

The Perspectives of Low-Achieving Language Learners Regarding Blended Learning as Remedial Assistance

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Recommended citation: Ağgün Çelik, N. & Sofu, H. (2025). The Perspectives of Low-Achieving Language Learners Regarding Blended Learning as Remedial Assistance. *Journal of Language Research (JLR)*, 9(1), 91-108.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51726/jlr.1625166>

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to determine how blended learning (BL) might be used as remedial assistance for low-achieving students, who are repeating at the beginning level of English as a foreign language (EFL). In order to make recommendations that will best promote students' success, this qualitative study looks at how students reflect on their experiences with BL. The sample setting was selected from a repeat A1 class of prospective engineering students enrolled in a preparatory program that teaches intense English courses at a Turkish university. The researcher's nine years of teaching and research expertise in the same setting, previous formal and informal feedback from low-achieving students, and the most recent literature were the main sources of shaping the BL design. It was carried out over a period of twelve weeks. Weekly forms, semi-structured interviews, and class discussions were used to collect data on students' reflections, which were then subjected to content analysis. The findings were revealed under the parameters used to define BL, such as mode, sequences of modes, level of integration, and so on. The results showed that students preferred contextualized design that was primarily supported by face-to-face contacts, traditional procedures, and teacher attention and was assisted by the online portion. These results would improve implementation techniques and advance our understanding of low-achieving EFL learners in BL.

Keywords: *blended learning, low-achieving students, perceptions of learners, English as a Foreign Language, productive skills*

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning (BL) creates a hybrid that includes both formal and informal educational activities by combining in-person instruction with online learning components (Hrastinski, 2019; Saliba & Rankine, 2010). These benefits are increased flexibility, autonomy, and interaction (Feng, 2022). Today, an increasing number of universities are emphasizing the use of online tools in conjunction with in-person instruction (Porter et al., 2016; Castro, 2019), as well as teaching with intellectual technological tools (Prasojo et al., 2019). In fact, with the emergence of the Corona-19 pandemic in 2020, blending is no longer a novelty and has become a global obligation. On the other hand, blended instruction poses some challenges and barriers for students. For example, students who lack autonomy, self-regulation, and time management abilities may struggle in online and blended courses due to a mismatch between their learning style and the nature of online instruction (Owston et al., 2013). In addition to that, according to Shimkovich et al. (2022), students miss the opportunity for direct observation and assessment in the classroom setting. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, in particular, face difficulties such as language transfer (Bulqiyah et al., 2021), feelings of

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Submitted: 22.01.2025

Accepted: 11.05.2025



embarrassment (Abdelaziz & Kashinathan, 2021), reluctance to communicate, and poor pronunciation in productive skills (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021).

BL can be challenging, especially for low-achieving students in EFL settings as well. Reis and McCoach (2000, p. 157) define low-achieving as "a severe discrepancy between expected achievement (as measured by standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments) and actual achievement (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations)." These students may struggle with English language skills. As a result, they may receive low grades, participate in fewer class activities, and show little interest in the learning process (DiCerbo et al., 2014). In addition to their difficulties with EFL, these students may have to deal with BL, which does not address their preferences. There are studies related to BL that show low-achieving students may have lower academic achievement and less satisfaction than their normal or high-achieving peers (Owston et al., 2013). More research is needed to understand how students learn EFL through blended instruction, as this could help better understand dropout in higher education (Njenga & Fourie, 2010).

Few studies have examined low-achieving learners' perspectives on their experiences studying productive skills with BL (Aggun, 2022; El-Bassuony, 2016). The purpose of this study was to investigate their perspectives on their experiences, difficulties, and recommendations when applying BL to productive skills in which they need to express themselves. The study's findings could help us better understand them, potentially leading to better use of BL in EFL and saving time and effort from using the incorrect blended instruction. Given the previously mentioned information, the study aims to achieve the following objective:

What are the perspectives of the low-achieving language learners regarding blended learning (BL) as remedial assistance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

