



THE IMPACT OF BLENDED LEARNING ON READING AND WRITING SKILLS OF ESL LEARNERS: A LONGITUDINAL MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF PACC, HYDERABAD, SINDH

TASAWAR ALI SHAIKH¹, SHOUKAT ALI LOHAR², WAQAR ALI SHAH³

¹ MS Scholar English language Development Centre, MUET, Jamshoro

²Assistant Professor, English Language Development Centre, MUET, Jamshoro

³Lecturer, English Language Development Centre, Jamshoro

E-mail: sunny_khan84@hotmail.com



TASAWAR ALI SHAIKH

Article Received: 14/02/2020

Article Accepted: 08/03/2020

Published online: 11/03/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.1.423](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.1.423)

Abstract

The study aims at evaluating the impact of Blended learning on the reading and writing skills of ESL learners. A longitudinal mixed-methods research was conducted for a span of two months on a cohort comprising thirty-two participants at Pakistan American Cultural Centre, Hyderabad. First a pretest was administered to ascertain their level of proficiency in reading and writing skills. The pretest was then followed by an intervention that is the administering of Blended learning approach on the participants. This was followed by a posttest to determine the impact of the B-learning. The data produced by the pretest and the posttest was statistically analyzed by Paired sample T test SPSS 21 version and the results showed that the approach had a positive impact on the reading and writing skills of the participants. However, to have a deeper insight into the impact of Blended learning, a triangulation was done by interviewing ten randomly selected participants from the cohort. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis and the results revealed that the participants were satisfied with the approach. Cumulatively, the study proves that the Blended learning has a positive impact on the reading and writing skills of the ESL learners.

Keywords: Blended learning, longitudinal mixed method, thematic analysis

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Present era is an era of a brave new world of information technology. Contemporary era's reliance on technology and particularly information technology is increasing with every passing day. This immense use of information technology has transformed the world into a global village and has made inroads into all the disciplines as well as fields equally, without any exceptions.

This phenomenon popularly known as globalization along with a need for international communication and an increased use of internet for

the purpose, have all established English language as a global lingua franca (Tsou & Kao; Sah & Li, 2018). According to Boran (2002) its use has also increased all around the world for academic, research and business purposes. Armani (2011) goes a step further and opines that the language has now become the language of science and technology, literature and arts, medicine and pharmacy, computer and communication as well as the medium of instruction in many of the developing and developed countries of the world.

Hence, today a student cannot do without being internet savvy as well as proficient in English language. As being good at using internet will give him an access to the latest and the most updated information while being good at English will help him understand that information. Therefore, as the traditional face-to-face classroom teaching and learning methods are still in practice, but it alone is not enough to cater for the needs of the learners hailing from generation Z, it is high time the teachers integrated online learning with the classroom based teaching and learning. Many a teacher has already started combining the traditional learning methods with the advanced online learning practices to get the most out of both.

This blending of the traditional with advanced has given birth to what today is known as the 'Blended learning approach.' The term originated in the field of business in connection with corporate training (Sharma and Berret, 2007) and according to Cliare Whittaker(2013) the term became a catchword in the realm of ELT with the publication of Sharma and Berret's book Blended Learning in 2007.

Blended learning is a hybrid form of learning that aims at blending the best of both the worlds that is the traditional classroom-based learning and the computer-based virtual or e-learning. By striking a perfect balance between both the modes of teaching, it is aiming at achieving the most by converging the strengths of both the modes of learning while doing away with their weaknesses. According to Watson as cited by Kaur(2012), Blended Learning synthesizes the online delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom interaction and live instruction in such a way as to personalize learning, allow thoughtful reflection and differentiate instruction from student to student across a diverse group of learners.

There are studies that suggest that the language skills can best be improved by teaching the EFL/ESL learners through Blended learning as compared to teaching them only through traditional face-to-face mode of teaching or through e-learning alone. For instance, Albiladi and Alashraf(2019) augmented this point by reviewing the current

literature on the subject in their seminal article and concluded that the Blended learning can enhance English learning process, develop language skills and improve the English language environment too., but they too ended up calling for more research on the subject in order to get a greater insight into the challenges faced by the teachers using blended learning.

