

Innovations

Instructors' and Students' Perceptions on Implementing Blended Learning Approach (BLA) in Communicative English Language Skills' 1 (CELS1) Course: Focused on Wolaita Sodo University, Ethiopia

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Abstract

One's perception towards the blended learning approach (BLA) determines its successful implementation. Thus, the current study investigated into the instructors' & students' perceptions on the implementation of blended learning approach (BLA) in communicative English language skills 1 (CELS1) course. Hence, the respondents of the current study were 48 EFL instructors & 44 freshmen students from the stream of social science (SSc). All of the 48 instructors were purposively selected from the department of English language & literature for the perception questionnaire (PQ) due to proximity of the subject matter & discipline of the research. However, among the 48 instructors, 8 were systematically selected again for the FGD. To get the exact participants, every Nth (6th) population were taken according to the payroll list of the institution under the descriptive research design. On the other hand, one section students of SSc stream were randomly selected for the PQ among the total sections of 15 in a lottery method. The selected section was consisted of 44 freshmen students (Males = 31 & Females = 13) who attended the class in the first semester of 2022. Meanwhile, the data collected from the focus group discussion were analyzed qualitatively in a form of statement. However, the data collected from the perceptions questionnaire (PQ) were analyzed quantitatively in assistance with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. The thematic results then revealed that, both the instructors & the students had positive perceptions towards the implementation of blended learning approach (BLA)in communicative English language skills 1 (CELS1) course sessions. Because, its implementation makes teaching & learning environment more conducive, saves the time & money of both the students & the instructors which is wasted in preparation of handouts & jotting down the notes. Therefore, the country's Ministry of Science & Higher Education (MOSHE) should consider the implementation of e-integrated instructions while designing curriculums of educational sectors.

Key words: Blended learning approach, Communicative English language skills 1, EFL Instructors' & students' perceptions, Social Science stream.

Introduction

The countries all over the world strive after modernizing educational sectors nowadays. Without modernizing educational sectors via integration of instructional technologies, the development of a country stays in a mere hallucination. Thus, every educational sectors of the country are in a tug of war either in adopting or adapting instructional technologies in their curriculums. Among so many of them, blended learning has commonly been implemented in educational sectors of all levels. Blended instruction is characterized by a deliberate combination of online & classroom-based interventions to instigate & support learning (Ruth, et al. 2015). Blended learning approach (BLA) enriches the overall learning experience & provides greater consistency in the content. Students are offered more convenience & flexibility in utilizing online learning modes while maintaining some of the interaction. Its integration in educational sectors in general & universities in particular, creates opportunity to achieve the subject matters, reduces time & cost which the students, the instructors & the institution spend in millions every year(Saovapa, 2017). Besides, it creates a greater access to information dissemination & improves students' learning satisfaction in visualizing the environment (Martha &Dan, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

The world in a general takes after modernization with single blow of whistle. Among them, some strive after integrating the countries' economy, information dissemination systems, agriculture, security, health & educational sectors. Among which the integration of educational sectors takes the lion's share in both developed & developing countries which makes learners & the instructors fully autonomous. E-instruction has commonly been implemented in developed countries where there are accessibility of internet connection & infrastructure (Mswazi, et al., 2014). On the contrary, the developing countries like Ethiopia prefer blended learning approach to fully online instruction which considers the learners' conditions, the country's infrastructure level & the instructors' conditions.

Blended learning approach (BLA) is a combination of two modes of teaching: online learning & face-to-face instruction (Saovapa, 2017). Hence, courses that follow the blended learning often take place in a real 'brick & mortar' classrooms with a dedicated tutor, but offer additional learning opportunities by way of a digital platform. It provides learners with the opportunity for personalized learning, allowing them to learn at their own pace in a chosen place & time (Angkana&Tongpoon, 2020). It also benefits the instructors & the school community in saving the time which waste during the preparation of handouts & the income which waste in purchasing stationery. It can be implemented in any subject sessions in general & to teach Communicative English language skills (CELS1) course in particular (Anna et. al., 2019).

