The Adoption of Blended Learning as an Emerging Mode of Learning among EFL Students: Current Challenges and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT: Blended learning is one of the well-known concepts that has emerged as a result of the significant impact that technology has had on learning and teaching. The latter has created obstacles that have greatly influenced learning while also bringing new opportunities to learn from. In order to ascertain students' perceptions of this type of learning and weigh the advantages and disadvantages to ensure best practices that support the quality of online learning, the current study was conducted among EFL students at three Moroccan universities (Dhar Mehraz University, Sais University, and Moulay Ismail University). 304 EFL students who successfully completed an online survey were included in the study. According to the quantitative and qualitative data collected, it was found that EFL students are thrilled with this approach to learning as they are prepared to switch from traditional learning to blended learning due to its benefits, such as self-paced learning, increased student engagement, flexibility, and cost effectiveness. The findings also indicated that EFL students encounter several difficulties while employing blended learning, which include procrastination, distraction, content overload, technical issues, and plagiarism.

KEYWORDS: Academic Achievement, Blended Learning, Challenges, EFL students, Moroccan Universities, Opportunities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Caner (2012) stated that new pedagogies and information technology have been introduced into educational settings since the start of the millennium. A new generation of learning environments that are feasible, real, and enjoyable may be constructed and utilized, thanks in particular to the widespread adoption of online technologies and networked learning. Alternative material delivery methods or technologies have been incorporated into the instructional environments over time thanks to advancements in education. Scholars began to mix the most useful components of education in various learning environments, which is widely referred to as "blended learning," in an effort to reap the full benefits of instructional delivery modes and reduce the drawbacks.

Kintu et al. (2017) mentioned that a variety of innovations are being used in the teaching and learning environment and blended learning is one of them. Despite going through a process, this innovative instructional technique has received widespread acceptance. One of these innovations is the introduction of blended learning initiatives, which combine face-to-face and online teaching and learning. In this vein, Morris (2010) added that blended learning is increasingly becoming an option for students in higher education. Using internet- or computer-based tools, it enables the enhancement of face-to-face interaction between professors and students. Today, blended learning courses are very common across all academic disciplines. They related to courses where a significant portion of seat time, or time spent in the classroom, is substituted with online activities that involve students in achieving course objectives (Bock et al., 2018).

The study of blended learning has made substantial progress over the last few decades (Zhao et al., 2005), and the process of teaching and learning is significantly impacted by this kind of e-learning. The underlying appeal of blended learning, according to previous studies and academic literature, is its capacity to offer an innovative learning pattern that seems beneficial and capable of passing on information beyond the confines of classroom-based courses (Alkhaleel, 2019).

The problem is that students' views on the adoption of blended learning in Moroccan universities, however, differ. Not all students recognize the potential of blended learning as an innovative learning strategy that can buttress their academic performance and accomplishments. In general, the aim of this study is to examine the impact of blended learning on educational quality and to

determine students' perceptions of this new type of learning. The study will target EFL students from three Moroccan universities: Dhar Mehraz University, Sais University, and Moulay Ismail University.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Definition of Blended Learning

I observed that there was confusion in the terminology of blended learning in the higher education sector while I was reading through publications on the topic. The various definitions of blended learning, according to Mortera-Gutierrez (2006), enable us to consider the level of detail and complexity of this kind of learning and educational procedure. In this vein, numerous definitions of blended learning can be found in various sources. Graham, Ch, et al. (2019) define blended learning as the purposeful blending of both in-person and online instruction. Blended learning connects face-to-face and distance learning, according to Russell T. Osguthorpe and Charles R. Graham in 2003, but it goes beyond simply displaying a webpage on the screen. The ones who employ blended learning environments aim to optimize the benefits of learning in person as well as online. In 2004, Garrison and Kanuka defined blended learning as the deliberate fusion of in-person learning experiences in the classroom with online learning activities. In the words of Dr. Ranjana Bhatia (2008), blended learning merges elements of online learning with those encountered in conventional onsite educational venues. According to John Watson (2008), the most common teaching method in the future will likely be blended learning, which combines the best components of online and in-person instruction. Clearly, blended learning remains a combination of traditional, in-person instruction with technology and online learning.

