Blended Learning Communication Problems Confronting Saudi Learners of English

Tanzin Ara Ashraf

Lecturer of English

King Khalid University

Abstract: *The paper is based on action research carried out in King Khalid University. The major portion of this paper presents the Blended Learning Communication Problems facing the Saudi Arabian Undergrad Learners of Intensive English. Then, it focuses on the positive and negative responses of the learners and thereby suggests effective communication and teaching strategies in language teaching using blended learning. The research was conducted among the first year students of Computer Science of King Khalid University, studying Intensive English as university requirement for 12 hours a week for 15 weeks.*

Key Words: *blended teaching, Saudi learners, exposure to English, informal teaching, vocabulary*

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized society, English can be termed as the world's local language. In this era of internet and technology, English has become the need for every individual. During the last decade, the government of Saudi Arabia has made massive investments on the field of education. Moreover, the country has included major plans for the strategic development of E-learning in the in the country's Eighth Development Plan (2005-2009) (Ministry of Economy and Planning 2009). Much research has been done on several learning difficulties that the Saudi learners of English face during the course of communication. Solutions have been recommended accordingly but the communication problems still remain constant. Blended learning, because of its innovative and flexible nature, can provide the necessary platform for the teachers to make the interaction more effective and to get the best in their students; if it is used intelligently, sincerely and thoughtfully. This emerging and promising trend in the field of education extends learning beyond the classroom wall. It multiplies the student -teacher interaction and the students enjoy the benefit of "flexibility and the freedom to learn anytime, anywhere" (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2006-2011). "The concept of blended learning is rooted in the idea that learning is not just a one-time event—learning is a continuous process. Blending provides various benefits over using any single learning delivery medium alone" (Singh, 2003).

In fact, the Arab learners face difficulties in all language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Such persistent problems decrease their ability to communicate trough online as well. After enrolling into blended English course, the learners suffer because of limited vocabulary. They get confused while navigating and using different tools of Blackboard. Insufficient exposure to English bars the learners from using technology freely, effectively above all happily.

Surprisingly enough, the responses of the students regarding blended English course were quite interesting. The students who had positive attitude towards blended learning were eager to learn even though language barrier existed. They proved to be more enthusiastic, interactive and tended to do well also. Those who had negative attitude or were reluctant to welcome the emerging trend of learning, performed badly. They found the Blackboard assignments or online classes as added burdens. However, the numbers of such students were nominal. The students, who were basically shy, appreciated and embraced the introduction of blended course. Most of the students indicated that, blended course should be more informal and interactive. In Blackboard, they preferred Blogs, Discussion Boards, Elluminate *Live* Sessions rather than Weekly Assignments. This research attempts to investigate the communication problems in blended learning facing Saudi Learners of English and suggests solutions of the existing problems.

The Statement of the Problem

The Saudi learners of blended English course encounter various problems during the course of communication. In the face-to-face classroom the learners lack the necessary vocabulary in order to get their meaning across and to keep the interaction going for a longer period of time (Rabab'ah, 2003). As a result, they switch to their first language (Arabic). Limited vocabulary, grammar, organization of ideas, spelling and referencing affect their ability to communicate in writing and speaking (Al-Khasawneh, 2010). Their continual errors in syntax, morphology and pronunciation unable them to express themselves "comfortably and efficiently" (Mukattash, 1983). While reading, the learners fail to extract the meaning of specific words and texts. Naturally, they become disappointed and finally loose the interest to read. Lack of vocabulary, prevents them to use the online tools successfully as those are written in English.

Insufficient exposure to English from the beginning of their primary education prevents the learners from making effective communication. Students are not exposed to sufficient English as they start learning English in the last year of the primary level (Al-Nofaie, 2010).

The students are well aware of their weakness existing in different skills of language. Simultaneously, they understand that if English were exposed to them from the beginning of their primary education, the current scenario would have been different. Many researchers have agreed on similar problems such as Jdetawy, 2011; Nation, 2003; Al-Abdan, 1993.