Although English language is both the language of the state (Rehman, 2002) as well as the medium of instructions in schools as well as higher education in Pakistan (NEP,2017 P.143,151; Haider, 2017) and mastering the four skills the demand of the times, yet the general achievement of Pakistani learners in the language does not paint a rosy picture and the state has called for urgent remedial measures(NEP,2017, P,132). Despite this all, the language is still being taught through traditional method in most of the educational institutions of Pakistan, which has not generated preferred results (Awan & Shafi, 2016). This is one of the reasons why The English language learners in Pakistan face a lot of difficulties in nearly all the areas: reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar..."(Dar & Khan, 2015, p122)

There is a plethora of studies that support the claim that the Blended learning can help master the English language skills better than the traditional face-to-face method of English language teaching or purely e-learning methods of language teaching. (Behlol & Khan, 2016; Ali et al, (2018)

However, few institutions can claim to have piloted Blended learning approach to help their pupils be proficient in English language. This initiative has been taken by the Pakistan American Cultural Centre, an institution established in 1959 as an initiative by the US consulate to increase people-to-people contact and for the promotion cultural activities and English language is still an integral part of it.

The series that has lately been launched to address the issues of the ESL learners, is grounded in Blended learning approach. The name of the series is *Q:Skills for Success, second edition*. It has been published by the oxford publication and is a paired skills, question-centered six level series catering for

the needs of the EFL/ESL learners. Each level of the book is divided into two strands- reading and writing; speaking and listening. Each unit of the books has clearly established objectives to assess the progress of the learners. This adds to the curiosity of the learners as well. Furthermore, each module also has its e-version known as *IQ Online: digital content* that can be accessed by a student, who is given a separate username and passcode to access it. The teacher too is given a passcode to access the online part of the book with a greater control and an access to more features than a student does. While the reading and writing strand of the book contains picture, guided writing practice that scaffolds the student's writing practice, vocabulary, learning activities, copying exercises and sentence writing practice. The remaining part is covered by the listening and speaking module that has speaking activities, listening tasks as well as a lot of grammatical practices (Bixby & McVeigh,2011)

For this study, only the Reading and Writing strand of the book was used owing to the importance of these two skills for a student to prosper academically as well as owing to time constraints.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to ascertain the impact of the Blended learning on the reading and writing skills of the ESL learners. Proficiency in both the skills is indispensable for a learner to attain success in academic pursuit. According to Chastain (1988), reading has always been a significant aspect of language learning, while writing skill is considered to be the most important skill when it comes to a student's personal development and academic success. (Mukulu et al,2006). Rao (2007) however goes a step further in emphasizing over the importance of writing skill and asserts, "Writing strengthens students' learning, thinking and reflecting on the English language in their academics".

Keeping in view immense importance of both of these skills, many a research scholar has done empirical studies to show that the Blended learning has a positive impact upon the reading skills of the EFL learners (Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour, 2017;

Guangying, 2014) and on their writing skills (Adas and Bakir, 2013; Liu, 2013) and also proved that the Blended learning environment instills a positive attitude in ESL learners (Akbarov et al, 2018., Challob et al, 2016). However, in the local context not much research has been done on the subject to check whether the Blended learning can create a positive impact on the ESL learners or otherwise. The few that can be quoted have only attested the point that the B. learning has a positive impact (Behlol and Khan,2016;Farooq et al 2012).

However, in all of the studies mentioned above, majority studied learning of English language skills through Blended learning as a product rather than a process, which was particularly so with the studies done within the local context. Moreover, there is a paucity of research grounded in longitudinal research design coupled with a qualitative insight into the subject on both the international as well as within the local context. Beside the point, none of the studies from the local context took Sindh as the context of their study. Lastly, none of them focused upon the applicability and impact of the Blended learning in English language teaching centres, despite the fact that a mushroom growth of such language centers has been noticed in Pakistan in general and Sindh in particular.

This research aimed at filling that gap as its area of study was Hyderabad—the second largest city of Sindh-- a lucrative market for language centres. It is also the cultural hub of Sindh and any breakthrough here will have its impacts felt all over Sindh. This study therefore took Hyderabad (Sindh) as its area of study and did a comprehensive longitudinal mixed methods research on the subject and focused specifically on an English Language Centre, the Pakistan American Cultural Centre (PACC), that had lately piloted a series steeped in Blended learning approach.

