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## Evaluation of hybrid learning model in an EFL context in higher education: A sample from Türkiye

### Yükseköğretimde İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretilmesi bağlamında hibrit öğrenme modelinin değerlendirilmesi: Türkiye'den bir örnek

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#### ABSTRACT

The hybrid learning model, which is a learning model that combines different educational environments simultaneously, is applied widely in many countries including Türkiye in the post-COVID era. This study aims to reveal the effectiveness of the hybrid learning model used in the EFL context in higher education in terms of the students' scores gathered from the scales and the instructors' perspectives explored through interviews. The study group consisted of 120 students who studied in the English preparatory program at a private university in the 2021-2022 academic year and 11 instructors who taught at the same program. The study was conducted with the convergent parallel mixed design that allows collecting both qualitative and quantitative data (Sardana, Shekoochi, Cornett & Kaye, 2023). The Effectiveness of Blended Learning Environments Scale developed by Cabı and Gülbahar (2013) was used to gather quantitative data from the students while semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain the qualitative data from the instructors. The findings showed that both parties were positive towards the model despite some points to be considered for a more effective program.

#### ÖZ

Farklı eğitim ortamlarını eş zamanlı olarak birleştiren bir öğrenme modeli olan hibrit öğrenme modeli, COVID sonrası dönemde Türkiye de dahil olmak üzere birçok ülkede yaygın olarak uygulanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, yükseköğretimde İngilizce hazırlık bağlamında kullanılan hibrit öğrenme modelinin etkililiğini öğrenci ve öğretim elemanı bakış açılarıyla ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmanın örneklemini, 2021-2022 akademik yılında özel bir üniversitede

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İngilizce hazırlık programında öğrenim gören 120 öğrenci ve aynı programda ders veren 11 öğretim elemanından oluşturmaktadır. Çalışma, hem nitel hem de nicel verilerin toplanmasına olanak tanıyan eş zamanlı karma yöntemler araştırması deseni ile yürütülmüştür (Sardana, Shekoochi, Cornett & Kaye, 2023). Öğrencilerden nicel veri toplamak için Cabı ve Gülbahar (2013) tarafından geliştirilen Harmanlanmış Öğrenme Ortamlarının Etkililiği Ölçeği kullanılırken, öğretim elemanlarından nitel veri elde etmek için yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Bulgular, daha etkili bir program için dikkat edilmesi gereken bazı noktaları da ortaya koymasına rağmen temelde her iki tarafın da modele olumlu yaklaştığını göstermiştir.

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## INTRODUCTION

Hybrid education has become worldwide popular, transforming traditional education into a blended version and finds its place in curricula more frequently these days. Saichaie (2020) states that the basic motives behind this trend model are students' and instructors' expectations regarding the lessons, effective use of lesson time and the technological advances. The ways of education and instruction have always changed in accordance with the needs of the era. The needs of the new generation and the advancing technology made it obvious that the lesson time spared for education should be used effectively. Additionally, educators and students may also experience compulsory changes such as COVID-19 pandemic. Within this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all institutions to stop the traditional way of teaching and turn it into the online one (Bhamani et al., 2020), which made this changeover to occur at once rather than gradually (Gnaur, Hindhede & Andersen, 2020). The post-COVID era, on the other hand, brought up the idea of hybrid learning to provide optimal learning environments and caution for the students (Powell, 2021).

Hybrid learning is simply defined as the model of learning that combines face-to-face education with online opportunities to engage students in different learning environments (Singh, Steele & Singh, 2021). Regarding online part of the model, Siegelman (2019) asserts that aforementioned instructions in the hybrid model may be held in synchronous or asynchronous classes. Despite those minor differences in the definitions, the main goal behind the online instruction in the hybrid model is said to substitute face-to-face lesson time effectively (Krantzow, 2022).

In conclusion, the hybrid learning model provides a flexible approach that blends the advantages of online and in-person instruction. By integrating synchronous and asynchronous online options, it does not only allow to accommodate different learning styles and timetables but also gives students more freedom to be engaged in diverse instructional settings. As more and more educational institutions use this model, knowing its subtleties can help maximize instructional strategies and make sure that both elements work well together to promote an enhanced learning environment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a growing number of studies conducted on the hybrid learning model in the literature since the COVID-19 lockdown (Gultom et al., 2021; Kastornova & Gerova, 2021; Woo et al., 2021; Bülow, 2022). The common results of these studies highlight the positive effects of the model on the students from different levels. As one of these, Yang and Kuo (2021) point out that college students experiencing hybrid education get an opportunity to improve their autonomy and knowledge-sharing skills. On the other hand, Hapke and others (2021) indicate a more flexible schedule offered by the hybrid model stating that the emotional engagement of students increases because it gives students the chance of online modality. In addition to these, other studies show that the hybrid education model leads students to be more competent users of technology (Johnson et al., 2018) and trigger accessibility and interaction in classroom (Mayisela, 2013).

