

## **Blended Instruction in EFL Context: A Way to Promote Reading Comprehension Ability**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The goal of the present study was to investigate the effect of blended instruction (face-to-face instruction accompanied with online instruction) on reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. Two intact classes containing ninety sophomore female and male students of English translation at Islamic Azad University of Arak Branch, Iran participated. Pre-test means scores showed insignificant differences between the experimental and control groups in their reading comprehension ability. At the end of treatment period, a post-test (the same as pre-test) was administered in both groups. Adopting a quasi-experimental design, the null hypothesis (There is no significant difference between the reading comprehension ability of the group undergone blended learning processing and the group undergone traditional face-to-face learning processes) was rejected.

**KEY WORDS:** reading comprehension, e-learning, EFL context, blended instruction, face-to-face instruction.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Due to the possibilities of the Internet, online education has become a strong alternative option for traditional face-to-face instruction.

The inherent appeal of distance learning — the scheduling flexibility that allows students to fit study time into their busy lives, with little or no need to visit the host campus — has been apparent since the advent of correspondence courses conducted by mail. The rise of videoconferencing, webcasting, message boards, podcasts, DVDs and email has seen a proliferation of distance-education courses, programs and institutions, presenting students with a dizzying array of choices. Some providers urge students to do their homework before taking the plunge.

Various studies have employed face-to-face instructional strategy with various degrees of success. Aarnoutse [1] investigated the effectiveness of a listening programme using the reciprocal teaching procedure and face-to-face instruction model. Results indicated that students trained by the programmed performed better during the post test than the control group. Brooks, Hamann and Vetter [2] designed and implemented a programme to improve students' vocabulary and comprehension using 59 students in grades 1, 2 and 3 in a low income area of a large city in Central Illinois. Findings from post intervention data suggest that face-to-face instruction through thematic literature units resulted in a steady growth in vocabulary by the students. A study by Duvall, Miller, Miller and Tillman [4] to evaluate an intervention for increasing prosocial behaviors while decreasing inappropriate behaviours among documentary school children employed the use of face-to-face instruction in social skills and cooperation learning structures. Post instruction data indicated an increase in prosocial behaviour and a decrease in negative behaviour. Schug, Tarver and Western, [6] reported on a project involving more than 70,000 students in 180 schools throughout the United States. The project compared students taught according to the different models with a control group and with one another. Analyses of data collected showed that the face to face instruction model produced the highest student outcomes on all three types of measures — basic skills, academic skills, and affective skills. Students who had received direct instruction performed well not only on measures of basic skills but also in more advanced skills including reading comprehension and math problem-solving.

However, Kuby and Aldridge [5] carried out a study to ascertain whether there were any significant differences in the early reading ability of kindergarten children who received direct instruction with print and those who received face-to-face instruction and those who received no instruction. The study revealed that the control group and the face-to-face instruction groups scored significantly higher than the direct instruction group. The effect of direct or face-to-face and on-line

instruction in library use was compared by Churckovich and Oughtred [3]. Results indicated that students with face-to-face instruction did gain higher post-test mean scores and felt

Whether a course should be proposed as a face-to-face interaction, an online course or a blended course depends on the analysis of the competences at stake, the nature and location of the audience, and the resources available. Depending on the cross-analysis of these 3 parameters, the course designer will opt for one of the 3 options. In his course scenario he/she will then have to decide which parts are online, which parts are offline. A basic example of this is a course of English as a second language where the instructor reaches the conclusion that all audio-based activities (listening comprehension, oral expression) will take place in the classroom where all text-based activities will take place online (reading comprehension, essays writing). As in many developing countries, use of online courses in EFL instruction in some higher education institutions in Iran is not yet known due to insufficient numbers of PC's, lack of internet connectivity in some colleges, lack of trained instructors, and lack of administrative support. A few individual attempts are now available here and there. However, the effect of such practices on Iranian college students' achievement has not been yet investigated. Here, the attempt is to search about the following null hypothesis:

There is no significant difference between the reading comprehension ability the group undergone blended learning processing and the group undergone traditional face-to-face learning processes.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The participants of this study were all at the intermediate level (English Translation Sophomores) within the age range of 20 to 24 years old. They were all Iranian and their mother tongue was Persian. Both male and female students participated. They were 90 in number.

First, both groups took part in a general proficiency test. The results indicated that they are homogeneous. Then, a reading comprehension test was administered. During the treatment period, the control group was taught by traditional method while the experimental group used an online course with Nicenet, because using the Nicenet course site did not require any special license or registration fees. The experimental group used their own PC's and the Internet from home. Every week, reading websites (hyperlinks) related to the reading topic covered in class was added in "Link Sharing". The links contained explanations, examples, exercises and quizzes.

At the end of the semester, post test (the same as pre-test) was administered in both groups.

### RESULTS

As indicated in table 1, the t-observed value for the comparison of experimental and control groups on the pre-test was 0.186.

Table1: t-statistic for pre-test

T-observed	Degrees of Freedom	T-critical	Level of significance
.186	68	2.000	.05
	68	2.660	.01

The following is a table for comparing the observed t-value based on the students' post-test performance.

Table2: t-statistic for post-test

T-observed	Degrees of Freedom	T-critical	Level of significance
4.77	68	2.000	.05
	68	2.660	.01

### DISCUSSION

The amount of t in the pre-test (as indicated in table 1) is much lower than the critical value (2000) at .05 and (2.660) at .01 level of probability for 68 degrees of freedom. Hence, it can be claimed that there is no significant difference between pre-test of the control and experimental groups. That is to say, both groups are almost homogeneous regarding their reading comprehension ability at the beginning of the study.

In the post-test, however, as table 2 indicates the "t-value" well exceeds "t-critical" values both at 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significance. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected; the two groups scored differently on the post-test, and the difference was statistically significant.

## **Conclusions**

Significant differences were found between the experimental and control groups in reading comprehension performance as measured by the post-test, suggesting that achievement in the experimental group improved as a result of blending online and in-class instruction. This means that use of online instruction as a supplement to in-class instruction proved to be a powerful tool for improving students' achievement in reading. The present study recommends that use of blended learning (use of online instruction as a supplement to face-to-face instruction) be extended to other language course and other college levels. Students of different college levels (i.e., lower and upper class students) enrolled in courses focusing on the same skill such as writing can share the same online course together with their instructors. Administrative support is also required in order for the students to take the online course seriously. BLENDED learning increases the options for greater quality and quantity of human interaction in a learning environment. Blended learning offers learners the opportunity "to be both together and apart." A community of learners can interact at anytime and anywhere because of the benefits that computer-mediated educational tools provide. Blended learning provides a 'good' mix of technologies and interactions, resulting in a socially supported, constructive, learning experience; this is especially significant given the profound effect that it could have on distance learning.

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