METHODOLOGY

Longitudinal Mixed-Methods Approach

The overarching research design followed in this research was longitudinal research design whose cardinal tenant is to determine the change with respect to time. Menard (2008) explains it as

the data collected on one or more variables for two or more periods of time which may allow the measurement of change and sometimes its explanation as well. This is important, because language learning has a lot to do with time and timing (Ortega & Ibarra-Shea, 2005, p.27). Therefore, the approach followed in this study was longitudinal approach as to study the language learning as a process rather than a product.

Moreover, in order to have a deeper understanding of the process, a semi-structured interview was conducted. This took the study into the realm of mixed methods approach, which is blending of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to dig deeper into understanding of the subject under investigation. This is done by taking in the most desirable features from both the realms and by doing away with their weaknesses. Creswell and Plano (2003) opine that its central premise is that the use of qualitative and quantitative in combination to provide a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. The said research methodology fulfilled the requirement of this study as this research aimed at gaining a greater insight into the impact of the Blended learning on ESL learners. For which it became all the more necessary to have the take of the participants after they had experienced the intervention and had also taken a pretest as well as a posttest. The results of the said tests were further validated by performing triangulation by administering another instrument to know regarding the firsthand experience of the participants. This gave a clear picture as to whether the participants were satisfied by the B. learning approach or not and what their perception was regarding the approach.

This study followed the sequential design of the mixed methodology. The first phase of the sequence was a Quasi-Experimental longitudinal research while the second phase of the research was a thematic analysis of a semi-structured interview.

Longitudinal Quasi Experimental Procedure

First of all, thirty-two participants were selected through convenience sampling from level Five of PACC (Pakistan American Cultural Centre) to form a cohort. The level five of PACC correlates to B1 level on CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference; Council of Europe, 2001). The cohort first

took a pretest on 04th Nov, 2019, which was actually the standardized test that comes along with each book of the series, *Q: Skills for Success, second edition*. The results of the test were kept confidential. After this the cohort was given an introductory class regarding the Learning management system-cum-resource center namely *IQ online* to be used in the class to make them technology as well as the system savvy. For which each participant was also given a separate class code along with an id to access the online resources provided along with the book, *Q: Skills for success, second edition*. All the features of the said LMS will be explained to the participants through the hands-on approach.

Next the classes were run ninety minutes a day, five days a week and for a span of two months. The instructions as well as activities were divided into Pre-class, in-class and after class sessions. The participants were taught through station rotation model of Blended learning approach and the class was conducted using communicative grammar activities in a collaborative environment both within the brick and mortar class as well as online. Moreover, it was made sure that greater peer-to-peer interaction as well as peer assessment supported by the discussion board as well as online resources for webquests may take place. They were also given a lot of opportunities to talk to the teacher through backchannel discussions as well as through discussion board.

After the completion of the book, a final test or the posttest was conducted on 27th Jan, 2020 and the results were analyzed by Paired Sample t-test on SPSS software version 21 to get a clearer picture as to whether the blended learning had been effective in improving the reading and writing skills or not.

Important Variables in the study

Variable

A variable is a measurable characteristic that varies. (Denis, P, 2004). The study included three types of variables that are as follows:

Independent variable

Jaeger (1990) defines independent variable as a factor that is either measured, or manipulated, or selected by the experimenter to know its relationship to the phenomenon that has been

observed. In this study, the only independent variable was the different learning approach.

Dependent variable

According to Jaeger (1990) a dependent variable is basically a factor that is observed and measured to ascertain the impact of the independent variable. The outcome of this research was the dependent variable. In other words, the dependent variable was the impact of the Blended learning approach.

Control Variables

It is a variable that is held constant in order to assess or clarify the relationship between other variables. BD (2019). The variables are kept constant in the experimental situation so that the effects of the intervention can be isolated. In this study, as stated before the only independent variables was the different approach of language teaching and learning, whereas the rest of the variables were the control variables. The cohort was exposed to the blended language learning approach where the participants were exposed to both the 'sage on stage' as well as 'guide by the side' form of teaching. In the latter format of teaching, the participants experienced both face-to-face lectures as well as autonomous online learning. The cohort were exposed to webquests, group work, pair work, task-based learning, communicative grammar activities, online lectures, flip teaching and a series of communication tools such as discussion board, back channel discussions etc.

