

**Online, Face to Face (F2F), and Blended Settings in Education:
Minimizing To Be or Not To Be Dilemma in EFL Education at
Tertiary Level in Bangladesh (BAU, Mymensingh)**

M. Shajedul Arifeen

Department of Languages, BAU, Mymensingh
Bangladesh

ms.arifeenbau@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to explore the role of different instructional settings at a graduate level across a semester. The focus was on identifying the impact of different instructional settings and the influence of these classroom settings on learners' EFL development. This study also aims to highlight the symmetrical relationship between different instructional settings exposed to the students. In addition, a reflection of the students was also investigated. To measure differences in foreign language classes through online, face-to-face, and blended studies, 60 EFL learners were randomly selected to participate in the current study. Data were collected from 60 students assigned under three instructional groups of three different classroom settings. Data sources included online discussion transcripts, post-discussion surveys of students' engagement in different class environments, and final self-reflective essays in which students described their experiences of the different class environments. Data analysis was inductive, interpretive, and qualitative, aimed at identifying the impact and to minimize the suitability of online, F to F and blended settings exposed by three instructors in each class session. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean number of comments posted by students and mean ratings of student engagement immediately following class sessions. Results showed that the blended and F to F sessions influenced the learning was more subtle than has online been assumed. The students who participated in face-to-face and blended classes stated a high level of EFL proficiency compared to their online group, which was significant compared to their online counterparts. However, through face-to-face and blended learning, the students achieved considerable EFL competency and proficiency. In many ways, F2F and blended settings have almost similar impact on students' development and the teachers' feedbacks were similar to their students.

Keywords: Online, Face to Face (F2F), Blended, Settings, EFL Education, Tertiary Level and Minimizing

Introduction

Widespread development and advancement of information technology provide a technical platform for education reform and opportunities for innovation in instructional education. The global disaster, COVID-19 pandemic, created a new normal that further springboards such opportunities to a large-scale implementation of online education around the globe. For its ready acceptance as a viable component in teaching and learning, artificial intelligence and online education will co-exist with traditional education to provide more education options, promote education equity, and enhance education innovation.

Several studies (e.g., Bernard et al., 2014; Chigeza and Halbert, 2014; González-Gómez et al., 2016; Israel, 2015; Northey et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2016; Southard, Meddaug and Harris, 2015) have compared F2Fteaching to online learning and/or blended learning in order to try to define which of the formats provides, e.g., the highest learning outcome, creates the most satisfied students or has the highest rate of course completion. The three different teaching and learning settings will be clarifying how each of them is definable according to studies of the different formats. Although there has not been complete agreement among researchers about the precise definition or meaning of the term ‘blended learning’ in particular (Bernard et al., 2014; Chigeza and Halbert, 2014), consensus has still built up around a sense of fairly clear distinctions between the three formats. Definitional questions do not, however, seem to haunt the terms ‘face-to-face learning’ and ‘online learning’ in the same way as they do ‘blended learning’ as their meaning appears to be more or less agreed upon.

The F2F learning format is characterized as “traditional” by many of the authors, referring to the fact that this is the format with the longest history of the three formats and in relation to which online and blended learning represent a modern or innovative intervention (e.g., Chigeza and Halbert, 2014; Adams,Randall and Traustadóttir, 2015; Pellas and Kazandis, 2015; González-Gómez et al., 2016). Generally, its meaning derives from an understanding of an instructional format that involves a physical classroom and the synchronous physical presence of all participants (i.e., teachers and students). One study emphasizes that even in-class use of computers and educational technology does not affect the definition of the F2F format so as to change it into blended learning (Bernard et al., 2014).Online learning is commonly defined in contradistinction to F2F learning (e.g., Ryan et al., 2016). Its most prominent feature is the absence of the physical classroom, which is replaced by the use of web-based technologies offering opportunities for out-of-class learning independent of time, place and pace (Bernard et al., 2014; Chigeza and Halbert, 2014; Northey et al., 2015; Israel, 2015; Potter, 2015). Ryan et al. (2016) point out that “in the context of higher education, the phrase

