EMPOWERING EFL LEARNERS: THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL LITERACY IN BLENDED ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING METHOD

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ABSTRACT
Universities worldwide face a pressing challenge: traditional teaching methods may not sufficiently prepare English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students for the rigors of academic English. This study investigates the transformative potential of digital literacy in EFL education through a blended learning approach. Digital literacy, encompassing the skills to effectively navigate, evaluate, and utilize technology for learning purposes, emerges as a promising solution. Employing a mixed-methods research design, this study integrates quantitative data from surveys and qualitative insights from interviews and classroom observations involving EFL university students and instructors. Findings reveal a critical need for enhanced English language proficiency, as evidenced by 72.22% of students scoring below 450 on the English Proficiency Test (EPT). The research underscores that digital literacy significantly enriches EFL instruction within the blended learning framework. By seamlessly integrating traditional and digital teaching methodologies, this approach creates a dynamic and engaging learning environment. However, successful adoption hinges on overcoming challenges and providing continuous support for both students and educators.

Keywords: Digital Literacy in Education, Blended Learning in EFL Education, Impact of Digital Literacy on Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

At Malikussaleh University, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a compulsory course for all undergraduate students. This course, known as MKDU English, aims to equip students with the necessary study skills to thrive in their academic careers (Reference to Malikussaleh course structure can be added here). However, a key challenge arises: the course materials, designed to develop these study skills, require a fairly high level of English proficiency that many students haven't yet reached.

This situation reflects a broader issue in EFL university education. Traditional classroom methods, focused on general English language proficiency, may not adequately prepare students for the demands of academic English. Here's where the concept of digital literacy comes in. Digital literacy, the ability to effectively navigate, evaluate, and utilize technology for information access, creation, and communication, offers a powerful solution. By integrating digital tools and resources into a blended learning approach (combining traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning), EFL educators can create a more dynamic and accessible learning environment.

This approach leverages the strengths of both traditional and digital methods. Digital resources like online dictionaries, grammar checkers, and personalized language learning apps empower students to learn at their own pace, focusing on areas requiring improvement (Benson, 2013). Additionally, online platforms connect students with native speakers and fellow learners worldwide, fostering communication and collaboration in an authentic English language environment (Piccolo et al., 2013). Exposure to a wider range of authentic materials, such as news articles, podcasts, and movies, further enhances comprehension skills and provides a

more realistic picture of real-world English usage (Warschauer, 2006).

However, integrating digital literacy into EFL teaching presents its own set of challenges. Unequal access to technology creates a digital divide, requiring educators to address these disparities (Zhao et al., 2009). Additionally, students may possess varying levels of digital proficiency, necessitating differentiated instruction and appropriate support (Reinders, 2012). Finally, effective use of digital tools demands educators themselves to be well-versed in digital literacy and blended learning methodologies (Yildiz, 2011).

By acknowledging these challenges and implementing appropriate solutions, EFL educators can harness the power of digital literacy to bridge the gap between students' existing English language proficiency and the demands of academic English. The following sections will explore this potential in more detail, focusing on the specific ways digital literacy can be integrated into a blended learning approach for EFL university EAP courses.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Digital Literacy in Education

The 21st century hinges on digital literacy, a skill impacting every facet of life, including education. This review delves into how digital literacy empowers educators and transforms the learning experience, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. By providing access to a vast ocean of information through online resources, digital tools empower EFL learners to encounter authentic English usage, broadening vocabulary and comprehension (Warschauer, 2006). Technology fosters active participation and engagement through interactive learning experiences. EFL

classrooms can leverage online platforms for discussions, simulations, and collaborative projects, encouraging students to hone communication and problem-solving skills in an English language environment (Brewer et al., 2014). Furthermore, digital tools personalize the learning journey. EFL students can utilize adaptive learning apps or online dictionaries to focus on specific areas for improvement and learn at their own pace (Benson, 2013). Digital technologies extend beyond language acquisition, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills through simulations and case studies presented in an English context (Zhang et al., 2018). Online platforms facilitate communication and collaboration, allowing EFL learners to connect with native speakers and fellow learners across geographical boundaries, practicing language skills in real-world scenarios (Piccolo et al., 2013). Integrating digital literacy also promotes responsible online behavior by encouraging ethical and productive participation in online communities and discussions, fostering digital citizenship (Ribble, 2017).