BL has garnered significant attention in the field of EFL. Researchers have found that BL contributes to reduced classroom overcrowding, well-designed instruction, an efficient EFL environment, and student satisfaction (Kumar et al., 2021). Further benefits of BL are as follows: individual feedback (Rahman et al., 2020), vast opportunities for writing practice (Liu et al., 2021), increased vocabulary and comprehension (Sari et al., 2021), increasing participation (Isda et al., 2021), and enhanced speaking performance (Wang, 2021). To illustrate, some studies demonstrated that remedial assistance with technology could improve vocabulary (Hu, 2020; Pasicolan, 2021), reading (Zainudin, 2019), productive skills (El-Bassuony, 2016; Aggun, 2022), and grammar skills (Abdelaziz, 2021). There have also been some studies that have aimed specifically to assist low-achieving language learners with the online remediation and have succeeded in leading to improvement (Mori, 2019; Chou et al., 2021; Armana, 2011).

However, for BL to be considered "traditional education" in EFL, it should undergo at least as much research as face-to-face education. Scholars have proposed various frameworks and designs to identify the optimal mode combination, participant role, methodology, content delivery, and more (Banados, 2006; Neumeier, 2005; Picciano, 2009; Goertler, 2012). As a result, educators have limitless opportunities and a wide variety of blends to choose from. Another problem is that some learners, such as underachievers, may resist complex and innovative instruction. While intervention with BL might have a positive effect on students' general performance, it may not help with every aspect of learning, such as self-regulation (Augustine, 2023). Similarly, there is a need to further explore the impact of BL on low-achieving students (Makhoul & Olshtain, 2024).

Indeed, several pertinent studies (Barr et al., 2005; Kobayashi & Little's, 2011) have demonstrated that students' academic performance did not improve, and they expressed dissatisfaction with the technology they were using (Chenoweth et al., 2006). Students face various challenges such as loneliness, silence, identity formation issues (Harrington, 2010), poor reading skills, time management issues (Parmar, 2023), incompatibility with online instruction (Kuama, 2016), and rejection of computers (Stracke, 2007). One more study (Mori, 2019) mentioned that, compared to



overachievers, underachievers did not participate much because some characteristics of the online task hindered them from doing so. It can be concluded the belief that students can learn easier on computers would be a myth (Gregori, 2015; Kleiman, 2000). Designing blended and online instruction to suit the students' needs is crucial for its success. Therefore, the current study aims to address the needs of low-achieving EFL in BL.

METHODOLOGY

Research Setting

The researcher conducted the research in a classroom within a preparatory program at Gaziantep University's Department of Foreign Languages. The reason for choosing this setting was that it was convenient for the researcher, had a huge population of students (approximately 1000 students), and had an intense English schedule. The program prepares students for English entrance exams into engineering departments, where English is the medium of instruction. Students have to take the exam to determine their placement in courses based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The students are placed into modules according to their level. Each module lasts eight weeks, and students must earn a passing grade of at least sixty points to move to the next module. Grades are determined through student evaluation, online assignments, quizzes, portfolios, and exit exams. Lastly, the students have to be at an intermediate level in order to start their engineering program.

Traditional face-to-face instruction for low-achieving EFL

Students who fail a module or fail the final exam must repeat the same level using the same learning materials and curriculum. They are referred to as "repeats" and have the opportunity to revisit the same materials and retry using the same process. The school did not treat low-achieving language learners who failed the A1 elementary course, differently from normally achieving students.

Participants

There were twelve classrooms at the elementary level. The majority of the students passed the module exit exam and started A2. The students who could not succeed at the module exit exam were placed randomly in three classes. They were called "repeat elementary classes". One of these classes was chosen randomly for the aim of the study.

Eleven of the twelve participants in that class were male, and one was female. All were prospective engineering students. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 22 on average. Most of the learners possessed Turkish nationality, except for one Syrian learner. In addition to the administration, all participants consented to their participation and data collection in the blended design, which took place during the entire A1 module (8 weeks) and the first phase of the A2 module (4 weeks). Participants were told their identities would be kept secret and the results would only be used for this study. In addition, ethical approval was taken from the university.