- 1) Participants were approximately at the same level of English proficiency because the Centre had already conducted a proficiency test.
- 2) Participants were also approximately at the same level of computer and internet skills.
- 3) The goal of the class was the same, which was to complete four units from the book, *Q: Skills for Success, Second edition* within the stipulated time that is 2 months.
- 4) The students took a specialized class to learn how to use the LMS provided along with the book.

- 5) The gender of the participants too was kept as a control variable.

Instrument

The instruments used in the Pretest and Posttest were the standardized tests that come along with the book, *Q: Skills for Success*, second edition. Their objectives were matched by two experienced teachers of the said institutions and they were also assessed by the same two teachers. Thus, the instruments were both reliable as well as valid.

Semi-Structured Interview

On the qualitative side of the study, a semi-structured questionnaire having six key questions was administered on to the participants to have a deeper insight into the impact of the Blended learning on the participants. Ten participants were randomly selected from the cohort to take part in this phase of the study and the questionnaire was administered on them. The questions dealt with the areas like how satisfied the participants were with the Blended learning Approach; whether there was any improvement in their writing skills; Whether they had improved their reading skills: what other skills or subskills pertaining to communication they had learnt during the course of the intervention; and lastly, whether they would like to learn through the Blended learning approach in the future or not.

Themes

Overall Satisfaction

The theme dealt with the level of satisfaction among the participants with respect to the B. learning approach. All the ten participants found the Blended learning approach to be quite satisfactory and wanted to learn through it in the future as well. All of them found it to be engaging, interactive, flexible and fulfilling. The participants were greatly satisfied with this teaching and learning approach. For instance,

Participant 4 stated "It has changed my learning style and has taught me a lot of new learning strategies."

However, one the participants titled P#2 opened up in the secondary questions and was of the opinion that the practice was time consuming and daily outages only added to the issues.

Participant 2 stated, "I am very satisfied with this approach..... but this approach took a lot of time because I am an intermediate student I have to prepare for my test... but I have to be alert all the time."

Writing skills

The theme takes into account the response made by the participants pertaining to the improvement in their writing skills with respect to the objectives established by the book. Responding to the questions, all of the participants stated that their writing skills had improved as the objectives stated within the book pertaining to writing skills had mostly been fulfilled. According to them, now they were able to write different types of paragraphs along with their components. They were particularly positive regarding the way note taking skills were explained in the book coupled with the online writing tutor, one of the important feature of the book, Q: Skills for Success, second edition. This guided and hands on approach helped them a great deal in improving their writing skills. For instance,

Participant 1 stated: "I can see a big difference in my writing skills. Like .. now I know how to brainstorm. It has really helped me how to plan a write-up. I have learnt opinion and descriptive paragraphs. We also did online practice and within classroom setting also."

Reading skills

This theme deals with the skills that the participants learned during the course of the time in class. The skills included skimming a passage as well as scanning a passage for main idea and its supporting details.

All of the participants were of the opinion that their reading skills improved a great deal. The book as well as its online part made them practice reading and now they can skim, scan, find the main idea as well as its supporting details from a given passage.

Participant #3 stated "I think I have improved my reading skills to a great extent because I have learnt how to skim or scan a passage and how to take out the main idea and its supporting details."

Other Skills, Sub-skills and learning strategies

This theme encompasses Speaking, Listening as well as collaborative learning strategies, development of learning autonomy as well as communication skills. The participants opined that the Blended learning approach inculcated a sense of learning autonomy in them because they were in control of all the material and were asked to go online again and again to access that material. They also stated that the approach helped them polish their communication and collaborative skills by providing them with opportunities to go for pair and group activities within the class as well as online where the discussion board helped them communicate with the whole class without having feeling anxious at all. Besides, the backchannel discussion brought them all closer to the teacher.

Participant # 5: "Yes it has increased my learning autonomy because now I am self-reliant. I go online and I write paragraphs with the help of writing tutor and I am not completely dependent on the teacher."

