#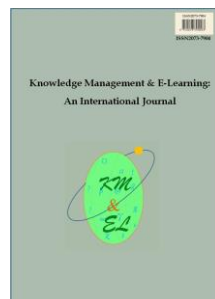 Introducing blended learning in the English language classroom: Students' attitudes and perceptions before and after the course

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# Introducing blended learning in the English language classroom: Students' attitudes and perceptions before and after the course

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**Abstract:** The increased demands for foreign language learning and the dwindling number of contact hours have urged teachers to look for innovative methods of instruction such as blended learning (BL). A study was conducted at a Russian university (The National Research University Higher School of Economics) in order to explore the attitudes and perceptions of the students toward blended learning in the English language classroom. The research instruments were tests and questionnaires administered to students before and after the course. The online portion of the course was realized through the corporate learning management system (LMS). The study revealed a noticeable evolution in students' perceptions and attitudes towards using blended learning in foreign language instruction. This shift and the consequential outcomes of the study are discussed.

**Keywords:** Blended learning; Perceptions and attitudes; Motivation; Language learning; Learning management system

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## 1.   Introduction

Computer-based methods of learning are being increasingly used in education, and research confirms their efficiency in terms of learner engagement, enhancement in learning experiences and opportunities for students (Wilson & Randall, 2012), improvement in knowledge and self-awareness (Beyth-Marom, Chajut, Roccas, & Sagiv, 2003), achievement in learning outcomes and developing skills for life-long learning (Lau, Lam, & Zhou, 2010).

The growing requirements for English language proficiency are obvious in light of the conditions of globalized economy and cross-cultural interaction. One way of addressing these issues might be to employ an efficient integration of information and educational technologies such as blended learning where computer-based instruction is combined with face-to-face instruction (Graham, 2006). When learning is taking place with limited classroom contact time, it is not possible to acquire all the necessary skills within traditional language instruction setting. Alternatively, e-learning creates the necessary environment for students' active and responsible involvement in their studies (Alfadly, 2013; Boeker & Klar, 2006), and offers more flexibility, learning opportunities and faster delivery.

e-Learning implies that teaching and learning paradigms should be modified within the learner-centered approach (Collins & O'Brien, 2003). It is essential for students to become self-reliant and to continue learning autonomously and efficiently outside of the class. It is critical to be aware of the learners' readiness to accept e-learning as well as the effect that the introduction of LMS will have on their learning behavior.

In view of these tasks and problems, this study is aimed at identifying students' attitudes and perceptions of blended learning and at encouraging the acceptance of the online component of the course as a means of enhancing students' learning opportunities.

## 2.   Literature review

### 2.1. *Language education with technologies: Attitudes and perceptions*

When integrating e-learning into language acquisition, one of the problems is the learner's adoption of technology. Some researchers express a concern that with the use of e-learning, acquiring the language might be impeded by computer-based tasks (Coryell & Chlup, 2007). Inappropriate use of new technologies can distract students from focusing on the task and over-emphasize delivery modality over learning objectives (Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, & Freynik, 2014). Using technology in language education should not be the main objective. Instead, it should become an integral tool of any classroom activity (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). Nonetheless, it is too early to claim that technology is completely "normalized" (Bax, 2000), fully-implemented into the classroom environment. In fact, fear and/or exaggerated respect for what technology can do are still being worked out among teachers and students (Bax, 2003). For students with computer anxiety or negative experience of using technological innovations for learning, this fear may carry over into the learning process of the particular topic or skill and thus may demotivate them to learn (Yau & Cheng, 2013).

Studies investigating the outcomes of e-learning include a large number of empirical or quasi-empirical projects, however a significant part of them have targeted the sphere of medicine, military, teacher education (Means, Toyama, Murphy Bakia, &

Jones, 2010), information technologies (IT) and the sciences (Tsai, Shen, & Chiang, 2013). Although the vast amount of research investigating the e-learning approach in language education includes conceptual (White, 2003) and empirical research (Shen & Liu, 2011; Karimi, 2014; Sun, 2014), the studies on language education with blended learning methods appear to have a smaller overall share of attention.