Blended Designs in the Study

The design was conducted over a twelve-week period in 2019. The design was layered into three levels, each with varying content and duration, as outlined below. At the same time, the goal of all three levels was to give the participants more learning opportunities. The goal of recombining the main blended instruction parameters on a weekly or daily basis was to provide learners with alternative learning contexts in which they could succeed. The additional mini-designs were also intended to gather more comprehensive and reliable student feedback by assessing their preferences for different parameter combinations. Writing and speaking classes were chosen to experiment with



BL since these were the skills in which students struggled the most while expressing themselves in English.

Neumeier's parameters (2005)

The current study used Neumeier's parameters (2005) in four ways. The first one was to define BL throughout the study. The second one was to design the feature of BL as remedial assistance for the participants and apply it. The third one was to prepare data collection tools like semi-structured interview questions. The last one was to present the results under relevant parameters for a clear presentation. The following table presents the details of the parameters.

Table 1. The parameters in the framework for designing blends (Neumeier, 2005)

The Parameters	The Options within the Parameters
1. Mode	a) Face-to-face- 10 b) Online-2
2. Distribution of Modes	a) 75 % face-to-face in class and 25% online b) 50 % face-to-face in class and 50% online c) 25 % face-to-face in class and 75% online
3. Sequencing of Modes	a) Isolation b) Parallel Instruction c) Overlapping
4. Level of Integration	a) Optional b) Obligatory
5. Distribution of Learning Content	a) Traditional Instruction b) Online Instruction c) Flipped Instruction d) Introduction of the Content in Class and Practice Online
6. Type of interaction Online	a) Synchronous Interaction b) Synchronous Interaction
7. Involvement of Learning Subjects	a) Studying Alone b) Studying with an Instructor c) Studying with one Partner d) Studying with a Larger Group

The feature of blended instruction as remedial assistance

The researcher determined the parameters and methodology based on previous formal and informal feedback from low-achieving EFL students in the same setting, a review of relevant literature, and her nine-year teaching and research experience in a foreign language school. The results indicated that these language learners need to study the language, break down the units into smaller parts (Efrat, 2019), receive consistent motivation from their teacher, and utilize rich online resources. Furthermore, these students must study the language in a communicative manner, supported by five senses (Avni, 2023).



Based on these conclusions, BL had features to support the students specifically. For example, the design divided the "introduction of yourself" paragraph into smaller components, including "topic, supporting, and concluding sentences", as well as "connectors", "punctuation", and "grammar". Moreover, multimedia presented the content in repetitive ways. For instance, the topic of "introduction of self" in speaking skills was accessible both in person and online. Additionally, the teacher presented the content through texts, pictures, videos, slides, audio recordings, and useful links. One last example of the teacher's close attention was also available. The teachers motivated the students to follow their interests online and interact with the content in speaking and writing forms.

Primary design

The main and static designs were prepared in accordance with the primary schedule of the institution over a period of twelve weeks. The goal is to replicate the main course content online, utilizing a variety of online tools, and surpass the traditional face-to-face methodology.

1. In the classroom, in-person instruction predominated.
2. The teacher went over all of the material in class and reviewed it online.
3. The online component was taught concurrently with in-person teaching.
4. While the online component was optional, in-person attendance was required.
5. The online course was taught asynchronously.
6. Online conversation took place between the students and the instructor as well as between the students and the online information.
7. Production, practice, and presentation were the approaches used.
8. In-person training took place on the university campus, while online instruction could take place at any time and from any location.
9. The online resources included social media apps, Gmail components, online platforms and tools related to the textbooks, and websites for writing and speaking.

Additional mini-designs

In addition to this main design, the researcher added weekly mini-designs by combining the parameters of the core design in different fashions. For example, although the online component of the main design took place asynchronously between learners and online content, in one of the additional mini-designs, the learners and the instructor met on videoconferencing to practise speaking before the final speaking exam. The purpose of re-combining the main blended instruction parameters on a weekly basis was to offer learners alternative learning contexts in which they could succeed.

Extended design component

The researcher encouraged students to write and communicate in English online in addition to the prescribed course material. This section served as a comprehensive overview of various language skills covered in the main course book. For example, the students searched for an influencer online based on their interest topic, found their introduction video in their series, and left a comment under the video.



