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Scaffolding English Language Teaching through Technology

Affiliation:

Fatima Rehan Dar

Centre for English language, IQRA University, Karachi, Pakistan.

E-mail: fatima.dar@iqra.edu.pk

Alia Faruqui

Centre for English language, IQRA University, Karachi, Pakistan

Muniza Asad

Centre for English language, IQRA University, Karachi, Pakistan

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Scaffolding English Language Teaching through Technology

Fatima Rehan Dar *

Alia Faruqui †

Muniza Asad ‡

Abstract: *The study focused on tracing the language development of students in a functional English course through the initiation of a diagnostic test. The diagnostic test aided the designing of classroom instruction together with the development of online language tasks as support activities. The post-test taken after an intervention of eight weeks revealed that the weekly online language tasks helped improve the language skills of students and made them autonomous learners. A mixed method approach was used where the scores of students were analysed quantitatively, while semi-structured interviews were taken to mark the satisfaction level with online language activities. The study highlighted the significance of a blended learning approach towards language development.*

Keywords: English language, blended learning, online language learning, instruction, self-directed learning.

Introduction

Pakistan is a country with a rich linguistic heritage. Within 881,913 square kilometre area, the country hosts more than 70 languages. Despite a rich cultural and local languages' history, English remains a language of utmost importance. Zaidi and Zaki (2017) state that "English, as it is spreading all over the world and is offering better prospects to its knower, is likely to do the same in Pakistan" (2017, p.64). Under the directives of the National Education Policy, 2009 English is taught as a compulsory subject from grades one to twelve in Pakistan. This signifies that students who enter undergraduate programs at the university level have undergone 12 years of English language instruction. Regardless of this fact, teaching English as a second language is an arduous task at various levels of student engagement in Pakistan. The biggest challenge to date remains the increasing pressure to enable students to become proficient users of English language. Seeking alternative and innovative methods of language instruction has therefore become inevitable in higher education institutions.

Pirani and Hussain (2019) state that local research studies indicate several challenges and reasons for the failure of quality instructions of teaching English in Pakistan. One of the root causes for the aforementioned issue is not initiating effective pedagogical reforms at early stages. Consequently, English language learners who are in the developing stage of competence in English characterise a large and rapidly developing population of

* Centre for English language, IQRA University, Karachi, Pakistan. E-mail: fatima.dar@iqra.edu.pk

† Centre for English language, IQRA University, Karachi, Pakistan. E-mail: alia.faruqui@iqra.edu.pk

‡ Centre for English language, IQRA University, Karachi, Pakistan. E-mail: muniza@iqra.edu.pk

students in Pakistani university classrooms. The main thrust behind this desire is that English signifies a language of power and upward social mobility. Coleman (2010) reiterates that English increases an individuals' chances of employability and facilitates worldwide mobility of students, tourists, workers and others. Keeping in view the growing number of university enrolments in Pakistan, it is safely assumed that a huge number of students study English as the medium of instruction. Moreover, they study English as a compulsory subject as well.

Despite a conscious focus on teaching English in Pakistani schools, "The language learners still face difficulties in almost every area: reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar" (M. F. Dar & Khan, 2015). This can be partially attributed to the lack of skill based language instruction at the secondary or high school level. The main focus of language teaching remains the completion of course and preparation for national high school board examinations rather than skill based language development. The 'teach to the test' stance leaves little room for adequate skill based development.

The situation takes a critical turn as students enter university. They are struck with an impasse as the requirement to meet academic standards are dependent on being reasonably well versed in English. Moreover, the pressure gets manifold as the soon to start professional life demands a good proficiency in English language.

The situation strikes a dilemma for teachers teaching English at the tertiary level as they are expected to teach English to students who have already surpassed the 'critical age' of language development. Moreover, once or twice a week class for English instruction is hardly sufficient to bring about the required change in the proficiency levels of students. The problem gets further intensified by a general perspective by students that English is less serious a skill for development as compared to other subjects which are crucial for completion of their professional degrees. Students, however, do not relate to the fact that proficiency in English is the vital requirement for the successful completion of professional courses as the medium of expression at the tertiary level remains English.