Nevertheless, technology is being increasingly used in the English classroom as a compliment to face-to-face language instruction. The advantages of this integration are numerous: convenience, time saving, flexibility, additional exposure to authentic materials, an opportunity to tailor language courses to individual tastes, preferences and meet all possible learners' requirements (McCarthy & Murphy, 2010; Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). Researchers associate the problem of technology adoption in language learning with such issues as the ease of use of the educational program depending on the computer literacy of the user. There is a correlation between student's technical abilities and attitudes toward using e-learning: students with the necessary technical skills are more motivated to engage in e-learning (Sabah, 2013).

Scholars are interested in different aspects of integrating online education into language learning practices and analyze students' attitudes and perceptions toward the BL-approach. They investigate the possible integration of online instruction into the teaching of the English language in general as well as experimenting with applying new practices to developing particular skills (or a combination of reading, writing, speaking, or listening skills) within a course. The survey among 92 students at Al-Quds Open University set out to investigate how the sample students perceived e-learning components of a BL English listening course. The results showed that, although prior to the course, the students mostly felt uncomfortable about online learning, eventually they changed their opinion. In their view, online learning environment was time-saving, effective and furthermore contributed to their confidence and independence as language learners. They were willing to take on more English courses in LMS (Abbas, 2013).

These findings are supported by the results of other studies investigating the development of students' reading comprehension skills using blended learning (Behjat, Yamini, & Bagheri, 2012). This study was conducted with 107 sophomore students. Control groups and experimental groups were formed; the participants were students with similar English language abilities and IT skills. The research showed a positive effect of blended-learning on both students' motivation and their performance. The researchers found a significant difference in development of the students' reading comprehension skills between experimental and control groups, which confirms that students can improve their reading skills much better in a BL environment than in face-to-face instruction.

The experiment conducted at the Academy of Language Studies (Malaysia) explored students' attitude toward the blended learning course aimed at developing their writing skills. The researchers were also interested in students' performance and engagement in the course. The results showed that students' perception toward blended learning was positive, but the frequency of students' interaction online was low. In regard to the students' performance, no significant difference was found between the experimental group, which was engaged in blended learning, and the control group, which had face-to-face instruction (Maulan & Ibrahim, 2012).

The study of Bangkok University students' blended learning experience of English course revealed positive attitudes to online learning. The students believed that LMS could support their learning of English in different ways, but their opinions of LMS as a learning tool were less enthusiastic (Srichanyachon, 2014).

Another research conducted in King Khalid University examined students' views regarding advantages and disadvantages of the blended learning approach in developing a particular set of different language skills. The researchers questioned 160 male students. According to the learners' feedback, integrated online learning was beneficial most notably for their reading skills and vocabulary building. However, the students were skeptical regarding the effectiveness of blended learning in relation to other areas (writing, listening, grammar and pronunciation). They appreciated the advantages of blended learning in providing better opportunities for language acquisition, but they could not really specify whether this type of learning was interesting, useful and/or convenient. At the same time, the limitations mentioned by the students referred to such issues as the courses' ineffectiveness, ease of cheating and some technical problems. The researchers concluded that in this way the learners displayed their feeling of dissatisfaction. Besides, more than 50% of students expressed the opinion that blended learning is less effective than traditional instruction (Al Zumor, Al Refaai, Eddin, & Al-Rahman, 2013).

As can be seen from the mentioned and analyzed literature, the outcomes regarding the learners' attitudes as well as their interest and satisfaction towards blended learning are diverse. A number of studies show that students have mostly positive perceptions of blended learning and are ready to accept an e-learning platform in their English classroom. They indicate that the e-learning environment was more efficient in comparison with the traditional teacher-student approach (Al-Dosari, 2011).

At the same time, other researchers present somewhat controversial findings, which show that there is no clear evidence that this type of language instruction is fully embraced by language learners, nor is it viewed by them as a form of linguistic support. Moreover, in some cases, students were rather reluctant to define this type of learning and teaching as motivating and effective. They viewed LMS as convenient and flexible, but considered traditional teacher-student instruction in language classroom more useful and productive, or at least preferable.

In regard to the development of language specific skills, in some cases there was a significant difference in language performance in experimental and control groups, in other cases no significant difference was found between the two types of teaching.