Subsequently, according to the current researcher's inclusive observation during upgrading times (BA, MA & Ph.D.), instructional technology had not been implemented in communicative English language skills 1(CELS1) course sessions at the targeted university due to lack of awareness & technophobia of both the instructors & the students towards the technology. The only devices which were considered as the instructional technology & used by the instructors were portable tape recorders & slide-projectors categorized under audio-visual materials (Amanuel Yonas &Sena, 2020). However, after the launching of the platform at the targeted university, it seems that both the instructors & the students likely accepted the implementation of blended instructions in communicative English language skills 1(CELS1) course sessions.



Figure 1.The Platform of Wolaita Sodo University LMS: <http://10.150.11.9/login/index.php>

Similarly, the following works which were conducted by different scholars have proximity to the theme & scope of the current manuscript that focused on instructors' & students' perceptions towards the implementation of blended learning approach in communicative English language skills 1(CELS1) course at Wolaita Sodo University. Owning to this, the works of Rini (2019); Nida (2020); Özkan (2020); Kaye (2021); Bokolo (2021) & Stephen (2019) thematically highlighted only teachers' perception on blended learning. To state out the findings, Rini (2019), focused on vocational school with EDMODO & found that blended learning model assisted by EDMODO could help to resolve the problems. Besides, Nida (2020), got a general sense of all teachers in terms of using BL. Then, the finding indicated station rotation & flipped classroom models easily to implement as a beginner. Özkan (2020), on the other hand, specified generally to pre-service teachers & the Science subject & found certain technical aspects of the blended learning environment hindered students' learning.

Whereas, Kaye (2021), targeted on the high school all teachers in a general sense & found the social change implications in high school classrooms. Sequentially, Bokolo (2021), focused only on academic staff. His finding then supports institutions in developing understanding of the factors that can be considered to improve teaching design. Whereas, Stephen (2019), was only specified to high school teachers & their perception towards blended learning& extracted out the key negative influences on perception were lack of professional development & technology resource support. Whereas, the following works conducted by Crisanta (2022); Angkana et al. (2020) &Shahana (2022); thematically focused on the perceptions of both the students & the teachers towards blended learning though their scope & theme contradict to the current manuscript. Crisanta (2022) on the other hand specified to the period of Covid-19 & extracted out that both students & teachers vehemently needed to be trained about blended learning. Similarly, Angkana et al. (2020), determined to tertiary English course regardless of the skills. As their finding indicated, both teachers & students were ready for new form of language teaching. Whereas, Shahana (2022), got a focus on Covid-19 epidemic situation & found the positive perception of teachers & students on the implementation of the learning approach on those periods.

To sum up, the works above, though all of them thematically centralized the variable perceptions in terms of blended learning model, there is dissimilarity among each of them & to the current journal as well. Some of them centralize to any teachers in a general sense, English as a foreign language teachers, pre-service teachers, academic staff & high school teachers. On the contrary, rest of the works included students; whereas, the others excluded them or considered both of them as the target points. In terms of the settings & the subjects, most of the aforementioned works were focused on higher levels & EFL subjects. However, some

of them targeted on all subjects in general & Science subject in particular. As the above deduction implied & the current researcher's knowledge was concerned, there were no similar researches conducted on the same topic, theme, scope & settings. Hence, what made this manuscript different from the above mentioned researches was that its only focus on both instructors & students' perceptions towards the implementation of BLA in CELS1 course. It neither focused on all teachers nor other courses' instructors & the courses as well. Besides, it did not focus on the factors like benefits, challenges, availability, etc. Therefore, in terms of the above research gaps, the researcher motivated to conduct the current study on both the instructors' & students perceptions towards the implementation of BLA in CELS1 course at Wolaita Sodo University, Ethiopia.

Research Design & Methodology

The researcher used descriptive research design to describe the facts & characteristics of a given population factually & accurately. Then, the instructors' & students' perceptions towards the implementation of BLA in CELS1 course at the targeted university were described in a mixed approach. Meanwhile, the tools used to collect the data were perceptions' questionnaire (PQ) for both the students & the instructors & additionally the EFL instructors were provided with semi-structured focus group discussion (FGD). The perception questionnaire which consisted of 8 questions under the targeted objectives was compiled in considering five-point Likert Scale items (strongly-positive, positive, neutral, negative & strongly-negative). On the other hand, the 2 hours sessions of the EFL instructors' focus group discussion was taken place in targeting upon the outlooks of both the students & the instructors on the implementation of blended learning approach to teach & learn communicative English language skills 1 (CELS1) course. Accordingly, the results were analyzed & organized in a mixed method (quantitative & qualitative) having cross checked via the technique which was intended to increase the results' validity & credibility.