An issue which has gained considerable momentum over the years with respect to ELT in Pakistan is the lack of language proficiency of teachers themselves. Language proficiency of teachers has consistently diminished over the years as teachers emerge from the same weak language learning systems. This problematizes matters further as teachers with compromised language skills cannot adequately support the language development of students. Erroneous teaching leads to flawed learning. Alderman, Orazem, and Paterno (2001) are of the opinion that quality of English language teacher is directly proportional to the quality of English language learning. Moreover, teachers of English find meagre opportunities for training in teaching English as a second or foreign language. Lack of methodological knowledge further aggravates teaching and learning conditions. Songsiri (2007) says "The teacher is one of the main factors to promote students' confidence in language learning" (p.6). Therefore, it is very important for a teacher to know theories about psychology, adult learning, learning styles and language teaching. Moreover, Sarwar, Ahmad, and Hyder (2017) state that teachers of English language are not properly trained as language teachers. This leads to a deadlock in terms of language development of learners at the tertiary level.

Despite offering a number of courses in English every semester, students demonstrate

inadequate language skills. This hampers their ability to cope with other subject areas which are in English. [Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, and Dearden \(2018\)](#) are also of the view that globally more and more universities are caught up in the rush to offer both undergraduate and postgraduate programs through the medium of English. The situation poses a challenge to university faculty and most specifically to language faculty who are unable to produce the desired results despite their best efforts.

A crucial factor that problematizes the situation is the legacy of poor English acquisition that the student body brings with them. Being victims of poor English instruction in schools, students develop compromised and poor language skills, hence their inability to withstand the pressures of an all-encompassing English language environment. With reference to Pakistan, [Shamim \(2011\)](#) points out that “the majority of teachers do not have formal qualifications or training in English language teaching” (p.7). This in return hugely impacts the language development of students. These students reach universities with faulty language abilities which continue to haunt them as they struggle to complete their course requirements.

Majority of the students who form the student body come from backgrounds where English language is not used. [Akbari \(2015\)](#) points at the same fact and reiterates that one of the factors that hinders language development is the environment. If there is no active use of English in the environment, language development is hampered.

The university which becomes the focus of the said study is also confronted with the dilemma of teaching language in large numbers. A large classroom comes as an impediment towards the successful learning of language as it effects teacher student interaction and constructive feedback from the teacher for language improvement. [Álava \(2015\)](#) regards large classes as an educational problem which must be tackled from instructional, social and psychological perspectives. Moreover, constant dependence on the traditional mode of language learning through the face-to-face mode does not enable the students to explore other opportunities to learn language. The concept of self-directed and autonomous language learning is not practiced generally in universities in Pakistan. The factors mentioned above, therefore, become the backdrop against which the current study is set.

Most private higher educational institutions in Pakistan have English as the medium of instruction. [Coleman \(2010\)](#) states that the globalization and the dominance of English as a global lingua franca have made it incumbent to develop a working knowledge of spoken and written English in various fields, including business, diplomacy, and academia. In order to comply, a growing number of non-English speaking countries are adopting English as a medium of instruction at their institutions of higher learning. Students, therefore, are expected to have a reasonable command on English to be able to cope up with the teaching learning conditions at the tertiary level. Moreover, an adequate command on English provides a fair chance to withstand the pressure of the academic workload which is mainly in English. Moreover, an equally skilled English teaching faculty makes it possible for students to sail through the academic programs through the provision of adequate and relevant language support.

The context in which the present study is designed presents a complex state. Most of the student body possesses weak English language skills with the result that teaching

and learning become a challenging and taxing activity for both the teacher and the taught. Moreover, the number of English language courses offered per semester are sparse with the result that not enough language input and output can be sought. In a typical semester, the number of English language offered is generally one which is not enough to polish the English language skills of students who suffer from moderate to acute language deficiency. Moreover, there are no self-directed remedial virtual language programs which students can take to improve their language abilities. Furthermore, teachers face the issues of teaching students in large classes and in the absence of regular training and professional development programs in ELT, teaching English becomes a cumbersome and difficult task.

The present study looks at the possibility of tracing the English language gaps among students through a diagnostic test and then designing an online remedial English language program as a language support system. The benefits of the blended language programs have seldom been tapped in the institutions of higher learning. [So and Lee \(2013\)](#) are of the view that blended learning approach enriches the student learning experience, optimizes student engagement, and improves the course administration and management through the use of information and communication technologies. The study supports student learning through the online mode in a basic English course titled, 'Functional English'. The face to face language teaching is followed by extension activities given by teachers through the online mode which students attempt in a flexible time period of one week. The blended learning approach not only supports student learning but also augments language learning through a flexible process.