Blended Learning in EFL Education

Blended learning, a combination of traditional classroom instruction and online learning opportunities, is transforming EFL education. This approach fosters a more engaging and dynamic environment. Interactive online activities, simulations, and gamified elements spark student motivation and go beyond the limitations of textbooks (Piccolo et al., 2013; Warschauer, 2006). EFL learners benefit from exposure to a wider range of authentic language materials online, enriching their learning and accelerating language acquisition. Blended learning environments also naturally integrate digital tools, fostering essential digital literacy skills

like information literacy and online communication (Benson, 2013).

However, challenges exist. The digital divide, where unequal access to technology and internet hinders participation, requires solutions (Zhao et al., 2009). Additionally, educators need to cater to students with varying levels of digital proficiency, differentiating instruction and providing appropriate support (Reinders, 2012). Effective teacher training is crucial to maximize blended learning's potential. Educators need to develop skills in integrating technology and online platforms seamlessly into their teaching practices (Yildiz, 2011). Finally, assessment strategies need to encompass both online and face-to-face components of the course to accurately evaluate student learning (Joo & Cho, 2013).

By implementing best practices, such as aligning online activities with clear learning objectives and ensuring a smooth flow between online and offline elements, educators can create a cohesive learning experience (Graham, 2013; Russell, 2001). Additionally, using high-quality online resources that are appropriate for the students' level ensures effective technology use that enhances learning, not just replaces traditional methods (Brewer et al., 2014; Roblyer & Schmid, 2010).

Blended learning offers a promising future for EFL education. By embracing its potential and addressing the challenges, educators can create a dynamic and empowering environment where EFL students can thrive.

Impact of Digital Literacy on Language Learning

Digital literacy empowers language learners by providing access to a vast array of authentic resources that are unavailable in traditional classrooms. This includes online news articles, blogs, and social media, which expose learners to real-world communication, helping them understand current events, cultural nuances, and everyday language use (Warschauer, 2016). Additionally, digital libraries and databases offer access to extensive literature, ebooks, and audiobooks, which expand learners' vocabulary and expose them to different writing styles (Benson, 2013). Streaming services and online videos, such as movies, TV shows, and educational videos, provide opportunities to learn through authentic spoken language in various contexts (Barzilai & Hess, 2016).

Digital tools can transform language learning from a passive activity into an engaging and interactive experience. Interactive language learning apps and games incorporate gamification elements like points, badges, and leaderboards, which increase motivation and make learning enjoyable (Liu, 2012). Online simulations and role-playing activities allow learners to practice language skills in simulated real-world situations, fostering deeper engagement (Piccolo et al., 2013). Project-based learning with digital tools enables students to collaborate on projects using online platforms, fostering creativity, critical thinking, and communication skills (Brewer et al., 2014).

Digital literacy also facilitates interaction and collaboration among language learners. Online forums and discussion boards provide a platform for students to interact with native speakers and fellow learners, allowing them to practice language skills in a safe and supportive online environment (Thorne et al., 2009). Video conferencing and online chat tools enable real-time communication and collaboration on projects with learners

worldwide, fostering intercultural understanding (Belz, 2009). Social media platforms for language learning, such as language exchange apps, connect learners with native speakers for conversation practice, promoting cultural exchange (Liu, 2017).

Despite these benefits, several challenges must be addressed. The digital divide, characterized by unequal access to technology and reliable internet, creates a barrier to utilizing digital resources, potentially hindering some learners' progress (Zhao et al., 2009). Information overload can be overwhelming for learners, making it essential for educators to guide students in critically evaluating online resources and developing strong information literacy skills (Benson, 2013). Additionally, digital tools can be sources of distraction, necessitating clear expectations and strategies from educators to help learners manage their online learning effectively (Lenhardt, 2010).

In conclusion, digital literacy empowers language learners by providing access to diverse and authentic materials, promoting engagement, and facilitating interactive and collaborative learning environments. However, educators need to address the challenges associated with digital learning to ensure equitable access and effective integration of technology into language learning practices.