Among the factors that the researchers put forward as an explanation of students' diverse perception of blended learning, the most significant were technical problems, teachers' improper use of technology in language instruction or the short duration of the course. Additionally, the emphasis was also put on methods of teaching and time spent on training language skills. Some researchers indicate that learners have not yet reached a certain level of maturity and are not ready to respond to the challenges of blended learning (Johnson & Marsh, 2014). The main concern of scholars is that learners are reluctant to take on that level of personal responsibility and prefer to rely on teachers.

## 2.2. Prerequisites for successful language learning with technologies

Using e-learning tools requires more autonomy and increased personal responsibility from students for their own studies and results (Bax, 2003). Therefore, it was proposed that in order to participate in online education, students need self-regulated learning skills (Bandura, 1997). Without the physical presence of a teacher, these skills might be of great importance for the success of distance learning (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998).

Language education implies a certain level of risk-taking and operating in an unfamiliar environment (Brown, 2000). If a student demonstrates the ability and courage

to cope with the unknown, make decisions and consciously reflect on experiences, he/she displays a certain degree of learner autonomy (Kohonen, 1992). A positive experience in acquiring a second language is also crucial. If language learners feel that their competencies are being enhanced, and are becoming more independent, the students are likely to assume more responsibility for their own learning. Crabbe (1993) provided three basic arguments to justify this concept: the ideological, the psychological, and the economic. However, learners have to be ready for the changes that autonomy would impose on their behavior and learning mentality. It is claimed that ideologies influence behavior, and therefore, in order to become an efficient autonomous learner, a student should hold to particular beliefs that contribute to his/her potential to achieve full educational autonomy (Cotterall, 1995).

Moreover, learner autonomy seems to be closely related to motivation. A lack of self-motivation in managing the learning process might be a constraint for some learners in their attempt to take up online courses, that is to evidence why involving them into such course would be a risk (Tsai, Shen, & Tsai, 2011). Therefore, pedagogy, which emphasizes learner autonomy, may have a positive influence on the students' sense of motivation. The research conducted in 2011 among learners of the English language at a Japanese university, confirmed that the sense of efficacy and achievement help to develop interest in the subject and improve academic results (Okazaki, 2011). In her Master's thesis, Ikonen (2013) discusses the complicated bidirectional character of the connection between motivation and autonomy: if students set up and pursue meaningful goals, they will become intrinsically motivated to achieve those goals.

Self-regulation skills can be acquired through instruction and can result in enhanced motivation and achievement (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). It does not seem reasonable, however, to start training a learner autonomy immediately without ensuring whether they have sufficient motivation (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). This is due to the fact that initially most learners do not have the knowledge, skills, and mindset to take responsibility for their own learning (Nunan, 1997). Instead, it is suggested to develop learner autonomy step-by-step, passing through several stages: making the course goals clearer to learners and involving them in goal-setting, encouraging language practice outside the classroom, allowing a variety of learning styles and strategies, and helping them become aware of the learning processes function (Nunan, 2003).

The BL-approach appears suitable within the framework of the current study. Firstly, research into blended learning practices has proved that it has a greater advantage and reasonably better performance compared to purely face-to-face instruction (Means et al., 2010). Secondly, in the case of resistance to technology among language learners, a BL course might serve as a compromise as it combines traditional instruction and innovative learning techniques. Thirdly, for the same reasons, blended learning might ensure a gradual promotion of learner autonomy, instead of an abrupt shift in learning styles.

Consequently, more research should be devoted to exploring learners' attitudes and perceptions, and in identifying the factors that should be analyzed and taken into account while integrating online education into language instruction.

## 3. Research questions

The purpose of the paper is to explore the following research questions:

1.  What are the students' perceptions of LMS as a compliment to the traditional classroom instruction of English?

2.  What are the outcomes of blended learning in terms of students' attitude, motivation, and perceived advantages?

## 4.  Method

### 4.1. Participants

The target group consisted of 56 second-year Bachelor students of HSE – Nizhny Novgorod campus, Department of Management. The course participants were not specially selected according to any parameters (language proficiency, age or gender). The level of English language proficiency in the sample varied from intermediate to upper-intermediate. All the students gave their consent to participate in the survey. The demography was as follows: 32% of them were men, 68% were women. The age of students was 18-20. The majority of students - 55.4% - had good academic record, 28.6% - had excellent grades and 16% had average to low performance.