Sampling Techniques

Respondents of the current study were 48 English as the foreign language (EFL) instructors & 44 freshmen students from the stream of social science. All of the 48 instructors were purposively selected from the department of English language & literature for the perception questionnaire (PQ) due to proximity of the subject matter & discipline of the research. However, among the 48 instructors, 8 were systematically selected again for the FGD. To get the exact participants which were 8, the researcher selected every N^{th} (6^{th}) population according to the payroll list of the institution under the descriptive research design. As Patricia (2017) indicated, this is a sampling strategy in which the first element in the study population is selected randomly & then every k^{th} element, after the first element is selected. Likewise, among the 15 sections of Social Science (SSc.) stream, one section which consisted of 44 student informants was randomly selected for perceptions' questionnaire (PQ) in a lottery method. Random selection of the informants using the lottery methods creates opportunity to manage the informants (Zoltan, 2007). Afterwards, the collected data were analyzed & interpreted in a mixed approach.

Data Analysis & Findings

Analysis of the Perception Questionnaire (PQ) Data

In order to gather the quantitative data the researcher provided the perception questionnaire to the targeted informants preceding the students & then after the instructors. Accordingly, the informants replied for the tools depending on the research objectives which were targeted on instructional technology, the MOODLE platform, the BLA & implementing the approach on CELS1 course of speaking skills. The gathered data were then, analyzed using SPSS version 22.

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1: Students' Perceptions to learn Communicative English Language Skills 1(CELS1) Course in General & Teaching Speaking Skills in Particular via Blended Learning Approach (BLA)

Students' Perception Questions	Evaluation Scales	Scored Data
The general concept of students on instructional technologies	Strongly Negative	0
	Negative	0
	Neutral	2
	Positive	28
	Strongly Positive	14
Students' outlooks on the MOODLE platform in terms of assisting in learning	Strongly Negative	0
	Negative	0
	Neutral	5
	Positive	26
	Strongly Positive	13
Students' opinion towards the BLA	Strongly Negative	0
	Negative	0
	Neutral	8
	Positive	21
	Strongly Positive	15
Students' perceptions on learning all subjects in blended approach in general &learning CELS1course of speaking skills in particular	Strongly Negative	0
	Negative	0
	Neutral	7
	Positive	23
	Strongly Positive	14

As it can be seen from the “**Table 1**” above, four different themes of the perception questions were set depending on the objective. For the sake of the current manuscript, each of the points were analyzed specifically & later on their rationales were thematically analyzed as well. Thus, as the above extracted data indicated (see table 1, item 1), the highest number of respondents 28 (64%) had positive outlooks on the general concepts of instructional technologies. On the other hand, 14 (32%) of the respondents had strongly positive outlooks on the aforementioned point. The rest 2 (4%) of the students stayed neutral to forward opinions on the concepts of instructional technologies. Never the less, none of them sided to strongly-negative & negative. Whereas the data indicated at item 2, the highest number of students 26 (59%) had positive outlooks on the MOODLE platform in general & assisting in instructions in particular. Likewise, 13 (30%) informants had strongly-positive perceptions & the rest 5 (11%) of the informants stayed neutral. However, none of the respondents were sided to strongly-negative & negative as well.

Similarly, on table 1, (item 3) the highest number of the respondents 21 (48%) replied that they had positive perceptions on blended learning approach. Meanwhile, 15 (34%) of the respondents had strongly-positive outlooks towards the BLA. This finding can be supported by Samuel (2015), that the students had positive perceptions to the blended learning environments. But, neither of the respondents were sided to negative & strongly-negative respectively.

The last point on item 4 dealt with students' perceptions on learning CELS1 course of speaking skills in BLA. In this regard, the highest number of informants 23 (52%) indicated that the students had positive perceptions to learn CELS1 course of speaking skills in a BLA. In the same way, 14 (32%) of the respondents

had strongly-positive outlooks & supported learning CELS1 course of speaking skills in a BLA. Contrary to the fact, neither of the respondents sided to strongly-negative & negative respectively. Thus, the findings above can be supported by the works of Samuel(2015); Yared(2018); Megawati (2020) & Mahallia et al.,(2020), which revealed the positive insights of students towards implementing & using blended learning approach.