Despite positive results, a number of studies indicate some challenges for the application of the model (Dlamini & Ndzinisa, 2020; Draffan & Rainger, 2006; Tshabalala, Ndeya-Ndereya, & van der Merwe, 2014). These seem to be based on the lack of technical infrastructure. Supporting this, Rianto (2020) reports that students in hybrid classes experience problems related to internet connection and the features of online platforms. Nikolopoulou (2022) also stresses the lack of necessary physical interaction in the hybrid classes that causes students to be less engaged in the learning process. For teachers, the model ends up in mental load such as coordination of tasks and management of online platforms (Raes et al., 2020).

Compared to an increasing number of studies focusing on the effectiveness of the hybrid model, the efforts in Türkiye seem insufficient. Within the scope of this research, in Turkish context the related studies are restricted to either solely teachers' perspectives or students' perspectives and academic success (Atmacasoy & Aksu, 2018; Bayyurt & Kerestecioglu, 2018; Dikmen & Ocak, 2020; Er & Bayyurt, 2022; Gürdoğan & Bağ, 2021; Kılıç & Güler, 2022; Türker, 2021). Hence, as a step to fill in a gap in the literature, this study will serve for the purpose of better

understanding the effectiveness of hybrid model in the EFL context in Türkiye by embracing both teachers' and students' perspectives and their proficiency levels. As a result, the findings promise valuable information to a wide range body from teachers to educational programmers. This will foster awareness of the model in both Turkish and worldwide contexts.

### Theoretical framework

Theoretical framework of the study relies on hybrid learning rooted in blended learning and is based on the theoretical pillars of active learning (Hung, 2015). Seen as one of the top ten popular trends today, blended learning is defined as combining online and face-to-face instructional methods (Graham, 2006). Accordingly, three types of blended learning were categorized by Graham (2006) on the level of their technology integration as enabling blends, enhancing blends and transforming blends. Current implementation in the study refers to the category of enhancing blends as the researchers aim to enrich and enable traditional classroom teaching with the integration of technology. However, it is critical to see that the hybrid learning model differs from Technology-Rich Instruction, Distance Education or "E Learning" by not only focusing on the delivery of the content through internet (Staker & Horn, 2012). Instead of presenting the content through smart boards, projectors or tablets in the traditional classrooms or delivering the content to learners through the internet not allowing face-to-face interaction, this study is theoretically grounded on the tenants of active learning but not content delivery, which form the center of the hybrid model (Ting, 2014).

### METHOD

This study investigates the case of hybrid learning model applied in the English Preparatory Program of a private university in Istanbul in the post-COVID era. Mixed method design is preferred to collect quantitative and qualitative data for in-depth knowledge (Creswell et al., 2023). Hence, the study uses convergent parallel mixed design to gain an in-depth understanding of the model. In the convergent parallel design, researchers simultaneously embrace the quantitative and qualitative elements of data collection and analysis in the same phase, weigh the methods equally, and analyze the two components independently, and interpret the results together (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Pablo-Clark, 2011). Compatibly, a scale was used in this study to collect quantitative data and semi-structured interviews were conducted for the qualitative part concurrently. The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed independently and interpreted together later. As a result, the pattern of this research can be formulated as qualitative and quantitative (QUAL+QUAN) (Morse, 1991).

### Research Context

This study was conducted in an EFL Program of a university in İstanbul in 2021-2022 academic year. The program aims to enable students to reach minimum B1 level of English Proficiency to start their education at the faculties where the medium of instruction is English. After a fully online instruction due to the pandemic in the previous year, the institution applied a hybrid model in the following academic year. The hybrid model required the students to take online and face-to-face lessons together in the modular system. While 40% of the lessons were offered online, the rest was held in traditional classrooms.

### Research Questions

The study aims to shed light on the effectiveness of hybrid learning model in EFL context from a broader aspect including instructors' perspectives and students' level of proficiency and gender. This aim is embodied in the following research questions:

1. Do male and female university prep EFL students differ significantly in terms of their scores of Effectiveness of Hybrid Learning Environment Scale (EHLE)?
2. Do university prep EFL students' EHLE scores differ significantly according to their levels of proficiency in English?
3. What are the EFL instructors' perceptions of their teaching experiences in the hybrid classes?

### Participants

The study group consists of 120 students who studied EFL in a hybrid preparatory class in the department of foreign languages at a private university in Istanbul in the 2021-2022 academic year and 11 of their instructors. Maximum variation sampling was used in the qualitative part of the study to fully describe the case from information-rich sources (Patton, 2002) to determine the interviewees. On the other hand, the quantitative study group was determined with the stratified random sampling method that allows the researcher to categorize the population into groups and to determine the participants randomly (Bhardwaj, 2019).

Table 1 and 2 below present the descriptive statistics for the participants.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for the Participant Students

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Female	73	61
Male	47	39
English Proficiency Level		
A2	4	3
B1	41	34
B2	58	48
B2+	11	9
C1	6	6

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for the Instructors

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Female	7	63
Male	4	37
Experience in Teaching		
1-3 years	1	9
4-6 years	3	27
7-9 years	2	18
>10 years	5	46
Bachelor's Degree in		
English Language Teaching	4	36
English Language and Literature	3	28
Translation	4	36
Holding a Master's Degree		
Yes	7	64
No	4	36

As seen in the table, 73 of the participants were female while 47 were male. The students are classified in accordance with their English proficiency levels specified by a level test at the beginning of the term. In this respect, the participants were selected from each level of proficiency to get an overall idea about the impact of hybrid learning on different achievement groups.