2.2 Main Characteristics of Blended Learning

According to Lalima & Dangwal (2017), blended learning is characterized by many features, such as the fact that students in blended learning have a choice between two modes of instruction: either the traditional classroom mode, where they can interact personally with their teachers and peers, or ICT-supported teaching and learning. This is heavily influenced by the types of materials and purposes being pursued. Sometimes the course creators or professors themselves select the style that is suitable for the subject being covered. Even more, students, via blended learning, can get an extensive experience with new technology. Today, being illiterate includes not just being able to read and write but also being familiar with current technologies. ICT proficiency is now required for all jobs; therefore, blended learning allows students to gain richer ICT experiences. In this regard, students who participate in blended learning develop the ability to fully utilize existing technologies for their own good. Last but not least, constructivism is also included in blended learning. Instead of just consuming knowledge, students build it. As opposed to depending on others to create teaching and learning strategies for them, students generate their own knowledge.

2.3 Advantages of Blended Learning

A substantial amount of research displays that students are more satisfied with mixed courses than they are with fully online or traditional face-to-face courses (Castle & McGuire, 2010; Farley, Jain, & Thomson, 2011). There are a number of important reasons why this is the case.

Students can gain from increased time and geographic versatility for their study, broader and simpler accessibility to educational materials, and a greater degree of independence in controlling their learning thanks to the delivery of blended learning, which depends on the combination of face-to-face and online learning circumstances (Poon, 2012; Reiss & Steffens, 2010). Given an enormous amount of flexibility in how to manage blended courses, students are able to arrange their learning around the various demands they encounter in their everyday lives (such as commuting, balancing work and family duties, and overcoming financial obstacles) in order to attain their academic objectives. Students say they value the ability to control their own learning—for instance, how quickly they move through course materials and how much time they spend participating in online forums (Lin & Wang, 2012; Mitchell & Honore, 2007).

Additionally, by including face-to-face meetings in blended courses, students have the chance to interact directly with professors and get help right away (Castle & McGuire, 2010; Poon, 2012; Schuhmann & Skopek, 2009). Students also believe that engaging in face-to-face interactive activities encourages them to interact with their classmates and form close relationships with them (such as friendships), which are thought to foster the growth of a strong community of learners beyond the classroom (Smyth et al., 2012; Vaughan, 2007).

In the words of Martinez-Caro and Campuzano-Bolarin (2011), ongoing access to the instructor is seen as a key element in students' happiness with blended learning. According to some students, instructors provide comments and marks more quickly than in traditional classes (Korr, Derwin, Greene, & Sokoloff, 2012). In contrast to fully online learning, students in blended courses are more satisfied with faculty interaction and are better endorsed with instructional guidance during their studies (Lim, Morris, and Kupritz, 2006; Schuhmann & Skopek, 2009). This leads to a smaller degree of perceived instructional difficulty and a more achievable workload for their studies. Additionally, students in blended courses significantly regarded the quality of teaching assistants as being higher than in the traditional classroom setting (Woltering et al., 2009).

2.4 Challenges of Blended Learning

As stated by Kaur (2013), there are three types of challenges that might arise when implementing blended learning: technical challenges, organizational challenges, and instructional design challenges. First, getting technologies to function on networks is not one of the technological hurdles. Instead, the focus should be on employing and supporting the right technology to ensure the program's success. Among the technical obstacles are ensuring that individuals can effectively utilize the technology and restraining oneself from utilizing technology solely due to its accessibility (Hofmann, 2011). Second, although management frequently believes that blended learning is the best approach for training programs, it frequently ignores the fact that this is a complicated process that requires consideration beyond a single course of action. Among the challenges facing organizations are dispelling the belief that blended learning is inferior to traditional classroom training, clarifying the facilitator's function, and directing and observing participant development (Hofmann, 2011). Third, when learning technologies are launched, the focus is frequently on the technology execution, leaving too little time and money for the design of the real necessary material to produce a successful program. The challenges of instructional design include: thinking about how to teach, not just what to teach; finding the optimum delivery method for the performance goals; and making sure that internet content is participatory rather than merely "talking at" users (Hofmann, 2011).

Jayanthi (2019) added that despite the advantages that blended learning offers, its implementation presents substantial challenges for students, teachers, and institutions. Among them are the following: students taking blended courses can have irrational expectations. The students in blended learning courses felt that having fewer lectures meant fewer efforts, that having poor time management skills was an issue, and that they had trouble taking charge of their own learning. Even more, another challenge with integrating blended learning is having trouble with increasingly advanced technologies. For instance, students might be forced to use slow Internet connections. It has been noted that poor Internet access prevents students from participating in online discussions, which can be quite frustrating and have a bad effect on learning. Also, there are not enough resources available to create a learning management system (LMS), which is necessary to improve blended learning in academic institutions. Last but not least, time commitment is the main obstacle to the implementation of blended learning in higher education. Accordingly, it is anticipated that designing and creating a blended learning course for a large group of students often takes two to three times as long as creating a course of a similar nature in a traditional manner.