online learning is often interpreted as referencing courses that are offered completely online; [...]” (p. 286). The terms blended learning and hybrid learning sometimes seem to be used interchangeably (Ryan et al., 2016). According to Bernard et al. (2014), who builds on Graham’s definition (2005), blended learning can be defined as “the combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional F2F learning systems and distributed learning systems” (p. 91). In some cases, blended learning is seen as the more effective counterpart to the other two formats used separately (Pellas and Kazandis, 2015; González-Gómez et al., 2016) insofar as it is, e.g., characterized as F2F and online learning being “optimally integrated” (Israel, 2015) or combining their “benefits” (Adams, Randall and Traustadóttir, 2015). Many studies compare the effect on students’ learning outcome generated by respectively F2F teaching and/or blended learning. In Bernard et al.’s (2014) meta-study of blended learning in higher education, students in blended programs have turned out to achieve slightly better than students following traditional classroom instruction programs. Similar findings have been made by other studies – e.g., Israel (2015), Northey et al. (2015), Southard, Meddaug and Harris (2015), González-Gómez et al. (2016) and Ryan et al. (2016). Despite widespread agreement that the blended learning format produces better learning achievement among students, other studies have shown the exact opposite. In a comparative study by Adams, Randall and Traustadóttir (2015) the overall finding is that university students ... were less successful than their peers following the same course in a F2F version. Less interaction with the material or a sense of isolation arising from less class attendance are counted among potential reasons for the hybrid students’ lower success. Similar findings are mentioned in Powers et al.’s study (2016) of students’ performance in respectively hybrid and traditional sections ... where a significant decrease in exam grades throughout the semester was observed for students in the hybrid section. A better academic outcome for students in a blended education program is precisely attributed to the opportunities given to them for working independently through participation in student-centered asynchronous collaborative learning activities supported by Web 2.0 media such as Facebook (Northey et al., 2015). On the whole, the studies comparing F2F teaching to online and/or blended learning reveal that no inherent features of any of the three teaching formats produce either better or poorer learning outcomes for students. Rather, what leads to either is not the format itself, but is circumstantial and context-dependent. Thus, it is very much essential to identify our contextual category which has emerged as one of the factors that significantly influence online and blended learning in higher education, i.e., the category of spaces, learning community for collaboration and student satisfaction/ learner satisfaction.

Justification

. Applying ICT tools to develop language education has gained much popularity and produced positive results in recent years. WEB 2 technology has the potential to widen the scope of resources available in teaching and to enhance the language learning experience. Face to face

and online or distance education blended learning, the combining of online and face-to-face learning, is becoming common in many higher education institutions particularly in developed countries without its challenges. Few studies, however, focus on students' perceptions of a learning environment designed to evaluate learning/ learner outcomes and to explore students' perceptions of classroom settings in general. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to investigate students' perceptions of different learning environment with the orientation of EFL education and its development at tertiary level in Bangladesh.

Research Questions

By adopting the mixed method, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Do the EFL learners achieve communicative competency in face-to-face, online, and blended learning classes?
2. What are the students' perceptions regarding learning environment/ settings to achieve EFL communicative competency?
3. How do the students perceive the impact of these three instructional settings on the development of their EFL competency?

Methodology

Participants, Procedures and Materials

The current study was conducted during the first semester of academic year 2020-2021 at BAU, Mymensingh, Bangladesh. In this study, 60 EFL learners in three instructional groups were selected as the study sample through random sampling. The study was carried out in the course of Practical English which is a branch of the comprehensive English course for first-year English as an integrated subject at Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), Mymensingh. The 16-week course adopted a learning mode of classroom online, face-to-face and blended settings of learning. These students were studying English in three modes or settings of online, face-to-face and blended settings at BAU, Mymensingh under three teachers. By rotation these three teachers were involved in teaching with all the three groups of different settings to provide similar exposure to the students. The curriculum equals to upper-intermediate of Common European Framework used for this study.

Instruments

To investigate the effect of different settings on learning of EFL learners' and language performance including their attitudes toward these three instructional settings a mixed method study, a quasi-experimental design (pre and posttest) followed by qualitative interviews to clarify student outcomes, was employed.

In selecting the pre and posttests, the study covered the course contents. At the beginning of the semester, all the participants completed a pretest on different categories of course contents. A posttest containing the same question pattern was given to the learners at the end of the course. After the posttest, data, related issues, ideas, and questions were then prepared for the interviews. As the population was not large, all 30 learners of each group were interviewed to explore their attitudes toward three instructional settings. Utilizing SPSS (Version 15.0), the pre and posttest results were analyzed. Descriptive analyses (means and standard deviation) were conducted to describe the pre and posttest results. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was then employed to find out which group was significantly different.

Results and Analysis

The findings are presented and discussed in light of the research topics: the learners' EFL performance and their motivation to instructional settings. Table 1 addresses the achievement of EFL learners' communicative competency. The means and standard deviations of the pre and posttest scores were compared to describe the language performance of all three groups.

Table1. Descriptive statistics of pre and posttests.

Group/ Setting	PreTest		Post Test		Adjusted Mean	Std. Error
	M	SD	M	SD		
Online	7.31	3.519	11.46	3.720	11.46	0.685
Face to Face	7.36	2.626	15.54	3.178	15.54	0.736
Blended	7.33	2.628	15.55	3.179	15.55	0.737

Table 1 shows that the posttest means of the face to face and blended groups (15.54, 15.55) were higher than the pretest mean of the online group (11.46). However, the pretest means of all the three groups (virtual 7.31, face to face 7.36 and blended 7.33) were almost alike. The data also shows a difference in the adjusted means (4.08, 4.09) in favor of face to face and blended groups. As illustrated in Table 1, the adjusted mean of the virtual group (11.46) was found to be lower than those of the face to face and blended groups (15.54, 15.55). This reveals that there is a significant difference in the adjusted means of learners' EFL posttest scores, show significant in favor of the face to face and blended groups ($p=.000$).