Table 2 indicates that most of the instructors (7 females; 4 males) were experienced in teaching ranging from 7 to more than 10 years. While only 4 of the interviewees had a BA degree in EFL teaching, 7 of them were found to have a master's degree.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data of the study was collected from the students by conducting The Effectiveness of Blended Learning Environments Scale developed by Cabı and Gülbahar (2013). The scale consists of 55 items and 4 dimensions that are face-to-face learning environments, online learning environments, hybrid learning environments and technical issues. It provides an opportunity to compare the effectiveness of all three learning environments separately. To make the original scale more compatible with this study, only 20 items delving into the 3rd dimension 'Hybrid Learning Environments' were adopted to gather students' perceptions of the hybrid learning model. Showing the reliability of this dimension, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and the split-half test score were found to be .93 and .92 respectively (Cabı & Gülbahar, 2013).

For a better EFL practice, analyzing the participants' self-reported opinions about their experiences become significant to better understand the issue under the studied setting (McGrath, Palmgren & Lijedahl, 2019). Hence, a semi-structured interview form was developed to un-

derstand the participant instructors' perceptions about the model. Based on this, the researchers came up with a draft of questions and got it edited and validated through experts' feedbacks. In more detail, the draft form was given to two language department experts to check its language for comprehensibility and relevance. In accordance to the experts' recommendations, the draft form was revised. The modified form's face and content validity were then discussed with an assessment and evaluation expert, two curriculum and education experts, an educational psychology expert, and an English language teaching expert. In order to provide a statistical value for the form's face validity and content, the experts were asked to circle the number on the form that best represented their opinions, ranging from "1 = completely invalid" to "5 = completely valid." As a result, the researchers had a five-question semi-structured form as a completely valid assessor of EFL instructors' perceptions of their hybrid model experience.

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS 22. Firstly, descriptive analyses were computed to see the distribution of the participants regarding the variables within the study. To see if the adopted sub-scale is a reliable assessor of the participant EFL students' perceptions of hybrid learning model, Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value was computed. Thereafter, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) were run by using LISREL 8.54. Independent Samples t-test was run to explore the possible impact of the gender on the participant students' EHLE scores. On the other hand, One-Way ANOVA test was administrated to see if EHLE scores differ significantly among the participant students from five different proficiency levels.

Content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data gathered through the interviews with the instructors. Kyngäs (2020) defines content analysis as a sensitive analysis that creates an opportunity to group the data into codes and categories. Within this perspective, the researchers analyzed the data manually by following content analysis procedures to transcribe and code the data.

### The Scale

Regarding the validity and reliability of the quantitative data, the values reached by Cabı and Gülbahar (2013) were regarded as the basis ( $KMO = 0,91$ ;  $p < .000$ ;  $\alpha = .93$ ). To set the reliability of the adopted Blended Learning Environments sub-scale, the procedures were repeated ( $KMO = .87$ ;  $p < .000$ ;  $\alpha = .92$ ). Based on Kaiser's (1974) recommendation of  $KMO$  & Bartlett's Test of Sphericity higher than .5, the sample size was found adequate enough to run the analysis. Then, cronbach's alpha coefficient regarding the sub-scales was found to range between .70 and .93, which indicates that the scale is reliable. As seen by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which must be .70 or above (Büyüköztürk, 2006), the researchers explored that the adopted sub-scale was a reliable measure of EFL students' attitudes towards hybrid learning model environment within the scope of the

research.

To explore and confirm if the adopted one-dimension scale is a valid measure of the perceptions regarding blended learning environment, the researchers ran exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). As a result of Principal Component Analysis, the items gathered around one dimension. Based on the fit indices in addition to standardized solution and t-values produced as a result of CFA, the researchers set the adopted scale of blended learning environment including 20 items in one factor as a valid assessor of EFL students' perceptions of the hybrid learning model (RMSEA= .081, GFI= .78, AGFI= 0.76, RMR=.12 and SRMR= .072, CMin/DF= 2.6.).

Regarding the validity and reliability of qualitative data, the related literature presents some common approaches (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Golafshani, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). Compatibly, the researchers consulted the field experts for the data analysis to validate the form, decline possible research bias, supported the results with similar results, described process of the data collection, accepted feedback from the interviewees to confirm the codes and triangulated the data through surveys and interview. It was also enhanced as one of the researchers was working at the relevant institution and therefore was familiar with the case and acknowledged the possible bias (Rolfe, 2006).

**Ethical Issues**

Based on the permission from Institutional Review of Board (IBR) with a notice of 16-01 issued on June 26, 2022, it was ethically approved that the research content was appropriate for the social sciences. Participants were all given consent forms, and informed about the aim of the study and ethical issues and ensured that all individual data was confidential by using pseudonyms in the analysis.