2.5 Findings of Previous Studies about Blended Learning

According to research, the efficacy of blended learning can greatly depend on how confident and capable teachers and students are to participate in it (Hadad, 2007). Based on Shraim and Khlaif's (2010) research, 75% of students and 72% of teachers did not possess the necessary expertise and experience with computers and internet applications for successfully employing ICT-based learning components, which could cause blended learning to fall short. In light of the fact that blended learning involves extensive computer use, it is important to note that computer proficiency is required to successfully implement technology in education for improved learning outcomes (Abubakar & Adetimirin, 2015). In this vein, Rovai (2003) emphasized the importance of students' computer literacy and time management in blended learning situations and came to the conclusion that these qualities matter in online classes. This is supported by Selim (2007), who stated that for blended learning to be profitable, learners must demonstrate the computer and time management skills needed.

Kenney and Newcombe (2011) conducted a comparison to determine efficacy in terms of grades and discovered that blended learning had a higher average score than the non-blended learning setting. In their 2004 study of the transformative potential of blended learning, Garrison and Kanuka reported greater percentages of course completion, better retention, and higher levels of student satisfaction. In this regard, a study comparing blended learning environments was conducted to determine the gap in

academic accomplishment, grade dispersion, and gender performance disparities; nevertheless, no appreciable variations between the groups were discovered (Demirkol & Kazu, 2014).

According to a study conducted by El-Deghaidy and Nouby (2008), students in the blended group achieve much more than those who attend class in person. Additionally, they discovered that blended group students generally have better attitudes regarding blended learning. Blended learning was therefore deemed beneficial in terms of attitudes. Jia et al. (2012) investigated 96 Chinese middle schoolers taking English classes. For their experimental examination, they employed Moodle as a tool for managing a blended system. The outcomes demonstrated that combining blended learning with a vocabulary evaluation system improved students' exam performance as well as their vocabulary learning. In order to understand the advantages and difficulties of blended learning in the Irish school of nursing and midwifery, Smyth et al. (2012) performed research. The results reveal that students find it simple to access and value it as a flexible course that helps them learn and understand. They identified three things as the course's challenges: the difficulty of social interaction, the teacher's delayed comments, and a bad internet connection. Students generally expressed satisfaction with integrated learning.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Problem

The educational processes that molded higher education during the later decades of the 20th century are probably not the same as those that exist today. The processes of teaching and learning are testing the temporal and physical constraints of the classrooms, along with advancements in information technologies and instructional approaches. To put it another way, improvements in technology and learning processes have created new opportunities for the implementation of learning environments that facilitate non-traditional forms of communication between students and teachers and are characterized by the integration of adaptable and creative teaching and learning technology. In this vein, the readiness of EFL students to embrace blended learning has recently been an intriguing topic in the Moroccan higher education environment. This study attempted to address the issue that attitudes regarding blended learning implementation in the educational setting vary because not all EFL students view blended learning as a useful form of learning as they prefer traditional classroom instruction. Other EFL students, on the other hand, regard blended learning as an innovative learning strategy with the potential to significantly affect their academic performance and success.

3.2 Research Objectives

Considering the problem described above, a number of objectives have been determined. In general, the study intended to investigate how blended learning has affected the standard of instruction at Moroccan universities. The objectives were:

- To explore the perspectives on and readiness for blended learning among EFL students.
- To identify any potential advantages of adopting blended learning.
- To gain insight about the obstacles EFL students encounter while using blended learning.

3.3 Research Questions

The following questions were the focus of the investigation:

Q1: What do EFL students at Moroccan universities believe regarding the utilization of blended learning in educational settings?

Q2: How prepared are EFL students for blended learning?

Q3: What benefits can blend learning courses offer EFL students?

Q4: What obstacles do EFL students suffer while engaging in blended learning?