Participant#6: "I think the ability of collaborative learning has raised a lot because most of the times whether we are in the classroom as well as online we work in the groups as well as.. like.. individually...so...but most of the times we... work in collaboration so that's why it has increased a lot."

Participant#3:"Yes, the discussion board enhanced my communicative skills. Also, backdoor channel gave me a confidence to talk directly to my teacher. This has definitely added to my communicative skills."

Majority of the participants were of the opinion that the said learning approach had taught them skills other than reading and writing skills. The skills that would help them prosper in future as well.

Learning through Blended learning in Future

This theme takes into account whether the participants would like to learn through this approach in the future as well. As a response to the question, most of the participants showed excitement about the idea of learning through the Blended learning approach in the future as well. This is because they found this experience to be different as well as fulfilling and equally flexible.

Participant#1 "Yes, it has added to my communication skills, given me learning autonomy

and I am very satisfied through this approach because I am really inspired because I learnt a lot of new things from this approach I wish that I learn through this approach in upcoming classes too."

Participant#7: "Yes obviously, I have been given individual assistance by the teacher. I improved a lot of reading and writing skills. Great deal I have improved through this approach so I would love to learn English through this approach in the future as well.

TEST RESULTS

Table: 101

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Reading1	25.19	32	3.247	.574
	Reading2	33.06	32	4.925	.871
Pair 2	Writing1	18.13	32	4.022	.711
	Writing2	21.53	32	5.255	.929

Table: 102

Paired Samples Correlations

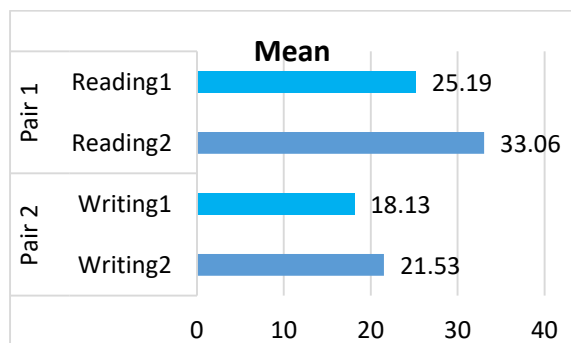
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Reading1 & Reading2	32	.128	.484
Pair 2	Writing1 & Writing2	32	.905	.000

The correlation was positive it suggested that there was a positive impact on the Participants.

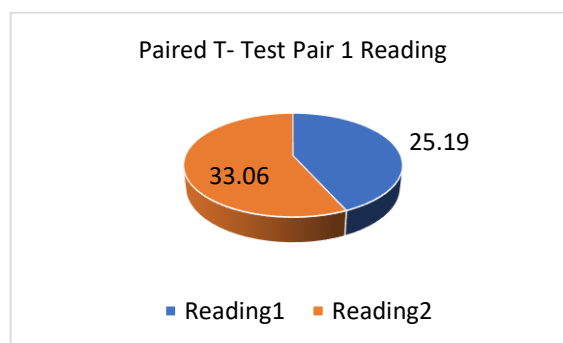
Table: 103

Paired Samples Test

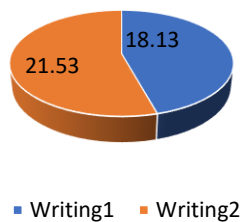
		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	Reading1	-7.875	5.540	.979	-9.872	-5.878	-8.041	31	.000
	Reading2								
Pair 2	Writing1	-3.406	2.354	.416	-4.255	-2.558	-8.187	31	.000
	Writing2								



The results of Pretest and Posttest on writing skills.



Paired T- Test Pair 2 Writing



Reading test Results

There were thirty two participants in the test one. A Paired sample t-test was used to check the means of the group in Pretest and then the post test. In the Pretest the mean stood at 25.19 whereas in Posttest it stood at 33.06. This clearly means that there was a considerable improvement in the reading skills of the participants after they had learnt through B.Learning approach.