### 4.2. Procedure

Prior to the study the target group was given diagnostic tests (grammar and listening) to assess their skills and a pre-course questionnaire to identify their perceptions of working with LMS. At the end of the term, the students were given the post-course questionnaire to evaluate the LMS-supplemented course and the assessment proficiency grammar and listening tests.

The students were offered a BL learning English language course whereas LMS was used outside of the classroom. The course lasted 1 semester: 2 academic hours per week (32 total contact hours) and independent work online. The students were not limited in time when doing skills development tasks and revising. Each topic was supported by links to external Internet sources. Assignments were given weekly and were listed in the dedicated section in LMS, so that the students could have access and full overview of the tasks. Regarding the testing, the overall time allocated was approximately three hours.

The approach to teaching foreign languages at the Higher School of Economics is competence-oriented. The aim of learning a foreign (English) language is to acquire the skills necessary to enable students to pass exams in the format of international proficiency tests which implies that all spheres of linguistic competencies should be developed on a relatively equal level. However, with the number of contact hours decreasing, an efficient academic balance is hard to achieve. It would therefore be reasonable to split the time dedicated to linguistic acquisition between face-to-face and online learning. Given the traditional educational setting, communicative activities still require most of the classroom hours at the expense of time and effort necessary to be spent on other language skills, such as grammar and listening. Teaching experiences show that for students, these aspects of language learning (grammar and listening) present the highest difficulty. Therefore, LMS might be a good channel for practicing listening and grammar skills outside of the classroom. Moreover, the analysis of the survey results confirmed that for the target group grammar and listening were the problem areas.

The course design was tailored to these specific needs and included the following spheres: grammar and listening. The grammar section contained reference materials, practice exercises, and tests. Grammar skills were developed through exercises and progress was assessed by testing. Grammar practice included various task types: gap-filling, multiple choice questions, matching, and completion. After students completed a task, they could check the answers and read the explanations. If the task was done incorrectly, the student was provided with the link to the relevant grammar reference section to revise the material.

Progress tests evaluated the completed grammar materials. Final tests combined and evaluated progress in different grammar sections (for example, articles, verb tenses, etc.). The student was allowed one attempt, and the test was to be completed within a specified time limit.

The listening exercises were divided into two categories: tasks in the format of international proficiency exams and links to videos with multiple choice questions. The videos were specifically selected to achieve two aims: to develop listening skills and to enhance intrinsic motivation through interesting and relevant topics that exposed students to authentic social contexts.

The students could monitor their progress through an electronic gradebook, which contained the marks for all the tasks within the course, as well as obtain feedback from the teacher in the form of personal messages.

## 4.3. Instruments

The survey was anonymous and respondent confidentiality was maintained. As the participants were Russian native speakers, both questionnaires were administered in Russian in order to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the questions. The paper survey was conducted among the students who participated in the study.

Both in the pre-course and post-course questionnaires, the respondents were asked about their perceptions of learning the English language with LMS. The students were also asked to provide information about their age, academic achievement, demographics, their computer literacy and habits of the Internet usage.

The pre-course questionnaire started with the questions concerning the computer literacy of the students. For example: "How much time during the day do you spend in the Internet?" (more than one hour; less than one hour; 2-3 hours; more than 3 hours; or "I am always online").

Each questionnaire contained open and closed questions. The open questions were as follows: "What are your expectations of introducing LMS in the English language learning course?" (before the course) and "What were your impressions of learning English with LMS?" (after the course).

The closed questions included "yes/no" questions and multiple choice questions. The "yes/no" questions were as follows: "Would you like to study English with the help of LMS? (yes/no/undecided)" and "Did you like studying English with the help of LMS?" (yes/no/undecided).

The multiple choice questions represented logical groupings of issues, for example: reasons to like or dislike LMS, expectations, experiences of working with the aid of LMS, and opinions about the language learning activities offered within LMS. Some of these questions were of the nominal, "check-all-that-apply" type.