The students' participation in the implementation

The students had free accounts on a variety of platforms, including mobile phone applications, Wix.com, Gmail, WhatsApp, and course platforms like Longman Press. They were used according to the aim of and content of the course. The number of hours the student spent was not calculated formally because the online tools wanted to be utilised were dynamic and varied. Conversely, quantitatively, the number of tasks, homework, and mini-projects completed were recorded. At the end of 12 weeks, the percentage of homework completed during the blended learning period was 57. The teacher formally graded these parts, accounting for 5% of the overall assessment. The students' online participation was not obligatory or graded during the extended design. The teacher motivated the students by having individual sessions in the classroom.

Collecting Data

Semi-structured interviews

Both before and after implementation, semi-structured interviews were carried out. The second series of interviews aimed to collect additional information about students' experiences, while the first set of interviews tried to understand students' opinions on blended instruction. Structured questions like "What has been your experience with each component of blended instruction?" and "Would you compare the parameters with each other?" were asked at the start of the interviews. They then moved on to less structured questions designed to elicit more information about their decisions as well as the rationale behind them.

Reflection forms

On forms created utilizing Gibbs's (1988) reflective cycle, students were also invited to write down their reflections once a week. These forms were always returned to the researcher the same day they were completed, giving students the opportunity to comment on the many parameter combinations in the mini-designs before they forgot their original concepts. For example, the form included this question:

- *Taking into account the material introduction, practice, and feedback, how have you applied blended instruction this week to improve your writing abilities? How did you feel as you finished the writing exercises? What caused you to experience these emotions?*

Classroom discussion

Each month, three classroom discussions were facilitated related to the parameters to triangulate the data. During these three discussions, driven by semi-structured interview questions and reflective forms, learners commented on the combination of online and face-to-face instruction they had been receiving.

- *What do you think of the implementation in general? If you were the designer, how would you modify the implementation in a way that would suit you?*

Analysis of the Data

During each interview segment and class discussion, participants' answers were audibly recorded via a mobile phone application, and the transcription was done by hand. Seven parameters involved in the BL, including mode, sequence of mode, and others, were the focus of the content-based data analysis methodologies (see Table 1). The participants thoroughly described nearly all of these factors, delving into great detail about their advantages and disadvantages. To determine when, for how long, in what way, why, and with whom each option connected to a parameter had been



useful, the researcher presented the parameters in a more neutral manner rather than using terms like "weak", "unpopular", "better", or "poor". Thematic analysis was used for reflective forms. The findings of all reflections on each parameter are shown in the results part of this paper so that the usefulness of the parameters may be understood from the viewpoint of the learners. Each student may struggle differently than the others, and some of the issues were particular to each person. Under the pertinent sections are direct quotes from the students who offer a comprehensive analysis of their experience.

The Role of the Researcher

The researcher also served as a mentor for the implementation process. Several methods to prevent the researchers' bias were followed to guarantee the validity and reliability of the study. Firstly, two other researchers were invited, who were also teachers in the same setting, to observe the entire process. Prior to implementation, these two researchers provided feedback on the design and checked the content analysis of the qualitative data to provide an objective external perspective. Secondly, during the implementation process, the teacher did not participate in the assessment of productive skills. The school employed a double-blind marking process, using a set of specific criteria that the student received in advance. The teacher could only grade 5% of the total assessment, which was a teacher-only assessment. Lastly, the teacher conducted the second phase of the semi-structured interview at the end of the term, when she was no longer teaching. Consequently, the teacher gathered part of the qualitative data when she had no authority over the students.

RESULTS

Under the relevant parameters, the students' justifications, remarks, examples, and specifics about their experiences were documented. The results have been revealed in accordance with the parameters in the framework for designing blends (Neumeier, 2005), presented in Table 1.

1. Mode

10 preferred face-to-face while 2 out of 12 students preferred online writing instruction.