This review lays a foundation for understanding the impact of digital literacy on language learning. Future research could explore specific digital tools and their effectiveness for various language skills, investigate the role of digital literacy in developing learner autonomy, or examine the impact of digital learning on language assessment practices.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to analyze the impact of digital literacy on EFL students taught using a blended method. Data will be collected through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations involving EFL university students and instructors.

Table 1. Table of EPT Scores for Students in 3 Classes during Odd Academic Year 2023/2024

EPT Score	N	%	
≥550	1	0,93	ΣN: 108
500-549	4	3,70	Mean: 423,302
450-499	25	23,15	St. Dev: 46,712
400-449	48	44,49	Min: 247
350-399	26	24,07	Max: 557
<350	4	3,70	

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Implementation of Blended Language Learning

The author began using the blended learning method in the odd and even semesters of the 2022-2024 academic year during the COVID-19 pandemic. To obtain measurable results for comparison, the author implemented blended learning in four classes, while in other classes, the author only implemented the learning system supervised by other lecturers using conventional methods.

To begin, the author used the EPT results given to students of the Faculty of Economics and Business at the beginning of the academic year as a pre-test. In accordance with the results of the previously submitted questionnaire, the author focused online learning only on structure and listening, while

for face-to-face classes, the author used the existing syllabus with slight changes during the face-to-face structure and listening sections. The author made these changes to align with the online activities. At the end of the semester, the author gave a post-test in the form of EPT to see the results of the classes that used blended learning and those that only used conventional methods.

The face-to-face process for this English Language for Business Communication (MKDU) course is 1 x 150 minutes (3 SKS) per week for approximately 15 weeks. The author then added online activities that were carried out by students once a week. The online activities carried out by students include group discussions, reviewing videos related to discussion material which are then discussed in face-to-face meetings, and creating group papers and presentations that will be presented in class for structure material.

The changes made to the face-to-face syllabus include:

- Structure-related discussions are carried out outside of face-to-face sessions. During face-to-face sessions, students who are grouped will share the results of their discussions in class with other groups.
- For listening material, the author did not change the syllabus at all. However, the author added a trigger for the speaking process in class by providing videos that can be watched and reviewed per group to be applied in speaking activities in class, either in the form of discussion or debate.

All of this was supplemented with independent exercises and quizzes conducted online using Malikussaleh University's e-learning.

Analysis of Student English Proficiency and Challenges in Conventional Learning

The author gathered questionnaire results during this academic year because it represents the last period in which the author solely employed conventional teaching methods involving face-to-face classroom instruction. Consequently, the responses reflect the experiences of students who had not yet encountered blended learning. Analysis of Student English Proficiency and Challenges in Conventional Learning

The analysis of student performance revealed that 72.22% of students, or 78 individuals, scored below 450 on the English Proficiency Test (EPT), indicating a very limited level of English proficiency. This deficiency posed significant challenges for these students in effectively engaging with the English Language for Business Communication (MKDU) course. This conclusion is further supported by a questionnaire administered to 35 students taught by the author at the end of the 2022/2024 academic year. The questionnaire results were collected during this academic year, as it marked the final period in which the author utilized traditional face-to-face teaching methods exclusively. Thus, the responses reflect the experiences of students who had not yet been exposed to blended learning. The findings underscore the substantial difficulty faced by students with limited English proficiency in conventional learning environments, highlighting the need for innovative teaching strategies to enhance their learning experience.

Tabel 2. Average pre-test score

Teaching Method	N	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
Conventional	69	35,471	7,826	20	56
Blended Learning	70	39,371	13,350	6	66
TOTAL	139	37,421	11,153	6	66

Tabel 3. Average post-test score

Teaching Method	N	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
Conventional	69	44,603	5,870	33	60
Blended Learning	70	62,147	12,460	31	87
TOTAL	139	53,375	13,140	31	87

From the data, it is evident that the average score in the Blended Learning class experienced a larger increase (22.775 points) compared to the conventional class (9.132 points). Thus, it can be said that the implementation of blended learning is quite effective, although more comprehensive research is needed to more accurately determine its effectiveness.