The focus of this study is to seek ways to provide alternative ways of language learning, especially through a flexible approach. The study provides a platform through which scaffolding of language learning is done through the blended learning model. In particular, the study engages with learner-driven activities to support and gauge the improvement of students' English proficiency. In the context of Pakistan, students need continuous language support so that they can adequately meet the rigours of their respective academic programs. This, however, seems a tall order in the traditional teaching-learning model. Alternative methods need to be applied as supplementary sources for language enhancement. This research, therefore, investigated the degree of learning enhancement by adding the flexible virtual learning model to the customary curriculum.

Significance of the Study

English language courses are prescribed in universities without determining the proficiency levels of students. The result is that students struggle with English language courses as they do not match their existing level of language proficiency. The said study is significant in terms of determining the English language proficiency level of undergraduate students, offering the Functional English course in accordance with the levels of students determined by the diagnostic test, providing a mechanism for language development apart from the regular face to face class and highlighting the importance of blended approach towards language development.

Literature Review

The ever growing need for good communication skills in English has created a huge demand for English teaching around the world, as millions of people today want to improve their command of English or ensure that their children achieve a good command of English (Richards, 2005). Moreover, English language is attached to power and status in Pakistan (Ashraf, 2006). In Pakistan a high proportion of English can be observed in almost all spheres of life, including advanced education, science and technology, media, industries, as well as in youth culture.

Despite the fact that English is taught as a compulsory subject in Pakistan, the root cause lies in various forms pertaining to students, teachers and administration. Khan and Khan (2016) relate the lack of English language proficiency with the poor performance of the English teachers due to lack of professional preparedness, students' weak position and foundation in English and large classes along with the other factors.

The prime factor which is responsible for the language development is the weak language proficiency of teachers and their lack of professional preparedness to teach English language. A general perception of an English language teacher is of the one who bears the knowledge of language and culture and is able to use it in reflective and ethical manner. However, it requires professional development and commitment to teaching and learning, both as a teacher and as a learner. Further, professional development in teaching English is a tool that teachers must possess in order to create a nurturing and meaningful atmosphere. A professional language learning environment is a place students engage in tasks in which they create and interpret meaning, and in which they communicate their own personal meanings and develop personal connections with the new language (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). This, however, is only possible if English language teachers are professionally equipped and trained to teach a difficult skill like language.

The problems of language learners and teachers become more crucial at tertiary level. Although students are supposed to have developed English language skills for a higher level of academic study in pre-university education, there are problems with productive writing and speaking in English upon entering universities (Evans & Green, 2007). Sit (2017) concludes in his study that there is a decline in English proficiency of local students, including university students, because of poor quality English-medium education. This is particularly true in the case of Pakistan where students entering higher education are struck with the affliction of English language deficiency.

It appears that teachers of English language believe that large classes are a prime obstruction for the efficient teaching of English and learning. Large classes in a country like Saudi Arabia and other developing countries like Egypt and India are obligatory rather than exceptional (Bahanshal, 2013). Many researchers believe that large classes offer few opportunities to teachers to create quality teaching and learning environment for learners (Blatchford, Moriarty, Edmonds, & Martin, 2002; Hattie, 2005; Pedder, 2006). Zhang (2002) examines the effect of large classes among college students and concludes that discipline, teacher's efficiency and effective learning all get affected because of a large class.

Amidst the ever growing stress of teaching English to linguistically deficient students, that too in large classes, the blended learning mode of learning offers a unique and prac-

tical opportunity for language learning. Blended learning (BL) provides the opportunity where one can employ various methods to enhance students learning. [Krasnova, Sidorenko, et al. \(2013\)](#) define BL as a method of teaching that combines the most effective face-to-face (f2f) teaching techniques and online interactive collaboration to constitute a system that functions in constant correlation and forms a single environment. [F. R. Dar \(2016\)](#) argues that blended learning is an underutilized medium in academia despite the fact that it offers rich opportunities for learning. Researchers further argue that blended learning is the concept beyond the use of technology integration. A study by [Jarvis \(2009\)](#) utilizes the online mode by making groups of students do a web-based research on chosen topics of interest, write draft reports, consider feedback from classmates and instructors by sharing and collaborating on drafts posted on the course website, and then deliver a presentation based on the final paper. [Young \(2002\)](#) argues that the convergence of classroom and online education is “the single greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today” (p. A33).