Writing test Results

Thirty two participants took the Writing test-1 and the mean of the results was 18.13. After the intervention by the Blended learning approach, they took the Writing test-II and the mean reached to 21.53. This suggests that there was a significant improvement in the writing skills of the participants, which in turn suggests that the Blended learning had a positive impact

Data Analysis

The results of the Pretest and the Postest were analyzed by using Paired Sample T Test of SPSS version 21.0. Results were as follows:

The Reading Tests

For the Reading test, the mean for the Test-1 stood at 25.19 whereas the mean of the Test-2 at 33.09 with mean difference being -3.406 and the standard deviation stood at 2.354, T value stood at -8.041 and the degrees of freedom 31. While the significance stood at .000.($p < 0.05$ → Statistically significant difference). Thus, the difference was statistically significant.

The Writing Tests

For the Writing test, the mean for the Test-1 stood at 18.13 whereas the mean of the Test-2 at 21.53 with mean difference being -7.875 and the standard deviation stands at 5.540 T value stood at

-8.041 and the degrees of freedom 31. While the significance stood at .000.($p < 0.05$ → Statistically significant difference). Thus, the difference was statistically significant.

The semi-structured interview

The questionnaire was first piloted and then it was administered on ten randomly selected participants. Their responses to the semi-structured questionnaire were analyzed through thematic analysis. First, four themes were established out of those responses and then the responses of all the participants were analyzed cumulatively on the basis of those themes. It was found that all the ten participants were satisfied with the approach that was administered onto them. They all felt that they had learnt gained a great deal from that approach as compared to the traditional approaches that they had hitherto been taught through. Responding to Q#2 that related to the second theme, they were positive because they said that they had improved their reading skills to a good extent in relation to the objectives set by the book. As for writing skills, they were of the opinion that they had learnt the art of writing at least two different paragraphs along with their components. Next theme was related to the skills and subskills that they thought they had mastered, they all opined that they were now able to learn autonomously, were able to learn through collaborative learning and were equally home when it came to communicating with the peers or the teacher. Finally, most of them were willing to learn through this teaching and learning approach in the future as well. Thus, this meant that all the impact of the Blended learning on the participants was positive.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Blended learning on the ESL learners of Pakistan American Cultural Center, Hyderabad. A longitudinal mixed methods study was conducted to have a deeper insight into how this state-of-the-art language teaching approach affected the ESL learners and how language teaching and learning acted when taken as a process. Lastly, how satisfied the learners could be with this demanding language teaching and learning approach.

The results of the Pretest and Postest simply proved that there was a considerable positive

impact upon the participants. They all had improved the language skills in focus. As for the reading skills, the participants were first unable to separate the main idea and its supporting details from a given passage. They were also unable to answer the questions related to the passage in an appropriate way. However, after the intervention they were fully able to perform both the tasks. Their writing skills too were not upto the mark. They had no idea how brainstorming was done or how a write-up was planned before getting started. Once they started inking out the write-up, they started it very abruptly without giving a topic sentence and then in middle of it they failed to give supporting details to augment their argument and did not even end it on a concluding sentence. Their write-ups were weak both syntactically as well as lexically. However as soon as the intervention was over, a change could be seen in their write-ups, as suggested by the posttest. Their write-ups had improved considerably with respect to mechanics, content, grammar as well as vocabulary. They had started planning a write-up before executing it. Once started they now always started by giving a topic sentence along with its controlling idea to each one of the paragraphs and in the following sentences they also gave supporting details following which they gave a concluding sentence. Furthermore, their grammar too improved along with their vocabulary. Overall, the tests suggested that the Blended learning had a positive impact on the participants.

The semi-structured interview too augmented the findings of the tests, the students were satisfied with the teaching approach and believed that they had improved a lot. They also wanted to be taught through this approach in the future as well. However, they also highlighted their issues while learning through this approach. The issues such as perennial outages, time consumption and the unavailability of internet or the required bandwidth of internet at certain places.

CONCLUSION

Cumulatively, it was found that the Blended learning had a positive impact on the reading and writing skills of the ESL learners. Also, it equipped them with other skills as well as subskills as well. The skills and subskills those are indispensable for a learner to thrive in this cyber age.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is high time to get rid of the outmoded and outdated language teaching methodologies and switch to the result-oriented and individualized ones and Blended Learning approach is just that.
2. It is also high time to integrate web-based learning into the actual face-to-face teaching and learning for the benefit of the language learners.
3. The teachers need to be trained to teach through Blended learning.

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