Benefits Experienced by Students

In addition to the benefits reflected in the improvement of post-test scores, the author also conducted a brief evaluation with students in the form of a class discussion during the final meeting regarding learning using blended learning. From the results of this discussion, participants reported improvements in their understanding of grammar and listening skills through online discussions. Moreover, they found that the online discussion environment was more conducive compared to in-class discussions. This was mainly because the students felt they could express their opinions more freely and simultaneously search for supporting materials on the internet during discussions.

Another reason was that students felt more closely monitored by the instructor during discussions, as the instructor could observe the discussion process in real-time.

Another benefit mentioned by the students was that they found the course materials to be more varied and up-to-date. Additionally, they noted a correlation between online learning and face-to-face sessions, which made it easier for them to engage in class discussions, especially during speaking sessions.

Furthermore, students believed that the inclusion of online classes made the overall learning process more effective. The first reason is that they could be better prepared for face-to-face sessions because, through the E-learning Application system, they could view the weekly learning plans. Additionally, the online learning materials that correlated with the next in-class session enabled students to discuss more effectively in class.

Challenges Encountered

Although students experienced the benefits of combining distance learning with conventional learning, there were still challenges and drawbacks. The most prominent challenge was related to time management. Despite recognizing the benefits, students felt burdened by the requirement to participate in discussions and online activities. This challenge was primarily due to their lack of familiarity with student-centered learning methods. Some students even believed that instructors should provide detailed explanations of the materials, similar to how teachers do in schools. However, before the active academic period, these students had already gone through the Student Learning Orientation, where they learned the necessary Learning Skills to actively engage in their courses.

The next challenge was technical issues, such as slow internet connections, which often hindered their ability to participate in online activities. Additionally, students encountered technical difficulties with using e-learning platforms. They felt it took some time to get accustomed to the e-learning system. Furthermore, e-learning did not provide real-time discussion facilities, which significantly hampered the discussion process. However, this issue was eventually resolved by using WhatsApp for discussions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, digital literacy significantly enhances English teaching for EFL university students through the blended method. By integrating traditional and digital teaching techniques, educators can foster a more engaging and effective learning environment. However, to fully realize the benefits of digital literacy, it is crucial to address implementation challenges and provide continuous support for both students and educators.

The author's experiences with blended language learning in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) highlight its effectiveness in improving student engagement, particularly for those with limited language skills. Nonetheless, technical issues such as slow internet connections and students' limited proficiency in using online learning applications can impede the process. Despite these challenges, blended learning offers substantial advantages, demonstrating its potential as a valuable approach in language education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhance Digital Literacy Training: Universities should implement comprehensive digital literacy training programs for both students and educators. This training should focus on effectively using digital tools and platforms to maximize the benefits of blended learning.

2. Improve Internet Infrastructure: Institutions should invest in improving internet connectivity and infrastructure to ensure that all students have reliable access to online learning resources. This is essential to mitigate the challenges posed by slow internet connections.

3. Integrate Blended Learning: Academic programs should integrate blended learning approaches into their curricula, combining traditional face-to-face instruction with digital learning methods. This integration can create a more engaging and effective learning environment.

4. Continuous Support and Feedback: Establish a support system for students and educators to address technical issues and provide continuous feedback. This can include technical support services, regular training sessions, and forums for sharing best practices.

5. Develop User-Friendly E-Learning Platforms: Institutions should invest in developing and maintaining user-friendly e-learning platforms that facilitate seamless navigation and interaction. These platforms should include features for real-time discussions and collaborative learning.

6. Promote Active Learning: Encourage educators to design and implement student-centered learning activities that promote active engagement and participation. This can include interactive discussions, online simulations, and project-based learning using digital tools.

7. Monitor and Evaluate Effectiveness: Regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning approaches through student feedback, performance assessments, and academic research. Use these evaluations to make data-driven improvements to the learning process.

8. Encourage Collaboration: Foster a collaborative learning environment by using digital tools that enable students to work together on projects, share ideas, and engage in meaningful discussions. This can enhance their learning experience and improve their language skills.

By implementing these recommendations, academic institutions can effectively leverage digital literacy and blended learning methods to enhance English teaching for EFL students, addressing existing challenges and maximizing educational outcomes.

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