To wind up, the thematic ratio of the above extracted data indicated that highest number of students 25 (56%) had positive perception towards instructional technology, the MOODLE platform, the BLA and learning CELS1 course of speaking skills via BLA. Similarly, 14 (32%) among the respondents had strongly-positive insights towards the aforementioned points. Contrarily, of the informants stayed neutral & none of them were sided to strongly-negative & negative respectively.

Table 2: Instructors' Perceptions to Implement Blended Learning Approach in Communicative English Language Skills 1(CELS1) Course Sessions

Instructors' Perceptions Questions	Evaluation Scales	Scored Data
The general concept of instructors on instructional technologies	Strongly Negative	1
	Negative	1
	Neutral	3
	Positive	23
	Strongly Positive	20
Instructors' outlooks on the MOODLE platform in terms of assisting in teaching	Strongly Negative	3
	Negative	0
	Neutral	2
	Positive	24
	Strongly Positive	19
Instructors' opinion towards the BLA	Strongly Negative	0
	Negative	1
	Neutral	4
	Positive	26
	Strongly Positive	17
Instructors' perceptions on teaching subject matters in blended approach in general & teaching CELS1 course of speaking skills in particular	Strongly Negative	1
	Negative	0
	Neutral	3
	Positive	26
	Strongly Positive	18

The respondents in the table above interacted on the forwarded question which mainly focused on instructors general concepts towards instructional technology. Accordingly, only 1 (2%) of the instructors each took the sides of "strongly-negative" & "negative" towards the general concept of instructional technology. Whereas, 3 (6%) of the respondents stayed neutral on the given notion. Similarly, among the informants, about 20 (42%) were replied that they did have strongly-positive concepts in terms of instructional technology. On the contrary, the highest number among the instructors 23 (48%) perceived "positively" on the general concept of instructional technology.

Moreover, the instructors showed their consensus on the perception question of item 2 which focused on their outlooks on the MOODLE platform in terms of assisting teaching learning processes. Thus, 3 (6%) of the respondents stayed "strongly negative" on the instructional assistance of the MOODLE platform. However, none of the respondents negated the notion. Sequentially, 2 (4%) of the respondents stayed neutral on the

assistance of MOODLE platform in instructions. Contrarily, the highest number of the respondents 24 (50%) had “positive” perceptions towards the utilities of MOODLE platform on instruction. On the other hand, 19 (40%) of the respondents had strongly positive perceptions towards utilities of the MOODLE platform in instruction.

Similarly, in the same table the instructors exposed out their opinions towards the blended learning approach (BLA). As the data revealed, the highest number of the respondents 26 (54%) had positive perceptions towards instructional blending. Whereas, 17 (35%) among the respondents had strongly positive perceptions & the rest of respondents stayed neutral 4 (6%) & negative 1(2%) respectively. However, none of the respondents sided to strongly negative on forwarded questions.

Sequentially, the respondents exposed out their perceptions on blended approach on general & using the approach to teach communicative English language skills 1 (CELS1) course of speaking skills in particular. As the data revealed on the last item, the highest number 26 (54%) of the respondents had positive perceptions on teaching CELS1 course in BLA. In the same way, 18 (35%) among the respondents had strongly positive perceptions on using BLA in CELS1 course sessions. On the other hand, rest of the respondents stayed neutral 3 (6%) & strongly 1 (2%) negative. On the contrary, none of the respondents preferred strongly negative.

Therefore, ratio of the above whole extracted data thematically indicated, 25 (52%) of the respondents had positive perceptions on the following points: instructional technology, the MOODLE platform, the BLA & implementing the approach on CELS1 course of speaking skills. Thus, these findings can be supported by Nida (2020) that instructors had positive outlooks on technology integrated instructions. Likewise, as the ratio data indicated 19 (40%) of the respondents had strongly positive perceptions on the aforementioned 4 points. Contrary to the fact, the least number of respondents had strongly-negative 4 (8%), negative 2 (4%) & neutral 12 (25%) on instructional technology in general, the MOODLE platform, the BLA & implementing the approach on CELS1 course of speaking skills.