The pre-course questionnaire: "Do you expect learning English with LMS to be:" (1. engaging and interesting, 2. more difficult than traditional learning, 3. easier than traditional learning, 4. more effective and efficient than traditional learning, 5. less effective than traditional learning, 6. useful for learning).

The post-course questionnaire: "Learning English with LMS was:" (1. engaging and interesting, 2. more difficult than traditional learning, 3. easier than traditional learning, 4. more effective and efficient than traditional learning, 5. less effective than traditional learning, 6. useful for learning).

When answering these types of questions, the respondents could select as many options as they wished.

Another type of multiple choice questions was "single-answer" questions: "What is the optimal ratio between face-to-face and online learning in your opinion?" (asked before and after the course): (30% and 70% (30% — face-to-face, and 70% — online); 50% and 50%; 70% and 30% (70% — face-to-face and 30% — online).

During the analysis, the mean values and percentages for each option were calculated.

Before and after the BL-course, the students had to complete the diagnostic and assessment proficiency tests: grammar and listening. The listening was in the format of international proficiency exams and contained 10 tasks (5 matching exercises and 5 multiple choice questions according to different audio extracts). The grammar test contained 20 tasks (10 multiple choice questions and 10 tasks requiring students to put a word in the right grammar form which fits the sentence structure). A 10-point scale was used to grade the tests. After the tests were assessed, the mean scores of the sample were calculated.

## 5.   Findings and discussion

Before the launch of the course the students were surveyed on their attitudes towards LMS use in learning a language. The main issues that interested the researchers were students' readiness to use IT technologies, their perceptions of LMS use, and their expectations of learning the English language with online supplements.

The learners' readiness is ensured by the level of IT skills and Internet experience of the learners, which make them confident users of technology (Foo, 2014; Abrahams, 2010). Thus, learner readiness of the sample group was identified through the analysis of their IT experience and computer skills. According to the survey, all the respondents use the Internet daily: 88% reported spending not less than 2-3 hours a day browsing the Internet, 12% - spending an hour or more. As can be seen, the students find no difficulty in working with the medium of the Internet.

The subjects' aims of using the Internet were mostly for searching for data and socializing. However, only 30% were involved in looking for educational sites. Moreover, when asked about the opportunity to study online, only 23% of students were ready to accept this method of study. They expounded on their position by describing the following factors as their disposition towards internet use: a greater freedom, good self-control, and the love of computers. Another 77% stated that they would not choose online education due to the lack of the necessary self-regulatory skills such as: self-discipline and time-management.

The English language was not viewed by the respondents as a subject that can be effectively studied online. Before the course, the learners had little awareness of what a blended English language course might be like, therefore they had somewhat of a conflicting attitude towards LMS support and were rather resistant to it.

Answering the question about the most effective mode of language acquisition, the majority of the respondents (66%) demonstrated an adherence to traditional forms of language studies, which are most common among language learners (Klimova & Poulova, 2014), 34.9% indicated an openness to using a BL course, while the rest were undecided. However, only 17% expressed their willingness to participate in a BL course, while a significant number of respondents (46%) were against including the online supplements in the language instruction, and 34% were undecided. Some of the respondents expressed their negative opinion towards using LMS by adding their comments such as: "no, never", and even "I hope it will never happen". They were ready to admit that they could study any subject through the Internet, with the exception of English. The students did not have very high expectations of the future usefulness of the LMS-supported course: 63.4% were not sure if there would be positive outcomes, while still 36.6% were rather optimistic.

The majority of the respondents had previous experience of working with LMS, although almost half of them (48.6%) only downloaded materials, 39.2% did various tests, and 12.2% had no experience of working with this particular type of system. The students' assumptions of learning English with LMS were as follows: 16% looked forward to more engaging activities, 39% expected higher difficulty, 7.1% believed it to be more effective and efficient, 26.7% said it might be useful for learning the language, while only 5.4% thought learning would become easier. At the same time, only 17.9% of respondents did not consider LMS as an effective tool for learning English.

After the completion of the LMS-supplemented course, the results showed that the students' attitudes changed in a positive direction, in favor of blended learning. The majority of students - 70% - expressed their satisfaction with the use of LMS in their studies, however 14% of the learners were not quite satisfied with the course, and 16% were still undecided.