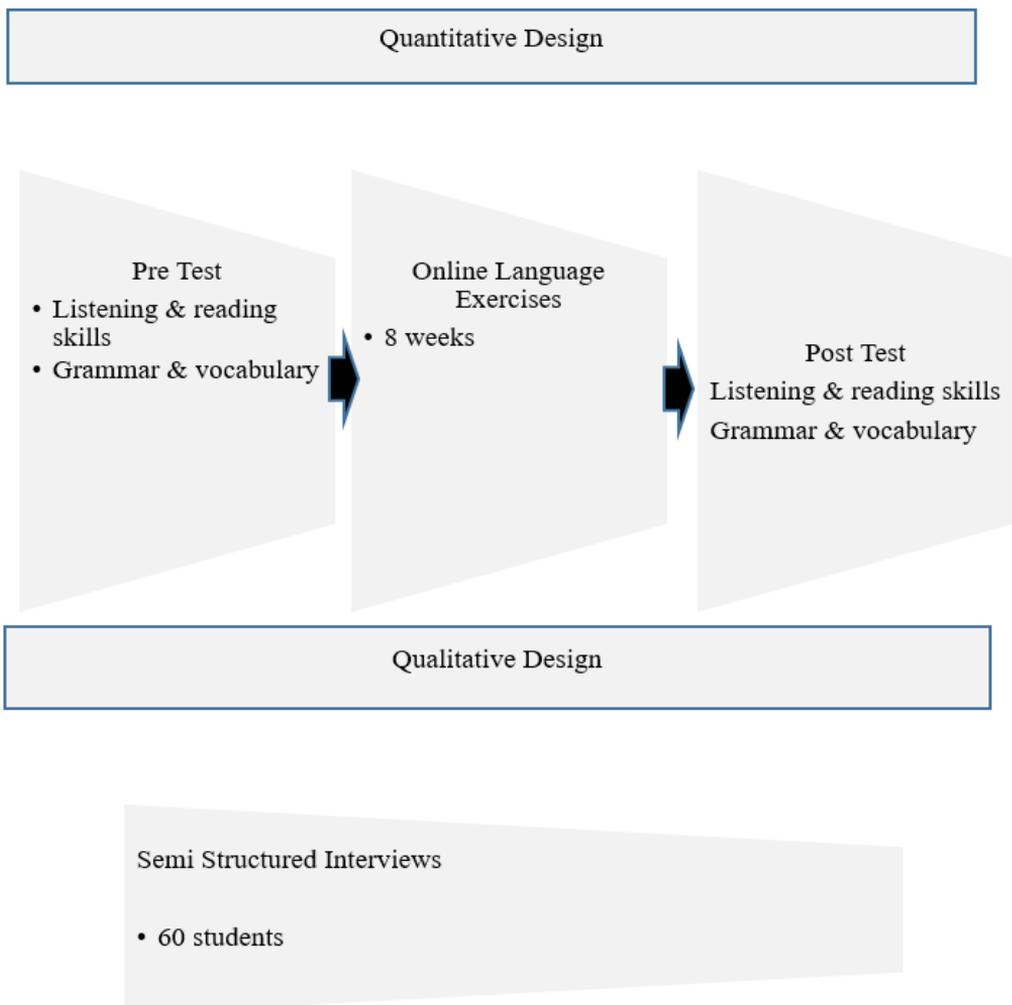
Research Methodology

The research paradigm used in the study follows a mixed method approach. [Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner \(2007\)](#) define mixed method research as research in which a researcher or team of researchers combine elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. [Tashakkori and Teddlie \(2003\)](#) consider mixed method as ‘a type of research design in which QUAL and QUAN approaches are used in types of questions, research methods, data collection and analysis procedures and inferences’ (p.711). Further, the study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-method research design. In this particular design, the quantitative data are collected and analysed prior to the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The purpose of this design is to use qualitative methods to explain earlier quantitative findings. An explanatory sequential design according to [Creswell and Clark \(2017\)](#) consists of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results. The results taken from the pre-test and post-test were analysed and became the quantitative data which was later corroborated through focused group interviews. The purpose of using the said approach is that the quantitative data and results provide the initial findings of the research problem; qualitative data with its analysis further refines and explains the quantitative findings. Moreover, the sampling technique of this study is Purposive, also known as decision sampling, in which “it is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses” to participate in a study (Musa and Alkassim, 2016, p.2). The chosen sampling technique is suitable for the present study as it gives the provision to select the way to obtain data from all the enrolled participants of Functional English course.