The students were asked to assess the online and in-person modalities from their point of view and to justify their preference for one over the other. The following table summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of both in-person and online instruction:

Table 2. The summary of the findings related to the first parameter, Mode

Mode	Strengths	Weaknesses
1.Face-to-Face	The Need for a Building	Occupation of Excessive Space
	The Familiar and Usual Way of Instruction	Source of Complicated Feelings
	Professionals Hands	
	Here and Now Learning	
	Strong Network	



2. Online	Pace Regulation	Too Many Simultaneous Problems
	Connecting with the World	Disadvantages of Being Limitless
	Preparing for the Future	Locked at Home

Analysis of face-to-face instruction

The majority of learners preferred face-to-face training. Below is a discussion of the face-to-face mode's stated advantages, which are followed by a list of its alleged drawbacks.

The Necessity of a Physical Space: Seven students think that the need for a real location to write and speak English is what makes in-person training so effective. They viewed this necessity as a benefit, since it often ensures a silent, comfortable place that is far away from the distractions of home life. One of the students gave an example for that saying “*In our house, there is always a ringing doorbell, an unexpected guest, an invitation to drink coffee, or the responsibility to cook food.*” With the aid of a board, chairs, supplies, and a projector, the physical space of the school acts as a haven for students who are unable to concentrate on writing and vocabulary study while on the go.

The Familiar and Usual Way of Instruction: Three students achieved their dream of attending university by private tutoring or attending university themselves, feeling confident in their ability to learn face-to-face. They prefer to experience important information in a classroom setting, with the guidance of an experienced instructor, rather than relying on tedious online instructions. One student asked a question to explain that “*Imagine you want to try a different exotic food for the first time. Would you prefer to read it from somewhere on your own or have somebody with you in the kitchen who can demonstrate how to blend the ingredients in the best way and give you the tips?*”

Professionals Hands: One of the students underlined the importance of the school's quality and the English instructor's experience, which determined the most effective methods of instruction, schedule, materials, and activities. Another student emphasized “*I am not an expert, but the teachers and the school are experts. They know what to do better than me.*” One more student expressed concerns about their ability to function independently without the school's close physical connection, as this was their first exposure to a foreign language, and felt it was unnecessary to waste time on whether online instruction would help them speak or write.

Here and Now Learning: All of the students preferred being at the center of instruction, focusing on acquiring and practicing new language knowledge. They appreciated the social environment provided by schools. Even small interactions, such as tardiness, apology, and being corrected by instructors were give as examples. This face-to-face and real-time learning was more exciting, memorable, and useful for them compared to watching online videos. One student told an anecdote about that: “*One day my friend was late for class, attempt to apologize in English, he could not remember the words, but the teacher looked into his eyes and sighted. It was funny and we all laughed.*”

Strong Networks: Two students think that studying with people who share their goal of learning a language will help them learn it more easily. They show an interest in joining a support group that will enable them to communicate, grow, and learn. Relationships between students are stronger in the classroom setting than in online forums because it enables them to share experiences, moments, and atmospheres. For instance, one student mentioned “*I became friends with a student from the other class who was planning to participate in the work and travel cultural exchange program. He explained all of the details about going to the USA. I want to do it next year. But first I need to learn English*”



Occupation of Excessive Space: In addition to the strengths, students reported some weaknesses in their face-to-face English learning environment. They struggled with listening to lectures, completing self-access, studying for exams, writing fluent paragraphs, and so on. One of the students criticized that, saying, “Every day *school, school, school...I do not have time for hobbies or extra online time.*” The students highlight the need to cut on the intensive classroom time and extend their study beyond class time.

Source of Complicated Feelings: One student had different feelings related to face-to-face class. Some felt ashamed when he was seen by their previous classmates repeating their course while their classmates advanced. In addition to that some hardworking students were often forced to complete activities with uninteresting students, leading to increased anxiety during quizzes and exams. One of them complained that “*I am not fond of my new classmates. They do not want to learn at all.*” Lastly, boredom was also a negative feeling among students. Overall, the learning materials were just “repeating themselves”.

Evaluating online instruction

The study found that online instruction was less popular among students than face-to-face instruction. The study analyzed students' perceived strengths and weaknesses of this mode, starting with strengths and ending with weaknesses.