The perceptions of different aspects of LMS-supported course also changed. The table below shows the evolution of the students' attitudes before and after the course (see Table 1).

It can be seen from the table that the LMS-supplemented course experienced a significant shift in student perception. Of those who found the LMS format of study more engaging and interesting, 16% in pre-course increased to 34% of the students in post-course, more than double. Of those who found LMS easier than face-to-face instruction, 5.4% of pre-course students rose to 13% in post-course. Likewise, subjects who believed LMS to be more effective and efficient in pre-course close to tripled from 7.1% to 20% in post-course. The number of respondents who admitted to the usefulness of LMS more than doubled from 27% to 63%. This evidence shows that the subjects completed the course with a significantly more positive perception of LMS learning. (The responses do not total 100% as the respondents could choose more than one option.) There is a statistically significant difference (p<0.05) between the pre-course and post-course results in the category of: "engaging and interesting", and a highly significant difference in regard to the categories of: "LMS is useful for learning" and "I would like to learn English with LMS".

**Table 1**
Students' attitudes of learning English with LMS before and after the course

|  | Pre-test | | | Post-test | | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | % | Mean | Std. deviation | % | Mean | Std. deviation | | |
| **«Learning English with LMS is:»** | | | | | | | | |
| 1. engaging and interesting | 16.0 | 0.164 | 0.373 | 34.0 | 0.345 | 0.479 | -2.104 | 0.041 |
| 2. more difficult | 39.2 | 0.400 | 0.494 | 21.4 | 0.218 | 0.417 | 1.937 | 0.058 |
| 3. easier | 5.4 | 0.055 | 0.229 | 13.0 | 0.127 | 0.336 | -1.428 | 0.159 |
| 4. more effective and efficient | 7.1 | 0.072 | 0.262 | 20.0 | 0.200 | 0.404 | -1.847 | 0.071 |
| 5. less effective | 17.9 | 0.182 | 0.389 | 9.0 | 0.091 | 0.290 | 1. 299 | 0.199 |
| 6. useful for learning | 26.7 | 0.272 | 0.449 | 63.0 | 0.636 | 0.485 | -4.157 | 0.000 |
| **"I would like to learn English with LMS"** | 17.0 | 0.164 | 0.373 | 70.0 | 0.709 | 0.458 | -6.708 | 0.000 |

Encouraging learners' interest and increasing intrinsic motivation is highly important in getting students to do online tasks. "When students perceive their experience as enjoyable, satisfying, and personally fulfilling, they tend to interact more, which results in (an) enhanced learning experience" (Esani, 2010).

Although LMS as a learning tool is easier to use for students who are confident Internet users, it does not mean that online language learning will be much easier or more motivating and/or inspiring for them. In the authors' view, it is connected with specifics of English as a subject to study. Many learners have a negative experience in studying a foreign language (Hsu & Sheu, 2008), and it is crucial to help them overcome a psychological barrier toward learning the language. Creating an environment that corresponds to the learners' interests, needs, and preferences may enhance their satisfaction in blended language learning and make them more actively engaged in using the online method. As for teachers, they have a challenging task to scaffold students' adoption of technologies that may facilitate and compliment traditional learning.

However, as can be seen from the table, for some students (21%) autonomous learning was more difficult than traditional face-to-face instruction. Students expounded on this using several explanations: a lack of self-discipline, the necessity to constantly follow up and meet the deadlines, and technical issues (sometimes low connection speed,

non-user-friendly or unintuitive interface, and/or browser incompatibility). For 9% of learners, using LMS seemed less effective than face-to-face classes; these happen to be low achievers who need constant supervision from the teacher and become stressed when working autonomously. Their main reasoning was the perceived difficulty of the tasks, poor listening and grammar skills, and lack of self-confidence.

In this educational context, developing learner autonomy – "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", (Holec, 1980) is becoming particularly important. Acquiring the skills of an autonomous learner, such as becoming aware of individual learning styles and strategies and developing an active approach to the learning task, may lead to improving their academic performance.

Among the positive aspects of the BL course, students indicated: finding the tasks interesting, having access to all the assignments online, having more opportunities for listening practice, and possessing available references to learning materials and the grammar section. The respondents also appreciated the opportunity to work at any time and place convenient for them.