**FINDINGS**

This part of the study presents the results of the analysis to stand for each of the research questions, respectively. However, there are two types of test data that require different types of analysis. Hence, the findings of this study were elaborated in two following sub-sections.

**Quantitative Findings**

The type of the data, parametric or non-parametric, ensures the validity of the conclusions drawn about the sample. Thus, the researchers checked the data in terms of the number of participants, measures of central tendency (mean=79,5; median=80,5; mode=80), normal distribution curves, the values of skewness and kurtosis (1,96/-1,96) and normality test with Kolmogorov Smirnov tests run for 5 proficiency level groups specified (z=,729; ,947; ,952; ,898; ,829; p >.05). Based on these, it was seen that the quantitative data distributed normally. As a result, parametric tests

were employed to answer the 1st and 2nd research questions. In this respect, by processing the students' responses acquired from the relevant scale through SPSS 22, descriptive analyses, Independent Sample t-tests and One-way ANOVAs depending on the number of the independent variables were conducted. Firstly, the participants' total scores were calculated, z-scores were acquired and presented as below (Table 3).

Prior to detailing the EHLE scores based on the students' proficiency levels, based on the z-scores, students were categorized as the lower (42-70), the medium (71-90) and the upper (91-100). As a result, the average score of the participants was determined to be at medium level with 79.5 (N=120, sd=12.8). In other words, the overall scores that range between 42 and 100 indicate the students have positive attitudes towards hybrid learning.

The distribution of the EHLE scores for proficiency levels is presented below (Table 4).

When the total scores are examined according to the students' levels of English proficiency, it is seen that the total scores for A2 group range between 55 and 96 and the mean is 79.5 (N=4, sd=23.67) while the scores range between 42 and 100 for B1 group with the mean of 76.31 (N=41, sd=14.41). For B2 group, the scores range between 59 and 98 and the mean is 80.89 (N=58, sd=10.42). On the other hand, B2+ group ranges between 64 and 95 and the mean is found to be 81.09 (N=11, sd=11.11). Finally, the minimum score for C1 group is 41 and the maximum score is found to be 100 (N=6, sd=15.57).

Table 5 below shows the t-test results regarding the impact of the gender variable on the total EHLE scores.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics for EHLE Scores

Scale	N	%	$\bar{X}$	Min	Max	SD
EHLE						
Low	26	21.6				
Medium	66	55	79.5	42	100	12.849
High	28	23.3				
Total	120	100				

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics for Proficiency Levels & EHLE Scores

Factor	N	$\bar{X}$	Min	Max	SD
EHLE					
A2	4	79.50	55	96	23.67
B1	41	76.31	42	100	14.41
B2	58	80.89	59	98	10.42
B2+	11	81.09	64	95	11.11
C1	6	87.50	60	100	15.57
Total	120	79.50	42	100	12.849

**Table 5.** Independent Samples T-Tests for Gender & EHLE Scores

Factor	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	t test		
				t	Df	p
EHLE						
Male	73	82.3	11.5	3.097	118	.002
Female	47	75.1	13.5			

This phase of the findings answers the 1st research question. Based on the analyses indicating the normal distribution of data, Independent Sample t-test was run to explore if male and female students' mean scores differ significantly. As seen in table 5, significant meaningful difference was found between the female and male students' scores in favor of the female students ( $t = 3.2097, p < .01$ ).

Table 6 below presents One-way ANOVA results regarding the impact of proficiency levels on EHLE scores.

As seen in table 6, as a response to the 2nd research question of the study, One-way ANOVA tests ensured that students' level of proficiency in English exerted no significant difference on their EHLE scores. The sub-groups of the proficiency did not differ significantly in terms of their mean scores ( $F = 1,54; p > .05$ ). However, despite the lack of statistically significant difference, the increasing mean scores of more proficient groups indicate that the students with a higher level of English proficiency are more content with the hybrid learning model.

### Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data was gathered through interviews conducted with 11 EFL instructors. To verify the quantitative findings, the qualitative data was analyzed following content analysis approach which included "developing a general sense of the data, and then coding description and themes about the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012:237). Within this respect, the researchers analyzed the data according to the themes and categories in the literature and the ones formed as a result of the current analysis.

**Table 6.** One-Way ANOVA Test for Proficiency Levels Students & EHLE.

Factor	N	$\bar{X}$	ss	ANOVA Results					
				Sum of Squares	Df	Mean of Squares	F	P	
EHLE									
A2	4	75.5	23.6	Between Groups	1004.3	4	251		
B1	41	76.3	14.4						
B2	58	80.9	10.4						
B2+	11	81	11.1	Within Groups	18642	115	162.1	1.54	0,19
C1	6	87.5	15.5	Total	19646	119			
Total	120	79.5	12.8						

Following Creswell's recommendations (2012), the researchers came up with 6 categories, 4 of which reflected the advantages and disadvantages of the model while 2 focused on the suggestions. Interpretations and comments on EFL instructors' perceptions were grounded in these categories, which were further evaluated in 14 codes (Table 7).