A Rich Way of Delivery: Online instruction offers students an alternative way to engage with learning content. These allows them to choose from various materials. As one of the students put it “*Of course pictures, slides, videos, voice recordings, Microsoft Word documents, PDF documents, discussion forums, and websites are much better than the board.*”

Pace Regulation: Repeat students often require repetitive information and longer learning periods for grammar and vocabulary. For three students, online instruction meant less pressure on understanding and skill development within limited time. One of the students observed that “*I cannot repeat the pronunciation of a new word for five times in the classroom, but I can do it at home online.*” Another student described himself as a “*slow writer*” and preferred to “*go online*”.

Connecting with the World: Five students reported that they were curious about other countries, cultures, and people from around the world. They felt that face-to-face instruction was insufficient for creating an environment in which they could learn correct pronunciation and authentic language use. In this regard, they felt that online instruction—especially via tools such as Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, Gmail, discussion forums, and other online communities—enabled them to extend their communications beyond the limited classroom space and feel like a world citizen. One student asked “*What is your chance of meeting a Spanish at school?*”.

Preparing for the Future: Five students connoted technology-supported instruction with innovation and quality instruction. Moreover, most of them expressed that they wanted to earn well-paid and competitive jobs at international companies which utilize advanced technology. As one of the students stated “*using a pencil on a piece of paper will not prepare me for responding to an email.*”

Too Many Simultaneous Problems: Online learning has its strengths, but students with an A1 level find it challenging to achieve proficiency in English within it. Although they felt that it could significantly benefit them, they also felt that learning to operate with online components could be overwhelming. For instance, they must understand how a computer functions, how to avoid or eliminate a virus, how to change the language of a word, how to convert a file on Apple into Windows, how to organize the files for videos, and how to deal with weak internet connection. While these all may seem like minor problems, when students experience them simultaneously, with limited help, patience, or backgrounds of online instruction, these problems may influence students to dismiss the foreign language learning content. One student explained why he once dropped learning; “*I was*



trying to watch a video sent by the teacher. I needed to download a program to open it. Then I thought I needed to sleep instead of working on that."

Disadvantages of Being Limitless: Three students preferred a schedule with less flexibility in terms of time, place, and activities. They desired to be "*pushed or motivated daily by an instructor or classmates*". In this case, online instruction may not work for them as efficiently as it would for hard-working, highly-motivated students.

Locked at Home: While one student praised online instruction for saving them time, money, and energy as they would not need to travel to the university, another student argued that "*face-to-face instruction was a reason to wake up early*", leave their homes, and enlarge their zones. These students did not prefer to remain in their home or at their university residences, as these environments lacked the stimulants necessary for improving their English.

2. Distribution of Modes

The percentage of online instruction preferred by learners was 27.08 while it was 72.92 for face-to-face.

The learners did not give reasons for their choice with the distribution of the modes. They underlined that they did not wish to study productive skills by staring at a computer screen for a long period of time. As a result, they did not prefer online to be a high percentage. However, there was one student who did not wish to attend face-to-face class at all.

3. Sequencing of Modes

4 students preferred that face-to-face delivery be parallel to online delivery. 5 preferred that face-to-face delivery be complementary to online delivery while 3 preferred that face-to-face instruction be isolated from online instruction.

Parallel instruction: The first reason why four students preferred that the delivery of face-to-face and online instruction be parallel to one another is that these learners wanted all of the content to be delivered in class and supported online in order that they could learn more efficiently and in more detail without missing any points. They expressed that this type of delivery would give them space and time to review what they had learned during school on a given day. A final advantage was that if learners were to miss the content for some reasons such as lack of attendance or difficulty level of the content, they could access the material online.

Complementary instruction: Five learners preferred the introduction of content in class so they may become more easily engaged. Later, they would be able to continue their studies in their own space and relate the content to more extensive related information online. Thus, they preferred to reserve face-to-face instruction for more complicated topics and continue practicing online with relatively more ease.

Isolated instruction: Three learners did not see the advantage of engaging with the same content both in class and online. These learners felt that they should "*get what they need*" during class through quality instruction. Rather, they preferred to explore interesting and different content which would be more motivational, such as the extended component of the BL in the current study.