The non-random purposive sampling strategy does not need a fixed number of participants or underlying theories. Therefore, a pre-test was used to test the existing proficiency

level of 1200 students registered in the basic English language proficiency course called Functional English. Functional English is a basic course in English offered to all freshmen students. A pretest was used to test the existing proficiency level of 1200 students registered in the Functional English. Functional English is a basic course in English offered to all freshmen students. The pretest was followed by an intervention of 8 weeks. During this intervention phase, the students practiced online language activities once a week for 8 weeks. The online activities were based on weekly class lessons. The online exercises covered listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary exercises. These exercises were a reinforcement of class lessons.

Figure 1
Research Design



A post-test was performed after 8 weeks of online interaction. Moreover, after the post test, focused group interviews of about 60 students were held in which they were asked to comment on the practice of taking the diagnostic test and online exercises. They were also asked to report on the way the said intervention helped them improve their language skills. Furthermore, the students were also encouraged to give recommendations to bring further improvements in the online exercises. The research design is presented in Figure 1:

Results and Analysis: Quantitative Part

The results of the study are indicated with respect to the students' performance, language skills and the overall grades. Table 1 reports the section wise results of the pre and post tests administered to 1200 students. The sections comprised of the following skills listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary.

Table 1
Pass Analysis

	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Section 1	58.01%	68.14%
Section 2	69.07%	80.23%
Section 3	47.75%	56.90%
Section 4	60.31%	70.31%

The overall result shows an improvement in the scores of the students. In section 1, listening skill, an improvement of 10% was recorded. In section 2, reading skill, students improved by 11%. In section 3, grammar and vocabulary, students showed 5% progress. Although the intervention period was only 8 weeks, an overall progress of 10% was recorded. This clearly shows that the online remedial English activities helped in enhancing students' language skills. Through online language practice exercises students not only complemented their face to face language learning process but also learnt in an autonomous environment. [Lander \(2015\)](#) opined that modern day technology eased the process of learning and made learning more self-directed. Table 2 reports the grade wise results of the students who undertook the pre and post English diagnostic tests:

Table 2
Grade Analysis

	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Fail	29.72%	29.46%
C	18.88%	16.74%
C+	14.54%	14.34%
B	19.87%	24.03%
B+	10.21%	7.21%
A	6.78%	8.68%

The results indicate a marginal reduction, about 0.26%, in the percentage of failures.

Also, the number of C grades decreased by 2%. On the contrary, the number of B grades improved by 4% and A grades by 1.9%. Although the improvement recorded was not substantial, the results indicate a path taken in the right direction. With more such interventions, it is hoped that the students would show consistent improvement in English language. Technology is thus a vital tool that helps students in improving their language skills. [Prensky \(2011\)](#) claimed that with currently available technologies, students are learning in a way that was never possible before. Universities need to incorporate such programs across disciplines to make students not only autonomous learners but also self-disciplined and well regulated. The concept of learning within the confines of the classrooms needs to be rethought about and opportunities need to be sought with regard to seeking assistance from programs which are innovative and self-directional. One such program is technology supported language learning. [Ruthven-Stuart \(2003\)](#) cites a study in which a poll taken from 300 language teachers from 36 countries found technology supported language learning as a complement to classroom teaching. The need is therefore to effectively integrate this mode to achieve the desired results and reach optimum student learning.

Results and Analysis: Qualitative Part

The data collected through semi-structured interviews and the results of online exercises were codified and information was synthesized for analysis. The students were asked questions about the experience of doing online exercises, ability to rate and improve their language learning levels, compatibility between classroom instruction and online exercises, and challenges faced by students in the course of attempting online exercise.

The results of the study demonstrated that 63% of the students responded positively to the online exercises, while 23% found it easy whereas 12% found it interesting and informative, and 2% believed it was not useful. The results of the present study further revealed that majority of the students, covering 52%, found online exercises as a tool to identify their existing proficiency level, while 34% students agreed that it helped to identify their proficiency level because of incorporation of variety of exercises namely listening, reading, vocabulary and grammar. However, 4% of the students believed that it helped to identify their language skills by improving their mistakes. On the contrary, 6% reflected their dissatisfaction regarding the effectiveness of online exercises.