To better reflect the qualitative findings, the qualitative results were presented in 3 sub-sections standing for each of themes.

### Theme One: Advantages of Hybrid Learning Model

The first theme details the instructors' perceptions regarding the advantages of hybrid learning model. This broad theme was grouped into 2 categories.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Category: Advantages for Learners

2 codes were obtained out of the first category focusing on the advantages of hybrid learning model for the EFL learners.

1. Benefits of Less Commute: The instructors stated that hybrid model provided learners with some chances like spending less time, energy, and money on commuting for school. Since the university is in a big city, the commute takes long time in traffic and costs more. Thanks to hybrid model, it is possible to decline the time, energy and money spent on online days. To support this, Ins2 who is an English Literature graduate with 8-year-experience stated: "Speaking about the learners, from what I've seen and from their feedback, one benefit was the flexibility the hybrid system offered in terms of attendance and commute". As a result of the less time and energy spent, instructors think that students get more energized and excited about face-to-face lessons. To illustrate, Ins3, who studied Translation with 9 years of experience expressed the following: "Students not having to come to schools twice a week greatly helps them as they can rest on those days. As a result, I believe that their enthusiasm for the face-to-face classes also increases drastically".
2. Being Autonomous Learners: Hybrid learning model allows students to reinforce their learning on their

Table 7. Themes, Categories, and Codes Obtained Through Content Analysis

Theme	Category	Code	Meaning
Advantages of Hybrid Learning Model	Advantages for Learners	Benefits of Less Commute	Less time and energy spent for coming to school
		Being Autonomous Learners	Being responsible for their own learning
	Advantages for Instructors	Benefits of Less Commute	Less time and energy spent for coming to school
Comfort of Teaching Online		Having more comfort teaching online at home	
Disadvantages of Hybrid Learning Model	Disadvantages for Learners	Chance for Professional Development	Having more chances to develop professionally
		Less Motivation in Online Lessons	Having less motivation and participation in online lessons
		Less Effective Online Lessons	Online lessons' being less effective
	Disadvantages for Instructors	Unequal Opportunities	Not having equal physical opportunities for online lessons
		Less Socializing	Spending less time with friends
		Difficulty in Online Classroom Management	Difficulty in managing the online classes
		Demotivated Students	Students' less motivation and participation for online lessons
Suggestions on Hybrid Learning Model	Lesson Planning	Some actions to be taken into consideration while planning lessons	
	Duration and Weekly Schedule	Some suggestions for the duration and timing of online lessons	
	Increasing Students' Participation	Strict rules on students' participation and camera-on policy	

own. They must attend online classes, find useful digital devices and tools for their assignments and projects, which makes them more responsible for their own learning. Instructors agreed that it boosts students' autonomy in learning. An ELT graduate, Ins 7 with 6 years of teaching experience commented as follows: *"The first advantage for learners is that they become more autonomous students. Secondly, this is a new way of education globally, therefore, they try to develop themselves thanks to digital platforms..."*. Even if students were not autonomous enough to maintain distance education, the hybrid learning model provided those students with a chance to get used to the hybrid model more. Ins9 with 4 years of experience emphasized this advantage as follows: *"Students who are willing to learn have more self-learning time on their own. Although this can be challenging for those who do not have strong organizational skills, that may force students to improve themselves"*.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Category: Advantages for Instructors**

3 codes were formed out of the 2nd category that delves into the advantages of hybrid learning model for the instructors.

1. Benefits of Less Commute: Hybrid learning model also made it easier for the instructors to commute to work. The instructors stated that coming to work for only some days allowed them to save energy, money and time just like the students. Ins1 emphasized the money they could save thanks to hybrid education giving a personal detail as *"Teachers are less exhausted...Public transport is now very expensive. I pay over 600 liras on a monthly pass, having a few days when I don't travel and teach from home is cheaper"*. With the help of the hybrid model, instructors also get less troubles related to traffic and find more time to relax. Regarding this issue, Ins3 added the following lines: *"Just as it is with the students, not having to come to school is great, even if it is only for two days a week. As traffic and public transportation are very problematic in Istanbul, those two online days help me relax and rest at home while doing my job"*.
2. Comfort of Teaching Online: The interviews showed that instructors were satisfied with the comfort of the model as they were conducting their classes online from their homes. Ins2 was happy with the online teaching days of the hybrid learning model and stated the following lines: *"It goes without saying that teachers were enjoying the hybrid system too and I, being one of them myself, can list some worth-mentioning ones: The comfort of working from my home, flexible schedules and working hours, and increased productivity resulting from the comfort I have been having at home"*. Besides the flexible schedules and working hours, it was easy to offer lessons and reach students wherever possible. Ins7 added the following lines on this topic: *"We can have access to the students and classes wherever we are and*

whenever compromised". With the comfort of teaching online, instructors mentioned that they could maintain their housework easily as well, which may be expected to help instructors better motivate and focus on instructional acts.