3.4 Research Instrument

To gather data for the study, an online questionnaire was used. There were two sections: a section with quantitative questions and a section with qualitative questions.
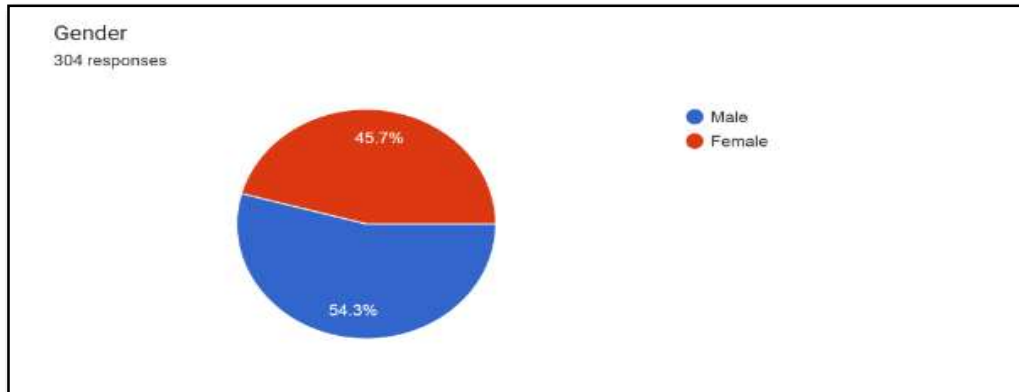
3.5 Sample and Setting

Figure 1: Participants by Gender

Figure 1 demonstrated the successful completion of the online questionnaire by 304 EFL students from three Moroccan universities (Dhar Mehraz University, Sais University, and Moulay Ismail University). There are 139 female students and 165 male students.
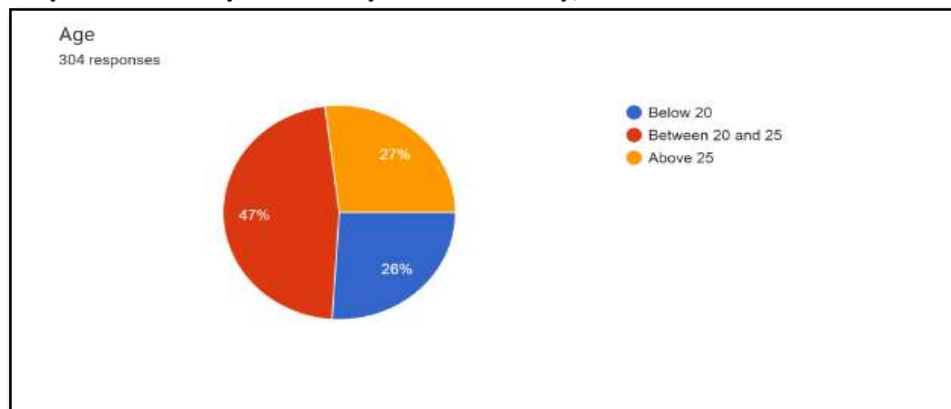

Figure 2: Participants by Age

According to Figure 2, 79 EFL students are under the age of 20, 82 EFL students are above 25, and 143 EFL students are between the ages of 20 and 25.
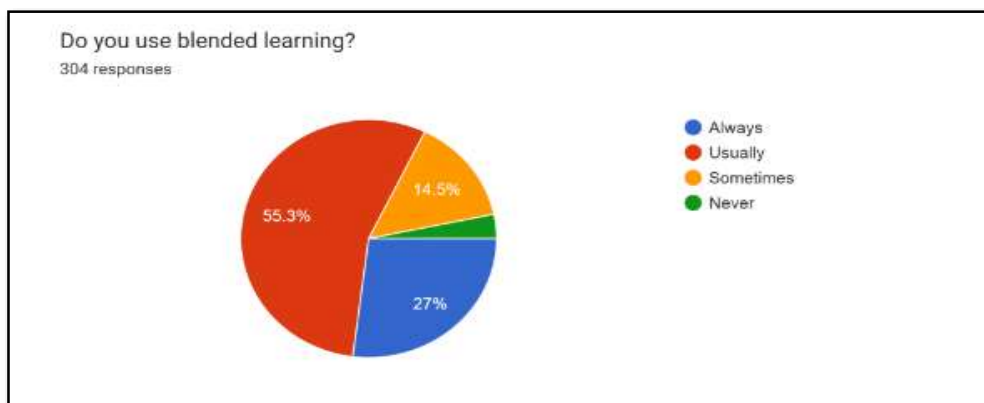
3.6 Data Analysis