In fact, the Saudi learners are left with very little opportunity to practice English apart from classroom. English is taught in the institutions only as an academic subject required passing. The young learners of Saudi Arabia love technology. They crave for the latest version of mobiles, laptops IPods, I Pads etc. But even in such popular electronic devices Arabic is used as the medium of instruction. Such practices make it harder for the language of English to replace the language of Arabic. To master any language Halliday et al. (1984) suggests that: "Oral mastery depends on practicing and repeating the patterns produced by a native speaker of the foreign language". (1984: 16) In the institutions, in order to satisfy the query of the students teachers adapt a bilingual method. So the question of how the students are going to use English practically remains somewhat unanswered. Al-Nofaie (2010: 77) states that "the use of Arabic was an unavoidable phenomenon" in the classroom. Neither from home nor from school, students got the motivation to practice English.

The formal way of teaching in blended courses de-motivates the learners of English. The teacher needs to play the role of a facilitator not of a dictator. Learning can become fun if suitable atmosphere is provided.

The Purpose of the Study

1. To diagnose the communication problems that the Saudi learner's of English face.

2. To identify the causes of these problems.

3. To suggest possible solutions of the existing problems.

Methodology

The first year students of Computer Science of King Khalid University, studying Intensive English as university requirement for 12 hours a week for 15 weeks, served as the sample of this study. The participants were 18/20 years old and they have freely discussed their problems regarding blended learning. Even they had tried to share possible solutions from their point of view. Semi-structured interviews, activities, discussions, questionnaires, face to face classroom observations as well as observation on participation in Blackboard and Facebook and the researchers own experience were the main research tools for collecting data. Students' eagerness to use technology was also noted. The English language exposure survey questionnaire was adopted from (Mango et al, 2009) in order to find out how much each individual has contacted with English.

The whole class was divided into five groups: A, B, C, D and E. The students were categorized on the basis of their score in English Course, completed on the First Semester. The researcher had asked each group to prepare a group presentation (oral) on any of their chosen topic. The students who had good communicative skills both in face to face and online

classroom, belonged to group A. The students who were studious, serious in their studies, eager enough to improve their communication skills, belonged to group B. The students who were satisfied enough simply by completing the tasks given by the teacher, were in group C. Those who had enrolled into blended English course only as a university requirement belonged to group D. The students who extremely lacked in all the skills of language were in group E. After the presentations each group were interviewed by the researcher and they discussed on the strengths and weakness of themselves regarding communication. Before dividing the students into groups, questionnaires were given to the students to find out their eagerness to learn English.

Literature Review

Most of the universities of Saudi Arabia have their own e-learning departments and deanships. The National Centre for E-Learning and Distance Learning Project supports and facilitates the universities towards utilizing electronic learning application in teaching and research (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). The rock solid infrastructure for blended learning has already been established in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the teachers should try to make the best use of it in order to minimize the communication gap.

In blended learning the students get the opportunity to actively get involved in the learning process (Thompson, 2003) and the learners can access different online resources (Osguthrope & Graham, 2003; Lim, Morris & Kumpitz, 2006). Even the most introvert learner of the class can interact freely and confidently with the teacher. Lai & Kritsonis (2006) showed that WebCT(now owned by Blackboard) helps the student in learning by repeating the lessons if required. We, the teachers, need to rethink and redesign ourselves to get the best in our students. Our courses need to be redesigned innovatively, intelligently and thoughtfully so that they can successfully draw the attention of the 21st century learners. "At the heart of blended learning redesign is the goal to engage students in critical discourse and reflection. Course redesign is not just about putting courses online. It is about rethinking the way we deliver instruction in light of the possibilities that new technology offers" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007).

Without the proper exposure of the target language, it will become extremely difficult to minimize the communication problem which the Arab learners are facing currently. Magno et al (2009) defines "….exposure to a second language occurs whenever individuals engage in conversations in the second language with family members, friends, classmates and colleagues; whenever they read books, magazines, and newspapers written in that language…".

The role of E-learning in Language Teaching and the Saudi Youth

In the recent years, the language teachers have deeply involved themselves to make language learning more effective, and motivating for the students (Vallance 1998; Donaldson & Kotter1999; Yang 2001). The use of e-learning has brought a dynamic change in the language learning atmosphere (Young, 2003). The teachers may change their concepts of teaching if they themselves are enrolled as online students (Al-Mahmood & McLoughlin, 2004). In fact, student

–centered –learning approaches are proved to be more effective in higher education (Kember, 2009).

The youth of Saudi Arabia are sharp-witted, intelligent as well as clever. Al-Shahrani and Al-Shehri(2012), for instance, state that, day by day the students are getting more connected to social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp etc. and are becoming "Digital Savvy". Therefore, the teachers of higher education need to introduce such applications in designing their courses; as the learners are already habituated to these channels.