The findings also indicated that 48% students found online exercises helpful in identification and improvement of English language skills: reading, speaking, listening and writing. About 46% students improved their vocabulary and grammar with the help of online course. Additionally, 2% of the students believed that online exercises were beneficial for both students and teachers. Similarly, 2% of the students found it as an opportunity to practice taught content, whereas 2% of the students felt it a compulsion to be part of this exercise.

The study revealed that 60% of students found important associations between online exercises and their language development. About 19% students found vocabulary section of online exercises as the most significant in their language development. About 7%

students responded positively to online exercises as a platform to practice their classroom instruction to develop their language skills. Alongside that 89% of the students confirmed that the content of online exercises and classroom instruction was same. A total of 9% believed there was a partial similarity, however, 2% believed there was no similarity between the online exercises and classroom instruction. [Banditvilai \(2016\)](#) also reported in a study that students displayed a favourable attitude towards enhancing their language skills through e-learning. Most students thought that the e-learning program should be a supplement to in-class teaching. In addition, he found a favourable response relating to motivational aspects delivered through the use of technology. It motivated the students to study by themselves" (p.224).

The students also highlighted the challenges in their responses. One of the biggest challenges that students faced was the user unfriendliness and complexity of the software used for the online practice exercises. In addition, the time allocation was also indicated as the hurdle in smooth practice of online exercises. Similarly, the other indicated problems by students included grading mechanism as students were unable to track their progress, lack of instructional clarity in grammar sections, intimation about the availability of online exercises, and the unavailability of answer key. Moreover, 21% students found vocabulary, reading and listening as the challenging sections of the exercises. About 30% of the students found online exercises as easy and manageable. [AlKhaleel \(2019\)](#) in a recent study reported the results of a blended learning English program at the University of Tabuk for the academic year 2018. The study indicated that 84% of the respondents stated that their language proficiency skills improved a lot compared to the use of the conventional teaching methods.

The findings of the semi-structured interviews clearly indicated that the online practice exercises helped students to improve their language skills. [Wang and Fang \(2005\)](#) also stated the same and opined that students could develop language skills such as listening, reading, writing and speaking through intervention of technology. However, the said intervention needed to be blended in well with other institutional programs and given the desired importance for better student results. [Garrison and Kanuka \(2004\)](#) opined that the incorporation of technologically supported programs in higher education programmes would redefine the role of higher education institutions as they moved towards more learner-centered and self-directed modes of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

English language teaching is a challenging practice in higher education in cases where majority of the students have weak language skills. One of the mediums through which this challenge could be managed is technology. The integration of technology supported language programs in regular language courses could offer a fine blend of face to face and online language learning where the online medium could emerge as a complementary tool to improve language. [Warschauer \(2011\)](#) supported the notion of the technology supported learning and recommended its use for improving academic achievement, facilitating new kinds of twenty-first century learning and promoting educational and social

equity. The current study proved the same and indicated that the online language instruction can become a supportive medium through which students can improve their language skills in their own time and space. The study also concluded that technology can serve as a successful tool to assist students in identifying their language deficiencies and attain better language proficiency through practice. It can work as a supportive system which not only helps students improve English but also promotes the concept of autonomous learning. Moreover, the study also emphasises the need for the development of better software and provision of better technical facilities for the efficient and smooth running of the online program. [Higgins and Gomez \(2014\)](#) contended that virtual learning environments were not always user friendly. However, efforts could be made to preempt and remove the possible technological glitches and avoid inconvenience posed to users.

The findings of the present study could have strong policy implications for various programs taught at tertiary level. Students requiring remedial support in key subject areas could be provided assistance through technology supported programs without the compulsion of traditional face to face classrooms. This would cover the knowledge deficit without exerting much pressure on existing resources. Moreover, such programs could also encourage higher education institutions to envisage their programs with a blended learning approach and also professionally train faculty, staff and students accordingly to conduct and attend such programs effectively. [F. R. Dar \(2016\)](#) points out that co-existence with technology has become a vital need, therefore, ways need to be paved for the smooth amalgamation of technology in education.

The study also paves way for some future research that needs to be done in aspects related to blended learning courses not only in English language teaching but also other subject areas. It would be useful to conduct studies on undergraduate courses, in a variety of disciplines, assisted by technology and see if the given support results in better learning. Furthermore, more research needs to be conducted with respect to effective tool and software development for efficient subject based learning.

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