Figure 3: Participants' Use of Blended Learning

Figure 3 demonstrated that 168 EFL students, representing a higher percentage of 55.3%, said they usually employ blended learning. Only 10 EFL students reported never using blended learning, compared to 82 who always do so and 44 who do so occasionally. Figure 3 indicated unequivocally that blended learning is used by most EFL students.
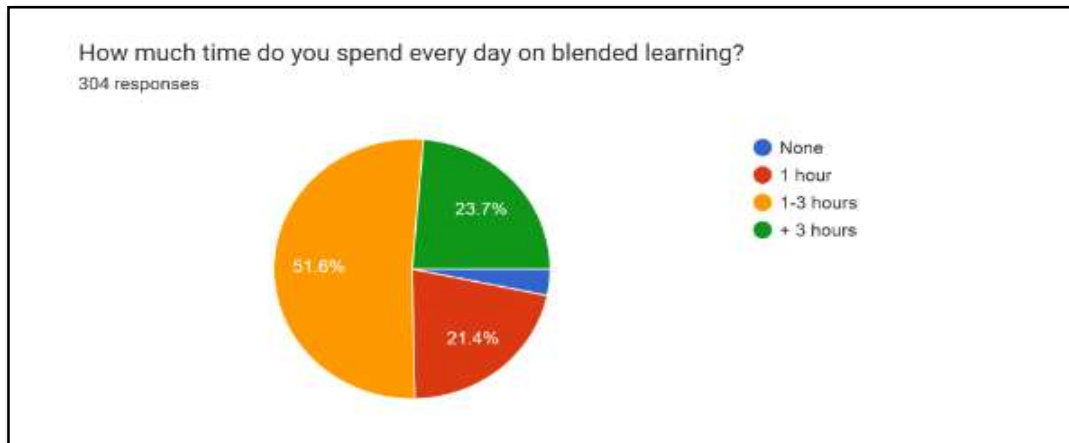

Figure 4: Participants ' Time Spent on Blended Learning

Figure 4 revealed that 157 EFL students engage in blended learning every day for one to three hours. 72 EFL students spend more than three hours, compared to 65 EFL students who only spend an hour. Only 10 of the EFL students use no blended learning at all. The majority of EFL students use blended learning, however at different paces, as shown in Figure 4.
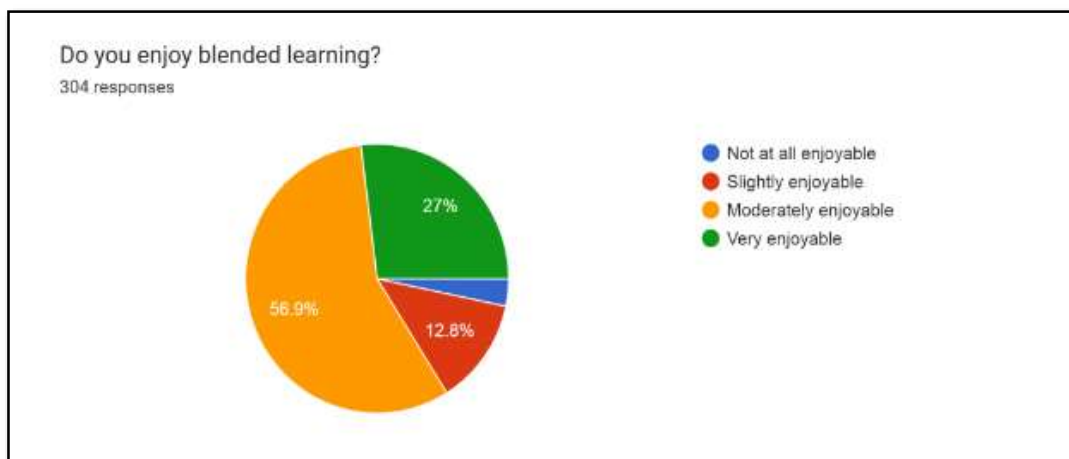

Figure 5: Participants ' Enjoyment of Blended Learning

Figure 5 illustrated that 82 EFL students find blended learning to be extremely enjoyable, while 173 EFL students said that they find blended learning to be moderately enjoyable. Only 10 EFL students said they found no enjoyment in this form of learning, while 39 EFL students said they partially enjoyed it. Figure 5 explicitly suggested that the majority of EFL students enjoy using blended learning.
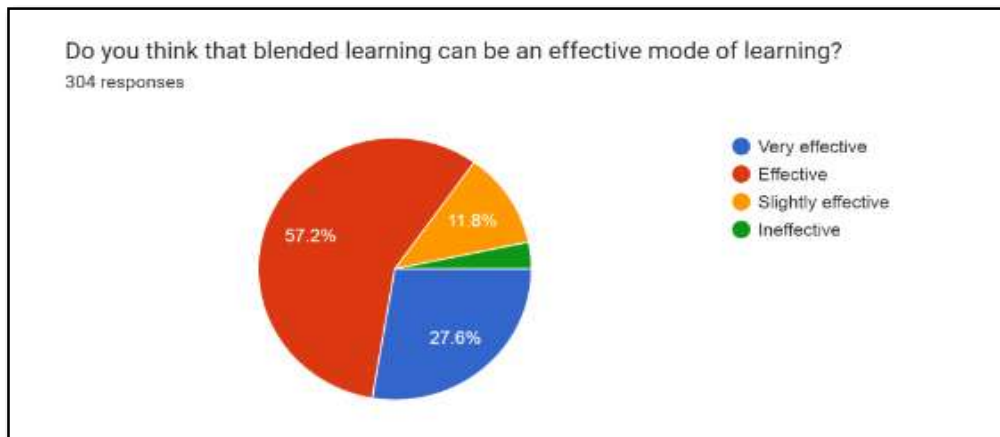
Figure 6: The Extent of Blended Learning's Efficacy for Participants