Results

Face to face Classroom Observation

Group A: The topic of group A was "Fashion Summer Trends 2013 in Saudi Arabia". Most of the students of this group were fluent and confident during presentation. Their pronunciation, use of vocabulary, body language, use of visual aids deserved praise. They loved this activity and were happy that they had the freedom of choosing the topic. Their strengths were the accuracies in all the language skills. They had the opportunities to practice English at home.

Group B: The topic of group B was "Difficulties of Communicating in Blended English Course". The teacher was surprised and at the same time proud of her students for selecting such an important topic. Their pronunciation and use of vocabulary were not as good as group A, but they successfully communicated their ideas. They appreciated this activity as well and felt that they could have done better if they had sufficient vocabulary. They added, if they could get more opportunity to practice English outside classroom, the communication problem would never exist. They regretted for not having exposure to English from the beginning of their primary education.

Group C: The topic of Group C was "How to cook Khabsa". The teacher was happy to see their presentation and appreciated the colorful presentation of the slides. These students lacked in vocabulary, pronunciation and in other language skills. They were switching from English to Arabic while giving presentation. They mention of their lacking in vocabulary. They were satisfied to finish the work on time.

Group D: The topic of Group D was "The Great Wall of China". The teacher appreciated the students that they had spent time for the task given by the teacher. These students were not aware of their strengths and weaknesses. The researcher sensed the lack of motivation in them.

Group E: The topic of group E was "The Beauty of Saudi Arabia". The teacher appreciated them for decorating the slides with beautiful pictures of their homeland. These students were extremely shy in nature. They hardly spoke in the classroom as well as in the presentation. They were well aware that, they lacked in all the language skills. They felt if fewer students were there in the class, they could come into more contact with the teacher. They also

added that they found difficulties while submitting assignments in Blackboard—as everything were written in English.

The researcher was convinced that, most of the students were well aware of their lacking and their consciousness could make them do wonders if they could get the suitable platform. Limited exposure to English from their primary education prevented them from expressing themselves comfortably. Limited vocabulary hindered their communication speed. The students, who were reluctant and enrolled into English course only because of university requirement, were extremely in need of motivation. They needed to realize that English was important for them. Many of them suggested that the language class should contain small number of students in order to have better teacher-student and student-student interaction.

Online Participation Observation

Most of the students appreciated e-learning but at the same time suggested for more informal way of interaction. One student said:

….If Blackboard had a chat option like Facebook …. I would have stayed logged in for a longer period of time……. I could do my work and chat with my fellow mates…… ☺… or with the teacher if necessary.

Al-Shahrani and Al-Shehri(2012), in their study highlighted the eagerness of the students on the implementation of "more informal and interactive medium" like Facebook.

While, many students preferred the "Elluminate *Live* Session" rather than classroom lecture. One student said,

I feel teacher is teaching only me and I can freely ask questions without the fear of others thinking that, I am dumb…..She continued…. …..Online lecture is Jannah (Heaven)!!!

Al most all the students suggested that, effective training with detail and clear instructions (in English), on navigating the course tools should be provided.

The Faculty Innovation Centre of Cockrell School of Engineering in The University of Texas has been giving much importance on using Facebook in Teaching. The teacher at the First Semester of the course had asked all her students to send her message individually in Facebook by writing a short brief about each of them. Simultaneously, she announced in Blackboard that all the students should introduce themselves using Discussion Board. Surprisingly enough, their responses in Facebook were more interesting and quicker than Blackboard. With whatever vocabulary they had in stalk, they made the maximum use of those while responding in Facebook. The informal nature of Facebook made them feel comfortable to interact. During the beginning of Second Semester, she asked the students again to introduce themselves in Discussion Board by changing the title of the task from "Introduce Yourself" to "Me… after ten years". The teacher was the first one to introduce her in a casual manner including fun in it. In the topic titled, "Me, after ten years…." the teacher wrote "I wish, I didn't wrinkle on my face!! I

wish, people would praise me for staying so young, even after ten years!!" The responses of the students were lovely, funny, interesting, surprising above all fantastic! Again, informal way of teaching was embraced by the learners. Whether it is Facebook or Blackboard, language teachers need to keep innovating and developing their ideas of teaching religiously.

