s) is three. In both cases, the range of participants' ratings was 1 to 5.

Finally, we were interested in the relationships of the number of online courses participants had been enrolled in, their English proficiency levels, and years spent in learning English with their attitudes toward blended learning. The results of the correlational analysis were displayed below, in Table 6.

Table 6. *The number of online courses, English proficiency levels, and blended learning attitudes*

	Attitudes toward blended learning
The number of online courses participants were enrolled in	.082
Participants' levels of English proficiency	.157*
Years spent in learning English	.103

* $p < .05$

Only students' levels of English proficiency were in a statistically significant correlation with their attitudes toward blended learning (Table 6). This correlation was small and positive ($r(160) = .157, p < .05$). Hence, the other two relationships were weak and statistically nonsignificant.

4. Discussion

The answer to the first research question was blended learning. Participants liked it more than traditional school environment where English is usually taught. Students are adolescents and their connection with digital devices (smartphones, laptops, tablets, etc.) cannot be neglected by the professionals within educational sciences. Thus, students like to use their devices during the class; however, teachers should help them use these devices for the purposes of learning English. This finding is optimistic because positive attitudes toward a teaching approach can reflect high levels of motivation in students. Additionally, if English is taught within the blended learning approach, the result is positive learning outcomes, that is, high academic performance, good critical/thinking skills, etc. (e. g. Almasaeid, 2014; Fakhir, 2015; Slomanson, 2014).

The second finding (referring to the second research question) revealed students' preferred taking English exams in paper-and-pencil form to taking them in digital form. This was interesting because students' had more positive attitudes toward blended learning than toward traditional approach in EFL

context. Paper-and-pencil form is typical for traditional, classic approaches to teaching and learning (in our case, English language). Therefore, students did not want to exclude all the traditional methods of interaction between teachers and themselves. They obviously want to be exposed to and be part of the combination of teaching methods (both traditional and contemporary ones).

There were no statistically significant differences in students' willingness to submit English assignments personally or online. A similar result was obtained when we tried to examine what did students trust more, English teaching materials in digital or analog forms. Hence, almost equal number of students chose either digital or analog forms as more accurate, reliable, trustworthy, and credible. Hence, the best option could be a combination of analog and digital materials (e.g. materials for exercising English reading skills, materials for learning grammar and vocabulary, audio and video tools used in learning and improving English listening skills, etc.).

Next, students' attitudes toward the introduction of infographics and establishing paperless classroom for the purposes of learning/teaching English were positive though not too positive. This was the answer to the fifth research question. The introduction of digital devices into the EFL classroom can increase the amount of time students' spend participating in classroom activities (James, 2016).

The number of English courses students' were enrolled in was not in a statistically significant relationship with their attitudes and preferences toward blended learning. This is maybe because they who had participated in such courses had perceived not only the advantages of online courses but also their limitations and disadvantages. On the other hand, English proficiency levels were in a positive relationship with students' preferences toward blended learning in EFL environment. This finding means the following: the higher level of English proficiency, the greater preference for blended learning for the purposes of learning English as a foreign language. Nevertheless, years spent in learning English were not significantly correlated with blended learning in EFL context.

By this research, five out of six aspects of blended learning (according to Tang & Chaw, 2013) were examined. These are learning flexibility (for instance, learning English in classic way and with the help of mobile devices), the availability and use of technology (for example, infographics), online learning (as part of blended learning), classroom learning (traditional and paperless classroom), and online interaction (i.e. submitting English assignments and taking exam tests online).

Some advantages of this research included: 1) trying to make a contribution to the investigation of a contemporary, educationally relevant topics (blended learning and paperless classroom), 2) making comparisons between participants' attitudes toward both traditional and digital classroom (as well as their combination as a result of blended learning), and 3) taking into account various aspects of blended learning (doing homework and taking exams in digital and analog environment).

On the other hand, this study had several shortcomings. It reflects attitudes of students from a particular university and its generalization potential is significantly limited. The second disadvantage of this study was the nature of questions used to examine students' attitudes. These were self-reported questions and participants are not always sincere about their attitudes, perceptions, habits, needs, and opinions. However, this issue is typical for social research.

5. Conclusion

Blended learning, paperless classroom, virtual classroom, digital/online learning, etc. are concepts and terms that inevitably should be in the vocabulary of every modern professional within educational sciences. English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) environment is a changing educational environment, thus, it has to follow modern development in technology, informatics, and education.

Hence, blended learning approach should be introduced there and this is not a demanding project because students like digital media and devices. Moreover, they are very competent in using these kinds of devices and they like to consume and interact with digital contents, especially with online ones.

In addition, teachers should keep some of the traditional teaching methods or ways of submitting assignments and taking exams. Of course, our findings were related to learning and teaching English

as a foreign language and students can have different attitudes, opinions, perceptions, and preferences with regard to other school subjects or academic courses.

This study also shed light on the relationship between online courses enrollment and blended learning. It seemed that participation in English online courses did not imply positive attitudes toward blended learning. In other words, digital learning (without using the classic, traditional method) was not closely linked to blended learning (according to students' opinions). This is another justification for preferences of blended learning over traditional and digital learning.

Some recommendations for future investigations in this field of education are the following: examining gender and age differences in preferences and attitudes toward blended, traditional, and digital learning; investigating parents' attitudes toward blended learning; carrying out a qualitative study to find out what students think about positive and negative side of this approach to learning English; asking students to give their suggestions about the improvement of the current EFL teaching and learning with the help of digital devices, etc.

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Appendix

A questionnaire on blended learning in EFL classroom

1. Gender: male/female
2. Age (enter a number): _____
3. Year of study (enter a number): _____
4. Number of years spent in learning English: _____
5. Your English level proficiency:
 - a) Elementary (A1)
 - b) Pre-intermediate (A2)
 - c) Intermediate (B1)
 - d) Upper intermediate (B2)
 - e) Advanced (C1)
 - f) Proficient (C2)
6. Have you ever been enrolled in an online English course?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
7. If your answer to the sixth question was "yes", how many online courses have you been enrolled in so far (enter a number)? _____
8. How much do you like traditional classroom methods while learning English (1 – totally dislike, 5 – absolutely like)? 1 2 3 4 5
9. How much do (would) you like blended learning (a combination of traditional methods and using digital media) in the English classroom (1 – totally dislike, 5 – absolutely like)?
1 2 3 4 5
10. How much would you like to take English exams in a digital form, that is, on the computer (1 – totally dislike, 5 – absolutely like)? 1 2 3 4 5
11. How much do you like to take English exams in a paper-and-pencil form (1 – totally dislike, 5 – absolutely like)? 1 2 3 4 5
12. How much would you like to do and submit your English assignments (homework) online (1 – totally dislike, 5 – absolutely like)? 1 2 3 4 5
13. How much would you like to do and submit your English assignments (homework) personally i.e. by hand (1 – totally dislike, 5 – absolutely like)? 1 2 3 4 5
14. Which type of English teaching materials do you trust more, digital (electronic) or analog (paper form materials)?
 - a) Digital materials
 - b) Analog materials
15. What is your attitude toward the introduction of infographics as a teaching tool in the English classroom (1 – completely negative, 5 – complete positive)? 1 2 3 4 5
16. What is your attitude toward establishing paperless classroom (i.e. learning solely with technological devices) for the purposes of learning English (1 – completely negative, 5 – completely positive)? 1 2 3 4 5

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