Table 2. The Result of the Independent-Samples T-Test for the Satisfaction of online, face to face and blended settings

Satisfactio n	Virtual		Face to Face		Blended	
	Mean	Sum of	Mean	Sum of	Mean	Sum

	Rank		Rank	Rank		Rank	Rank		of Rank
Negative	25	15.30	302.00	2	0.48	0.37	1	.00	0.25
Positive	3	5.20	39.00	28	14.75	456.00	28	14.75	456.0
Ties	2	-----	-----	-----	----	-----	1	--	-----

As shown on the table 2 above there is a significant difference between the two tests, because there is no negative ranks and 100% positive ranks where the sum of rank is 456.0 including all thirty students who participated in the face to face and blended settings

Table 3 Comparison: Perceptions of students on online, face-to-face and blended learning.

Statement	Students ($n= 90; 30 \times 3$)			
	Online Mean(\pm SD)	Face-to-face Mean(\pm SD)	Blended Mean(\pm SD)	p -value
Space for interaction	3.61(\pm 0.68)	4.42(\pm 0.60)	4.10(\pm 0.80)	0.000*
Collaboration or pair interaction	3.77(\pm 0.6)	4.32(\pm 0.67)	4.10(\pm 0.86)	0.000
Learner satisfaction	3.90(\pm 0.78)	4.34(\pm 0.73)	4.08(\pm 1.08)	0.001*
Overall	3.76(\pm0.89)	4.34(\pm0.77)	4.09(\pm1.05)	0.000*

**Statistically significant.*

Comparing the perceptions of the students on online, face-to-face, and blended learning regarding the studied domains (space for Interaction, collaboration and learning satisfaction) and the overall revealed consistently higher mean scores for face-to-face and blended learning than online learning. This is especially true when it comes to communication and practical sessions, which is expected as social skills and cannot be acquired without communication between students and real or simulated situations.

Table 4 Students' preference regarding the mode of learning.

Mode of learning	Students($n = 30$)	Chi ²	Sig.(p -value)
Online	(4.0%)	48.8	0.000*
Face-to-face	(56.0%)		
Blended	(52.0%)		
*Statistically significant			

Table (5) Students' perceptions

Achievements of different settings	Online Setting	Face to Face Setting	Blended Setting
Develop competency	22.0	67.0	65.0
Focus on learning	17.0	78.0	75.0
Provides Scope of practice	12.0	81.0	82.0
Builds collaboration/ peer development	23.0	86.0	88.0
Removes anxiety	18.0	73.0	77.0
Motivates to learning	18.0	68.0	71.0
Space for communication	12.0	77.0	87.0
Learners' involvement	11.0	84.0	85.0
Fear of teacher's presence	88.0	12.0	11.0

Paired samples t-test was used to compare the differences of mean scores of responses of the students regarding online, face-to-face and blended learning. The results indicate that the mean scores of responses of the students were higher for face-to-face and blended learning than that for online learning for all the survey statements. The differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) for almost all the statements.

Discussion

The findings show that EFL learners developed a good level of competency in both face-to-face and blended settings. Learners feel comfortable in both educational settings. Results also indicate that classroom involvement and participation are one of the main features that cause EFL learning in face to face and blended groups. The quantitative results showed that the

students in the Face to face and blended groups outperformed those in the online group. This reflected that blended learning had a positive impact on students' EFL and performance. Thus, this study agrees with previous studies, such as by Aslani & Tabrizi (2015), Bataineh & Mayyas (2017), &Fakhir (2015), all of which support the statement that blended learning has an impact on learners in EFL learning. Moreover, the qualitative results showed that the students enjoyed the new experience of blended learning. They were strongly satisfied with and motivated toward learning English using a blended learning method. The majority of the students believed that using blended learning is very important to foster their language competency. Despite some technical issues, the students believed that blended learning could help them to improve their language skills in a flexible and relaxing setting that accounts for all their individual differences. Students agree on the benefits of online learning during emergencies but prefer face-to-face and blended modes for their higher benefits.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this study showed that like the face to face mode, blended setting had a positive impact on the performance of EFL learners. Learners in the blended group engaged in a dynamic, simultaneous, free, joint, and significant learning experience. Based on the results, the researchers recommend that the university should implement the blended learning method in English language lectures. In conclusion, the use of online technology, materials and media in language learning must be skillfully implemented to enhance a course providing the importance of face to face instruction with blended setting in EFL education. Finally, more research should be conducted to examine the effectiveness of blended learning in Bangladeshi universities and its impact on students' performance.

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