3. A Chance for Professional Development: Pandemic and post-pandemic conditions forced many instructors who were only obsessed with traditional face-to-face classes to catch up with the changing conditions. Applying hybrid learning model, in a way, forced instructors to improve their teaching skills in both face-to-face and digital environments. Ins10, having one year of experience in teaching EFL, emphasized this triggering process stating: "...With the hybrid system, I have been able to improve my online teaching skills and experience with the technological tools more, which has become much more important especially nowadays, after the pandemic. But also balancing it with traditional classroom setting was effective." Instructors also stated their observations regarding the processes both the learners and the teachers went through. Ins8 with 8 years of experience explained: "Having both online and face-to-face modes enables instructors to use diverse methods to conduct a fruitful lesson. Instructors can evaluate their teaching skills in both modes and decide which one is required to be improved. Instructors can observe how learners learn better using modes by comparing the advantages and disadvantages of each session...". In conclusion, the feature of hybrid learning model was understood to make the instructors believe in the necessity of professionally developing themselves.

### Theme Two: Disadvantages of Hybrid Learning Model

The second theme based on the qualitative seeks the disadvantages of hybrid learning model applied in the relevant English preparatory program.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Category: Disadvantages for Learners

The researchers formed 4 codes grounded in the drawbacks of the hybrid learning model for the learners.

1. Less Motivation for Online Courses: One disadvantage of the hybrid learning model was related to the courses offered online in which students' motivation and participation declined clearly. According to the instructors, students had motivational problems with the online classes. Ins3 supported this: "There is a significant drop in students' participation in online courses compared to face-to-face ones. While almost all students in one of my classes are willingly active during face-to-face classes, participation drops to only 4-5 students during the online classes". Similarly, Ins2 also added: "...issues such as boredom, unwillingness to sit in front of a screen for 5 hours every day, the monotony of the materials and, of course, the lack of the physical aspects of teaching they had got used to for the past 10 years

were problems". Yet, this could be associated with the lack of necessary internal motivation of the students as reported by instructors. In other words, it was the learner himself/ herself to take the responsibility of the learning in this environment.

2. Less Effective Online Courses: Another drawback of the model was found to be the passive nature of the online delivery of the content. Compared to the face-to-face lessons, instructors found online classes less effective due to technical problems. Ins5 emphasized the importance of the device(s) used for the online part and said the following: "The online lessons require technological devices with good quality, some of which we do not sometimes have access to". Ins8 also clearly explains this as follows: "Some learners might have a tendency for distance online education, and they might not participate fully in the acts. In online classes, most of the students do not even like to turn on their cameras which can lead to an ineffective lesson. There might be technical issues in conducting online lessons like insufficient internet connection." To sum up, online delivery of the content, where the control of the learning environment is held by the students, results in non-interactive classes based on one-way transfer of information.
3. Unequal Opportunities: Access to internet is a must for the application of this model, which may cause some inequalities for the disadvantaged learners. Ins9, emphasized this prerequisite of the model and said, "the online part of the hybrid classes requires technological devices for everyone, which is not very possible". Ins5 paid attention to unequal opportunities among the students: "Unfortunately, there is no equal opportunity for all students. Some students find it hard to find a proper device or a good stable internet connection to attend online classes..." It is understood that the interviewed instructors draw attention to the infrastructure constraints that may hinder the efficiency of the model.
4. Less Socializing on Online Days: When the holistic basis of education that aims at not only students' intellectual but also their psychological and social development, less physical interaction between students and the teachers and among peers on online days may cause problems. Ins11 remarked this as follows: "...Also, they need to be in social environments and interact with their friends. When the classes are held online, students are deprived of this chance". Instructors reported to observe students happier at school compared to online classes. Ins5 explained this very clearly: "Most of the students seem to be happy on campus while they usually have problems with online days. They can't have face-to-face interaction with their peers and that sometimes causes boredom for students. Some of the students like coming to school to get socialized and to do some activities with their friends. However, this is impossible on online days. Students who



have some personal issues find it hard to find some private time to talk about their problems with their instructors". As concluded from the responses, EFL learners seem to prefer lively touching learning environment in traditional classrooms to virtual classrooms.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Category: Disadvantages for Instructors

Two codes were obtained based on the 2nd category which details the probable disadvantages of hybrid learning model for the instructors.