Based on figure 6, a significant portion of 57.2%, which represents 174 EFL students, of the total respondents indicated that blended learning has been moderately beneficial for them, while 84 EFL students indicated that blended learning has been extremely effective for them. A small amount of success with blended learning has been reported by 36 EFL students. Unfortunately, 10 EFL students admitted that they had no success at all with blended learning. Figure 6 made it obvious that the use of blended learning has a beneficial effect on the academic performance of the majority of EFL students.
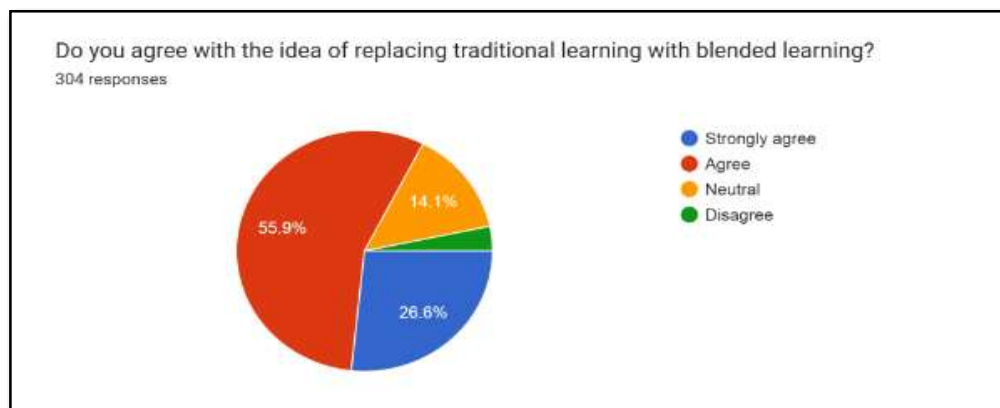

Figure 7: Opinions of Participants Regarding the Idea of Blended Learning Replacing Traditional Learning

Figure 7 clearly demonstrated that 170 EFL students support the idea of substituting blended learning for traditional instruction, while 81 EFL students strongly endorse the idea. In contrast, only 10 EFL students disagree with the idea of replacement, and 43 EFL students feel ambivalent about it. Figure 7 clearly showed that the majority of EFL students are ready to supplant traditional learning with blended learning.
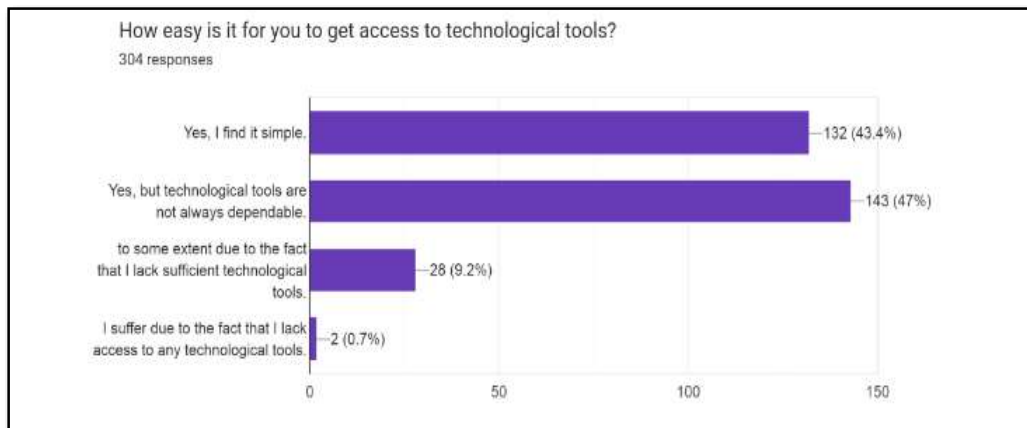
Figure 8: Participants' Flexibility in Using Technological Tools for Blended Learning