Discussion

1. The researcher believes that, the first step to increase the level of communication in a blended course is increasing the vocabulary of the Saudi Learners of English. As vocabulary is the root of all language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking (Lin, 2002). Asselin (2002) and Nichols & Rupley (2004) support the fact that, vocabulary is the key to acquiring all the language skills. Mastering vocabulary will help the learners to communicate comfortably both in face-to-face and online class.

2. Detail and effective training (in English) should to be given to the students before enrolling into a blended English course. In doing so, the number of E-labs need to be increased. Efficient and sincere trainers should be there in the E-labs.

3. Student-teacher interaction in blended courses needs to be more informal. The teachers can introduce the social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp etc. in designing their courses. In this study, Facebook provided the opportunity to the students to connect with their teacher outside classroom. It was informal in nature and was a friendly medium of communication.

4. Student centered learning activity should be included while designing the course. The course design should meet the students need and interest.

5. Fewer number of students should be enrolled into a blended English course in order to increase the quality of student –teacher and student-student interaction.

6. The researcher firmly believes that, sufficient exposure to English from the beginning of primary level is in fact, the urgent need for the Arab Learners to improve their level of communication both in face-to-face and online class.

7. Teachers should not adopt a bilingual method in teaching language. The tendency of both teachers and students towards using Arabic in language classroom minimizes the amount of English language exposure (Al-Abadan, 1993; Kannan, 2009).

8. The learners need to be motivated to learn English from the family, from the school above all from the culture in which they are growing up.

Conclusion

The research has explored some of the factors that have affected the Saudi learners pace of communicating in blended English courses. Their limitations in all language skills of English bound them to suffer both in face-to-face and online classes. Therefore, the teachers should design the blended courses by meeting their needs and interests. Informal way of teaching can

motivate the learners to overcome their weaknesses. It is recommended that, sufficient exposure to English from the beginning of primary education is extremely needed.

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Tanzin Ara Ashraf is a Lecturer at King Khalid University. She received an MA in English Literature and has been teaching in Saudi Arabia since 2008. Her area of interest includes language teaching style, blended learning and teaching Shakespearean drama.

Appendix A: The Questionnaire

No.	Questions	Yes	No
1.	Do you think learning English is important?	80%	20%
2.	Do you think that you lack in vocabulary to communicate?	94%	6%
3.	Did you enrolled into English because of university requirement?	81%	19%
4.	Do you think that blended learning can be helpful in learning language?	63%	37%
5.	Do you need training before enrolling into a blended course taught in English?	89%	11%
6.	Do you enjoy Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp. etc?	98%	2%
7.	Do you think a language class should have small number of students?	93%	7%
8.	Do you think that teachers should be friendlier?	96%	4%
9.	Do think that studying English should start from Grade 1 of Primary level?	85%	15%
10.	Do you think that the method of teaching English in the school level was sufficient enough?	25%	75%

Appendix B: Items for the Checklist for English Language Exposure

Instruction: Read each item and check how often is the situation applied to you. Shade the bubble corresponding to your answer

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Home	O	O	O	O	O
1. My parents talk in English	O	O	O	O	O
2. English is spoken at home	O	O	O	O	O
3. I converse in English with my family	O	O	O	O	O
4. My family encourages to speak in English	O	O	O	O	O
Friends					
5. My friends speak English	O	O	O	O	O
6. I chat online with my friends in English	O	O	O	O	O
7. I talk with my friends in English	O	O	O	O	O
University					
8. My professors speak in English	O	O	O	O	O
9. My classmates speak in English	O	O	O	O	O
10. The medium of instruction is English	O	O	O	O	O
11. All the lectures are delivered in English	O	O	O	O	O
12. All the staff members understand English	O	O	O	O	O
13. The medium of instruction in e-learning is English	O	O	O	O	O
Media					
14. The medium of instruction in Facebook is English	O	O	O	O	O
15. The medium of instruction in my computer is English	O	O	O	O	O
16. The medium of instruction in my mobile is English	O	O	O	O	O
17. I browse web pages that are written in English	O	O	O	O	O
18. I chat online in English	O	O	O	O	O
19. I listen to songs in English	O	O	O	O	O
20. I watch movies in English	O	O	O	O	O
21. I watch TV shows in English	O	O	O	O	O
22. I read magazines written in English	O	O	O	O	O
23. I read newspapers written in English	O	O	O	O	O
24. I read books written in English	O	O	O	O	O

Adopted from Mango et al 2009 and adapted by the researcher