The most interesting tasks were video (for 84% of students), listening tasks (for 27%), and grammar (for 16%). With respect to the usefulness of the course, 61% - indicated video, 43% of learners showed preference to the listening tasks, and 34% - to grammar exercises (See Table 2).

**Table 2**
Tasks as viewed by students

| # | Task/Students' opinion | Interesting (%) | Useful (%) | Difficult (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Listening | 27 | 43 | 53 |
| 2 | Video | 84 | 61 | 7 |
| 3 | Grammar | 16 | 34 | 45 |

For a great number of students, video was both interesting and useful. In our view, it is necessary to put emphasis on the need of getting students interested in the process of learning in order to enhance their intrinsic motivation. The fact that using LMS in the language classroom has elevated student interest has been credited by the authors mainly to the proper presentation of engaging materials, as well as information for general knowledge which appeals to the learners' cognitive needs.

The most challenging tasks appeared to be listening and grammar. These tasks were indicated as the most difficult by 53% and 45% of respondents respectively, while video was considered difficult by only 7% of the learners.

The students' main concerns in relation to grammar were the tests themselves, which were supposed to be done with one attempt and within a certain time limit. They were assessed by the system, and the results were shown in the grade book. Students complained about the time restrictions which led to anxiety and stress, and therefore the task was neither satisfying nor enjoyable. According to Awan, Azher, Anwar, and Naz (2010), anxiety in learning a language can be the main barrier to successful language acquisition. The factor of anxiety should not be ignored and students should not be left alone with this problem.

It leads the authors to the conclusion that at the initial stages of using the online mode in language learning, all sorts of progress control tools in LMS, with the exception of self-assessment tests, should be avoided, so that the learners might feel relaxed and in control of their own pace and time spent on the task. This will permit them to get used to working autonomously, and get involved in additional learning practices without being rushed or negatively assessed. Besides, the students will have no reason to cheat the system. When they feel comfortable doing language tasks in LMS, assessment tests and progress control tools can be introduced.

According to some studies, so far there is no 'right blend between online and offline components' (Hew & Cheung, 2014). In this research, the authors were interested in the learners' opinion of the appropriate ratio between the two education formats. Prior to the experiment 70.6% of the respondents indicated the optimal percentage of face-to-face and online learning as 70% to 30%, and 12.8% of learners thought it to be 50% to 50%. Having completed the BL course, the majority of respondents remained consistent with their prior opinion and indicated a preferred balance of 70% to 30% face-to-face and online learning respectively. Those who had chosen the option 50% to 50% changed their opinion and joined the majority, leaving only 2% who were ready to accept 50% to 50%.

In terms of developing subject-specific skills, listening and grammar tests administered to the students before and after the BL course showed some positive changes in their progress after the experiment (see Table 3). There is a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the diagnostic and assessment test results.

**Table 3**
Test results before and after the course

|  | Diagnostic test | | Assessment test | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Mean | Std. deviation | Mean | Std. deviation | | |
| **Test results** | 6.684 | 2.927 | 7.418 | 2.074 | -2.079 | 0.042 |

Fewer face-to-face contact hours can be compensated for by the time spent online. Furthermore, when studying online, students are not limited by time for practice, they can always access the materials and tasks and study at their own pace. The main achievement was demonstrated in the fact that both listening and grammar assessment tests were passed by all students comparable to the diagnostic tests, where 12% of students failed the assignments. However, the scores of the students did not increase dramatically, which is consistent with existing results in this sphere (Means et al., 2010).

However, a more rigorous and detailed analysis is required to investigate the effect of blended learning on the development of language skills; the experiment should involve examining the results of control and experimental groups before and after the study.

The learners' change of attitude towards their progress and achievements after the LMS-supported course was remarkable. There was a shift in the students' perception of the effect LMS has on fostering the development of their language skills. The perceived improvement in listening and grammar was indicated by 59% and 34% of learners respectively, which can be viewed as a notable outcome. The main emphasis was put on the listening tasks, because the listening sections independently were perceived as the most challenging by 53% of students throughout the study.