As seen in Figure 8 above, 132 EFL students reported that they can easily employ blended learning since they have access to sufficient technology resources. However, 143 EFL students claimed that using blended learning was simple for them, but many grumbled that the technical tools did not always operate well. Unfortunately, only two EFL students out of 28 said it was difficult for them to use blended learning since they were not adequately acquainted with technical tools. Figure 8 clearly showed that the majority of EFL students can employ blended learning with flexibility, despite the fact that technological tools can occasionally deceive them.
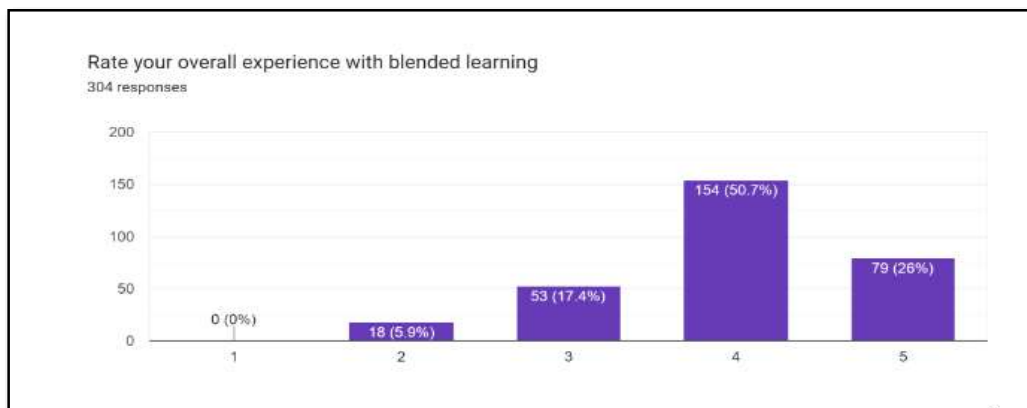
Figure 9: Participants ' Experiences with blended learning

Figure 9 showed that 154 EFL students, or a larger percentage of 50.7%, reported having good blended learning experiences, while 79 EFL students reported having very good ones. 53 EFL students stated that they had merely satisfactory experiences with blended learning. Sadly, 18 EFL students admitted to having poor experiences. Figure 9 plainly demonstrated that the majority of EFL students have had adequate experience with blended learning.

The remaining inquiries on the questionnaire were qualitative, questioning EFL students about upsides and obstacles they had encountered while adopting blended learning.

The analysis disclosed that most EFL students responded favorably to the expanding appeal of blended learning. They displayed their excitement and comfort in applying blended learning as a new mode in their academic endeavors as digital natives. In this vein, the following are the benefits that participants most frequently cited when discussing this form of learning:

- Self-Paced Learning: Most EFL students claimed that having some degree of control over their education helps them study more effectively. This means that blended learning gives them the option to learn online at their own speed rather than being constrained by the group's rules. The option to skip past well-known material or to pause, rewind, and look for other resources was also introduced. Additionally, EFL students can access the material when they are at their freshest and even

take breaks when needed. With this method of learning, EFL students can start with the knowledge they already possess and then add the individualized attention guided by professors in the amphitheater to enhance the learning quality.

- The Increase in Students' Engagement: the analysis additionally demonstrated that blended learning boosts engagement by giving students a variety of ways to participate online using technologies like social media platforms. Some EFL students who are enrolled in blended learning exhibit significantly higher levels of engagement online than they do in front of their peers in person. As a result, EFL students reported that engagement enhanced their level of comprehension and academic performance. Clearly, images, videos, tables, graphs, and other sorts of learning resources are all used in blended learning. This facilitates EFL students' ability to concentrate, assimilate, and internalize the knowledge they acquire.
- Flexibility: some EFL students highlighted how flexible learning is with blended learning. This indicates that blended learning empowers students to access educational materials at any time and from any location. On their own digital devices, learners can access content via a variety of tools, including social media websites. Additionally, they may work on assignments, communicate with professors, and get useful feedback and suggestions all from the convenience of their homes.
- Cost Effectiveness: The majority of EFL students recognized that blended learning can actually result in cost savings. In other words, blended learning can be more affordable than traditional learning because it can cut down on expenses like rent, transportation, and other living expenses. As a result, blended learning may be an economically feasible decision for EFL students.