1. **Difficulty in Online Classroom Management:** It could be expected that hybrid learning model might increase the burden on teachers by obliging them to spend a lot of time before the class to prepare the content for online sessions. The online part of the hybrid education makes it also harder for them to follow the process during a class, to check every student individually and control students' learning performance on digital activities. Ins9 highlighted this drawback as follows: *"It may be hard to follow the learning process individually. It is hard to check the learning environment whether it is suitable for the intended outcome or not. Classroom management might be challenging sometimes."* Ins11 enlightened the researchers that some students turned their cameras off during the online lessons by explaining *"We do not have a chance to know if they are busy with other things especially when their cameras are turned off"*. In addition to the students' self-controlled online learning environment that is off the teachers' intervention, planning of the whole course including the preparation of video lectures, assignments, and adapting students to this new way of teaching and learning are reported to increase the load on instructors' shoulders.
2. **Demotivated Students:** Students are inevitably the central element of instruction, and their demotivation will cause problems for the instructors. Also, blend nature of the model may also turn into a drawback for some students depending on their learning habits, resulting in a mismatch between their learning styles and media-embedded teaching style. Accordingly, it was concluded that students' low motivation and participation in online lessons was the biggest disadvantage for the instructors as they felt that they had to attract those students' attention in online lessons. Ins5 reflected on this in the following lines: *"Students' attention span is exceptionally low in online classes. Hence, it is hard for us to keep them focused during the lessons. Some students tend to turn off their cameras and deal with other issues, which creates a big problem for them to follow the schedule later"*. Demotivated students caused instructors to lose their motivation as well, which is expressed by Ins3 as follows: *"When participation is low, the teachers lose the desire to teach, as well. In some classes, I felt like I was wasting my time as no one answered even basic yes-no questions"*.

## Theme Three: Suggestions on Hybrid Learning Model

The final theme focuses on suggestions for the efficient implementation of hybrid learning model in two categories.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Category: Teaching Approach

The interviewees' suggestions were mostly related to the planning of the hybrid courses. Hence, only one code was formed in this category.

1. **Lesson Planning:** Hybrid classes could have a strong potential to enable learning, which can be achieved with careful planning. Compatibly, the instructors stressed the importance of the rearrangement of the lesson plans in the hybrid learning model to benefit from the online lessons better. Participant instructors stated that the online lessons should be planned in a way to engage students in interactive activities rather than passively delivering the content. Stressing the importance of allocating more time to meaningful problem-solving activities during the online classes, Ins11 suggested the following: *"I have tried to plan my lessons so that students would be forced to do more group work in breakout rooms. With most of my students this worked well. A similar approach could be employed by everyone, or the pacing could be arranged in that way. Online lessons could be spared to do extra practice instead of teaching new things and this could be done by playing games"*. As suggested by Ins9, some instructors, on the other hand, underlined the role of the material in virtual classes: *"I think the effectiveness of the system all depends on effective planning for instructors. Since half of the model is based on technology, providing a learning environment integrated with technology is necessary. It can only be possible with the use of the right materials and online sources"*. In conclusion, it is clear that the success of the model lies in comprehensive planning of online and face-to-face classroom sessions.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Category: Administration and Curriculum Designers

Hybrid model can be said to impose responsibilities not only on students and teachers, but also on administrators and curriculum designers. Based on instructors' suggestions 2 codes were obtained from this category.

1. **Duration and Weekly Schedule:** Regarding the organization of hybrid classes, the instructors suggested that concerned stakeholders should make some changes on the duration and the number of the weekly lessons, particularly the online ones. Ins11 commented on this issue: *"The number of online lessons or the duration of the lessons could be reduced if we want to have a more effective system"*. In conclusion, as a response to the probable challenges, all of which seemed to arise from the online sessions of the model, the participant interviewees were found to suggest the reduction of the weight of online classes in hybrid curriculum.
2. **Increasing Students' Participation:** One of the main

drawbacks for the instructors was low student participation and motivation. As a result, most of the instructors suggested that concerned bodies should take necessary out-of-classroom precautions including instructional and planning acts to increase students' participation in the online classes. Ins3 expressed his ideas with the following sentence: *"We need, well, one way or another to ensure that student participation is needed for the efficiency of the model"*. As a result, the interviewees, despite privacy of life, recommended that by setting a relevant rule, students could be made to keep their cameras on during the online classes. Ins4 elaborated on this point as follows: *"If possible, I would make it mandatory to turn on the camera for the course evaluation. If the students' cameras are turned off and they are not attending the lesson, we have no idea what they are doing. We do not know whether they are listening to the lecture or just turning on their computers and gone"*. In conclusion, participant instructors drew attention to the problem of accountability since they could not be certain if the students were there really attending the class.

## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to evaluate the hybrid learning model in EFL at a university in Istanbul in terms of the students' proficiency levels and the instructors' perceptions. Since COVID-19, integration of the advanced technology into traditional classes has become inevitable, which is possible with hybrid learning environments (Li, Li & Han, 2021). Accordingly, Batdi, Kayıklık and Talan (2021) regard hybrid learning as one of the effective learning methods of the future, so it is critical to understand and evaluate the system with its strengths and weaknesses to improve it worldwide.

The quantitative data revealed that the students possessed positive attitudes regarding the model based on the average score obtained from the scale. This result is parallel to the previous studies that point out students' positive perceptions of the hybrid learning model (Erliza & Septianingsih, 2022; Istiqomah, 2021; Lu, 2021; Simbolon, 2021). Similarly, Aksel (2021) compared the preferences of the college students among face-to-face, hybrid and online learning models and found out that the college students were positive about the hybrid model.

Despite the medium range mean score acquired from the scale, it is also important to note that the item with the minimum score was the item claiming that the students learned better with the hybrid model. This indicates that the present study has produced results that partly support the literature exploring students' preferences for online or on-campus over hybrid learning and certain difficulties of hybrid learning (Albeta et al., 2023; Al-Amin et al., 2021; Osaili et al., 2023). Supporting this result, Meri-Yılan (2021) stated that students might not feel fully active in their own learning due to some challenges during blended learning.