This shows that LMS can be an efficient learning tool in enhancing students' confidence of their own abilities, and it can help teachers increase students' awareness of their own potential. Developing listening skills is hard to achieve within the time constraints of the classroom. Additional computer-based practice provides more learner confidence that the acquisition of these skills is manageable and frees up more time for productive communication in class. When students are ready to embrace online methods, become more engaged and self-reliant, and do part of the tasks online, then teachers can allocate more attention to communicative activities, creating the necessary interactive language environment (Shibley, Amaral, Shank, & Shibley, 2011).

Another outcome of the LMS-supported course was the students' increased awareness that e-learning fosters their self-reliance and independence as learners. According to their self-assessment, students believed that using LMS contributed to developing such self-regulatory skills as: improved self-discipline (54%), better time management (30%), and heightened responsibility (30%). However, 14% did not feel any significant effect on their development as autonomous learners. It would be desirable to find motivating tools in order to engage reluctant learners and to encourage them to be more proactive with their studies. Developing responsibility for their own study time would lead learners to be more effective and autonomous (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989).

The main outcome of the study was that there was a shift in students' attitudes towards this format, in favor of blended learning. After the course, they became aware of a number of advantages that computer-based learning offers. They gained confidence that learning English online can be engaging, meaningful, and achievable. This was also supported by their success in passing the assessment tests. The students' increased motivation towards online learning contributes to building learner autonomy and self-regulation, which can further be implemented in other disciplines and in real life.

## 6.  Conclusions and implications

The study was aimed at identifying students' perceptions of e-learning as online supplementation to classroom instruction, as well as fostering learners' motivation, attitudes and skills development.

It would be reasonable to conclude that implementing online instruction makes learning more accessible, convenient, and richer in content. However, it does not mean that these factors by themselves may increase learners' engagement in the online mode nor encourage students' increased exposure to extensive learning practices. The main challenge here is how to motivate and encourage students to embrace online channels of education.

The learners' involvement is one of the major factors which requires closer analysis and attention. Students should not be forced to use blended learning, it is necessary to introduce the system gradually, along with developing learner motivation. When introduced forcefully, online learning may not aid in achieving the required results: learners would not necessarily perceive the system as useful, interesting, or effective. The idea is not to impose blended learning independent of the learners' preferences and desires, but to "embrace" its value as a tool for the purpose of facilitating the acquisition of knowledge. The development of self-regulated skills will positively affect the students' confidence and study engagement.

The results of the study have shown that the students' attitudes and perceptions towards e-learning had changed from mostly negative to largely positive for the majority

of the students, and their resistance toward e-learning was reduced. After the experiment, the learners viewed LMS as an engaging, more effective, and supplemental instrument in addition to face-to-face classes. They felt that it could be useful for language learning and foster the achievement of learner autonomy through developing self-directed learning skills and enhancing intrinsic motivation. Such positive changes may only occur once students have acquired an active participative role in a blended learning course environment. It is important to help the learners overcome the psychological barrier attached to acquiring language skills, without the constant need of teacher support, thus making the learners more confident.

The students' engagement is also largely influenced by the teachers' enthusiasm of using and promoting the system. The teachers should be sensitive to the learners' needs, avoid formal use of LMS, and be ready to invest time and effort into getting the students interested and motivated (Emelyanova & Voronina, 2014).

Learning practices should be based on the students' interest; the content should engage students into using technology and meet their cognitive needs. This will enhance the value of the task and encourage students to use the system and be more involved in using online methods. To start with, instead of trying to impose LMS to teach all the skills at once, it is advisable to target particular areas which need immediate attention or improvement. If students are interested in the content, it will increase their engagement in the online mode of language learning.

There are some limitations of the study that must be kept in mind when interpreting the results and planning future research. One of which is that the sample was not very large (56 students), and it has to be expanded in the future in order to obtain stronger evidence. Besides this, the study lasted only 18 teaching weeks, which might not have been a sufficient amount of time to demonstrate whether the progress is more easily observable. The researchers are planning to continue their study by increasing the size of the sample, the duration of the study, and include control and experimental groups. The research areas may be the following: "designing the blended learning course to meet the needs of all students," "engaging low achievers and building their commitment to learning," "increasing intrinsic motivation," and "developing learner autonomy while learning a foreign language with LMS."

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