Another noteworthy result of this study was that blended learning presents certain difficulties for EFL students. The following challenges were mentioned by participants most frequently:

- Distraction: the majority of EFL students admitted that distraction from blended learning often leads them away from their studies and toward other activities like texting, listening to music, watching humorous videos on social media, etc. Therefore, distraction may lower the effectiveness of blended learning instruction and result in time loss and a lack of focus.
- Content Overload: Some EFL students stated that content overload is a problem brought on by blended learning. This implies that users of social media platforms are free to post whatever they want, which causes students to be overloaded with both relevant and irrelevant content to the point where they run out of time to read through it all, analyze it, and distinguish between authentic and relevant content and irrelevant and fake content.
- Procrastination: Procrastination, according to the majority of EFL students, is the main disadvantage of using blended learning because the online setting makes it easy to put off doing assignments and completing them on time. Additionally, EFL students said that they are prone to procrastinating since they do not feel compelled to learn and nothing is there to remind them when assignments and tests are due.
- Technical Issue: The majority of EFL students admitted that sometimes technology instruments mislead them, such as when a computer breaks down or there is an inconsistent internet connection. As a result, it is challenging for them to access online learning resources that require an internet connection.
- Plagiarism: There were a few EFL students who commented that it could be challenging for online learners to resist the desire to do web searches while studying on a computer or smartphone.

4. RESULTS

The current research revealed that:

- Most EFL students at Moroccan universities (Dhar Mehraz University, Sais University, and Moulay Ismail University) use blended learning at various times due to their enjoyment of this kind of learning.
- The majority of EFL students acknowledged that blended learning can be a useful tool that helps improve their academic performance. This is why they are ready to make the transition from traditional learning to blended learning.
- With the exception of the occasional glitch, the majority of EFL students agreed that gaining access to technical tools is not that difficult for them. Additionally, they stated that they have had sufficient experience with blended learning.
- EFL students claimed that self-paced learning, increased student engagement, flexibility, and cost effectiveness among advantages associated with blended learning.

- EFL students asserted that the challenges of blended learning included procrastination, distraction, content overload, technical issues, and plagiarism.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study lucidly demonstrated that most EFL students responded favorably to blended learning becoming a new method of instruction at Moroccan universities. In this respect, they emphasized their profound satisfaction with this method of learning because it permits them to integrate traditional learning with online material. For this reason, the majority of EFL students acknowledged that blended learning had a significant impact on their academic success. However, the study reveals that EFL students continue to lament the fact that technology tools are occasionally malfunctioning and thus not always reliable. This, therefore, was not a solid reason to discourage them from using blended learning.

The results of this study met my expectations, both as a researcher and a digital native. We have to acknowledge how dramatically technology has altered many facets of life, including education. As a result, blended learning is one of the innovative learning approaches that have emerged in the educational field. In this regard, blended learning is already practiced in Moroccan universities because the majority of EFL students nowadays are tech-savvy and grew up in a digital age. This gives them the assurance to use this style of learning as a tool to support their academic success.

For me, blended learning refers to a way of learning that amalgamates traditional classroom techniques with online educational resources. In this vein, both professors and EFL students must be physically present during blended learning, and some aspects of time, place, and pace may be under the student's control. EFL students, via blended learning, can learn at their own speed and skill level, seeing that learning is not just done in a physical classroom but can also take place over lengthy periods of time, from home, from universities' libraries, or even over a lunch break, depending on EFL students' schedules. Thus, for EFL learners, blended learning may be seen as beneficial, entertaining, encouraging, and more adaptable. These elements, however, are insufficient to foster an environment conducive to learning. To put it another way, I do think that professors who use blended learning environments should encourage students to be more involved in the environment and should look for ways to foster social interaction through more collaboration, as the blending of online and in-person educational environments should be carefully planned in order to reap the most benefits from this approach.

The small sample size of this study, which focused on EFL students at three Moroccan universities (Dhar Mehraz University, Sais University, and Moulay Ismail University), limits its generalizability. This means that the research's conclusions are solely dependent on the views, beliefs, and experiences of EFL students. Because of this restriction, it is difficult to say how much blended learning affects students' academic performance. In order to have an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the issue of the adoption of blended learning as an emerging practice in Moroccan universities, further research is necessary to establish a tangible connection between technology and the learning environment, and future studies should take into account other departments and majors.

6. CONCLUSION

EFL students are habituated to employing technical devices like computers, laptops, mobile phones, etc. in their daily lives. Since using these technology tools for education has become more commonplace than it once was, Moroccan institutions of higher learning have begun integrating them into their curriculum so as to promote the academic success of learners. All in all, the study's findings showed that EFL students prefer blended learning since they believe it has improved their academic results. Due to this, EFL students are prepared to switch from traditional to blended learning.

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