Analysis of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Data

Semi-structured focus group discussion was employed to the systematically selected 8 EFL instructors of Wolaita Sodo University (WSU) on the first semester of 2022. To run out the discussion session, the researcher & co-modulator told them its objective & let all the participants fill their demographic information. Among the informants, 6 were males aged between 38-45& the rest 2 were females aged between 35-43. Thus, the researcher thematically analyzed the collected data in a form of statement.

As the respondents interacted on the opening question, which mainly focused on the general implications of teaching communicative English language skills 1 (CELS1) course in blended learning approach (BLA), 8 of them had positive perceptions on the implementation of blended learning approach in communicative English language skills 1 (CELS1)course. To support their assertions, they thematically stated out their positive reasons towards the integration of technology in educational arenas.

We are at the side of the implementation of blended learning approach (BLA) in CELS1 course. Because, it scoops up the attention of students, saves their time & money in which they waste by copying the handouts. It also lets all the instructors act accordingly in their own paces& makes the instructional interactions alive.

As the instructors uttered out what they internalized towards their students' class interactions during instructions, all the students attended the class on time, well accustomed with the platform & the software, used online materials from the platform & eager to do every activities using the MOODLE™ learning management system. Therefore, this can be deduced that the learners had also positive perceptions in terms of implementation of BLA in CELS1course sessions. Because, implementation of blended approach, assists the

learners acquire multiple modalities dramatically & let the learners control the pace of their learning (ELT, 2016).



Figure 2. The students were taking the blended course

Likewise, for the forwarded question whether they had a clue of educational software or applications, the respondents replied that they knew some of them & used for educational purposes. Typically, they are accustomed with LCD projectors, microphones, laptop computers, etc. which they usually implement for instructions. On the other hand, the informants considered, MOODLE™, ZOOM, telegram & some mobile applications as educational software or applications. However, among the mentioned applications or software, the respondents came into agreement that MOODLE™ & ZOOM are more common in educational sectors currently. This can be assured by Saovapa (2017), where he coined EDMODO, MOODLE™ & ZOOM as the common application in educational sectors.

On the other hand, for the discussion question which focused on the general definitions of e-learning, almost all of the respondents stated out that it is a computer assisted or technology based learning. Likewise, in defining the blended learning approach (BLA), most of the respondents thematically stated out that, blended learning approach (BLA) is the mixed approach; which mixes the classical face-to-face interaction & internet assisted education. Conversely, conventional mode of instruction (CMI) is a usual classroom which takes place in the presence of teachers & students within the classrooms via the help of chalk & blackboard (Shahana, 2022). Therefore, from the above extracted data, it could be deduced that both the students & the instructors had positive perceptions towards the implementation of BLA in CELS1 course at the targeted university.

Main Findings of the Study

Based on the analyses made above, the following main findings had thematically been extracted out & put below as follows:

- Both the students & the instructors had positive perceptions towards integration of instructional technologies in educational sectors using the MOODLE platform.
- Instructional integration gives more benefits to both the students & the instructors. It saves the times of both the students & the instructors which wastes in writing on the boards, preparing the notes & taking the notes. Besides, the money of students that they waste in copying the handouts. This approach benefits both of them in making the classrooms' arena alive.
- The highest number of the students & the instructors had positive perceptions on the implementation of BLA in general & in CELS1 course sessions in particular at the targeted university.

Conclusion

The following conclusions have been drawn from the results which were analyzed above:

- MOODLE platform has been launched at Wolaita Sodo University (WSU) which assists both the students & the instructors to learn & give the course of CELS1.
- Instructional integration gives more benefits to both the students & the instructors.
- The highest number of students &instructors had positive perception on the implementation of blended learning approach in CELS1course sessions at the targeted university.

Recommendations

Based on the findings & conclusions, the following recommendations have been forwarded:

- Ethiopian secondary & tertiary level curriculums should be designed considering instructional technology.
- The benefits of instructional technology should be appropriately introduced to the stakeholders of the institutions.
- Functionality of the gadgets should be checked beforehand.
- ICT teachers & instructors should take the lions' share in letting students be accustomed with the current technology.

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Conflicts of interest

The corresponding author officially declares that there is no conflict of interests towards this manuscript.

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