In this context, Thorne (2003) recommended instructors to encourage students to find the best appropriate learning environments to decrease the limitations of hybrid learning. Since the model was relatively new for the students, it might require some time to overcome the habits of traditional learning. Irani-Kermani et al., (2021) associated the negative perception of hybrid learning with the habitual effects students got used to in time.

This study also highlighted that female students found the hybrid learning model more effective than male students. This part of the result is frequently supported by the studies that studied the gender difference in blended learning model (Ashby et al., 2011; Dang et al., 2016; Sankar et al., 2022).

Another finding of the research showed that there was not a statistically significant difference between the students' English proficiency levels and their attitudes towards the hybrid learning model. However, it was also observed that students with a higher English proficiency level were more positive towards the system. This seems to be supporting Hiralal's (2012) and Sahni's (2019) studies exploring students' significant improvements in their performance thanks to hybrid learning. This may be linked to the autonomy level of the students as they are also on their own with the online part of the hybrid model as shown by Dafei (2007) and Mohamadpour (2013).

Qualitative data of this study presents both positive and negative outcomes of the hybrid learning model for both the instructors and the students. Based on the codes, instructors stressed that the model resulted in comfort of teaching online and triggered the professional development. Hybrid learning was also understood to tap on learners' autonomy. This seems to be harmonious with the similar studies focusing on instructors' perceptions in different contexts. To support it, Toit-Brits (2019:8) asserts that educator expectation plays a key factor in enhancing students' self-directedness adding that *"their positive expectations, encourage students to be self-directed learners"*. Osaili et al., (2023:10) strengthened the results by exploring that *"the guaranteed anonymity of the students may have provided them with more convenience and confidence in transparently reporting their opinions and behaviors"*. Aji et al., (2020) also underlined that instructors liked the hybrid system as it boosted learner autonomy and was easy to conduct. In line with Irani-Kermani (2021), this study also showed that the instructors were holding positive attitudes towards the hybrid model since they commuted less and wasted less time in traffic.

On the other hand, the present study explored some drawbacks of the model based on the participant instructors' opinions, which is parallel to the related literature summarizing the main difficulties in hybrid learning as lack of motivation and discomfort when on campus. The related literature included studies indicating such challeng-

es of the hybrid model (Albeta et al., 2023; Aldosemani et al., 2018; Osaili et al., 2023; Rasheed et al., 2020; Sriwichai, 2020). Yet, the present study has found out students' mean scores of EHLE increased with their proficiency levels. This facilitative impact of the model on students' learning outcomes is supported by several studies (Abroto et al., 2021; Grønlienetal, 2021; Halasaetal, 2020).

The current study explored challenges regarding classroom management and explored instructors' solution as effectively using information technology. This drawback of the model is emphasized by Aşıroğlu et al., (2022) as difficulty in classroom management. Accordingly, Aşıroğlu et al., (2022) also stated that hybrid learning required the instructors to plan their lessons in a more detailed way not to copy the face-to-face plans into online plans. Consequently, instructors needed to work more on lesson planning to maintain better learning environments and fruitful interactions. Yet, ineffective infrastructure was found to be another challenge that exceeds the instructors themselves. This is supported by Luo (2021) who asserts hybrid learning mostly depends on technology, lack of which creates inequality for everyone.

Instructors suggested some solutions to improve the hybrid learning model in EFL. Those suggestions included some changes in lesson planning, timing, and developing policies on students' participation. Apart from the suggestions related to the administration, instructors' opinions covered specific instructional suggestions ranging from changing the lesson planning, including more student-centered activities, to teaching specific skills in online lessons. Therefore, it is critical to work on effective instructional design methods based on detailed analyses of student and instructor needs, learning objectives and student participation (Aşıroğlu et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the present study explored the students' positive scores of EHLE that may indicate also their positive attitudes towards hybrid learning environment and the instructors' positive perceptions of hybrid learning. However, drawbacks of the model explored through the interviews with the instructors were suggested to be solved by maintaining the necessary infrastructure, enhancing the instructors' ability to plan and use ICT, which may also increase their workload.

However, the limitations of the study must be considered when interpreting the findings. Self-reported surveys may produce respondent bias and cause misinterpretation of the results. Also, higher participation of the students and instructors from different universities may produce more generalizable results. Therefore, the findings of this study call for future research to consistently label the problems for all contexts and to produce solutions to ensure and optimize the hybrid learning model.

Considering dynamics of the current digital age, hybrid learning model offers an enormous potential for the learn-

ers. As a result, the researchers make following recommendations to maximize the effectiveness of the hybrid learning model:

- A deep need analysis is required to design an effective hybrid program.
- For successful implementation of the model, necessary infrastructure and equipment must be ensured.
- Instructors may be offered in-service training on the principles of instructional design to better plan their lessons.
- The administration should ensure all students to own equal and necessary technological opportunities.

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