4. Level of Integration

8 students preferred online instruction to be optional, and 4 preferred it to be obligatory.

Obligatory choice: The first reason for that choice was lack of self-regulation. Four learners preferred mandatory tasks like attendance, exam passing, and homework to ensure they could effectively learn



English, as they did not trust themselves to regulate their studies independently. The second reason was developing connection. They grew closer to their teacher, who was able to watch them more intently and learn more about their learning preferences and habits or develop closer relationships with their classmates. The final reason was being afraid of going off track. Some students discovered that going to class or doing online exercises helped them stay on course and adhere to the syllabus. They would miss school every day for trivial reasons if it weren't required, which would make it harder for them to follow the lessons when they returned.

Evaluating optional choice: On the other hand, eight learners thought that obligatory instruction would not contribute to their levels of understanding or productive language skills. They complained that commuting to school was a waste of time. They believed that if they were not going to learn from certain methods, obligations could not help them. One of the learners mentioned that obligatory attendance was an outdated concept. He argued that *“In today’s world, learners should not be forced during class time to complete activities against their will.”*

5. Distribution of Learning Content

8 students preferred traditional face-to-face instruction, 3 students preferred topics to be introduced in class but practiced online, and 1 preferred flipped instruction. None of the students preferred that course content be introduced and practiced entirely online.

Traditional instruction: Eight learners stated that the best way to learn was the way with which they were already familiar: traditional face-to-face instruction. They felt safe during face-to-face instruction, which they felt was important for them. Moreover, they preferred step-by-step instruction such as the introduction of a topic followed by related practice and feedback. One student stated *“when I returned home, I don’t want to think about studying certain content from the beginning.”*

Introduction of the content in class and practice online: Three learners mentioned that they would prefer a decrease in class time. They believed they spent too much time at school and with little results. Thus, they preferred that content be introduced in class and practiced online at home.

Flipped instruction: One learner preferred the idea of using class time only for speaking or writing practice. With flipped instruction, he could reserve class time for interesting and interactive activities rather than sampling following the same course routine. However, some other learners also mentioned that they did not like the idea of having content introduced while at home since for them, initially learning about the content itself was the most difficult part of their learning.

Online instruction: A few learners mentioned that online instruction was a type of learning with which they felt comfortable, but they did not want it to replace face-to-face classes. At the same time, face-to-face instruction could be available for them, so they would still have a concrete institution to support their studies.

6. Involvement of Learning Subjects

5 students preferred to study alone and 4 preferred studying with an instructor. 2 preferred to study with a partner and 1 preferred to study in a larger group.

Studying Alone: For five learners, studying on their own was essential since they viewed learning a foreign language as a subject. They individually should be able to comprehend it. They referred to grammar and vocabulary as examples of content which they preferred to study alone. In this regard, technology meant that they had their own time, and space.

Studying with an Instructor: The instructor was considered an important parameter both in face-to-face and online instruction by four students. They believed that studying with an instructor would assist them in achieving their learning goals in the simplest and most direct way. They also felt that the



instructor knew the best individual paths for them due to her extensive teaching experience. Moreover, some felt that instructors serve the role of a companion throughout the journey of learning a foreign language in that they provide emotional support such as motivation and confirmation.

Studying with One Partner: Studying with one partner was a preferred option because it would assist them in following instructions and learning content while ensuring that their ideas and voices be heard. They felt that in a larger group, they might have to compete with dominant personalities and my lack opportunities for engagement. One learner emphasized the quality of the partner as an important factor. They stated that they preferred partners with whom they would feel safe in attempting to produce the language either in writing or in speaking. Likewise, learners felt that in some instances they may prefer an online partner whom they had never met in-person so that they would feel less pressure and insecurity.

Studying with a Larger Group: One student preferred this option in which more interesting dialogue might emerge, more spontaneous language might be produced, and less pressure might be felt. He mentioned that he left comments in an online conversation in English. He said that *“I am happy when I got likes on my comments online.”*

8. Type of Online Interaction

While 4 students preferred synchronous instruction, 8 students preferred asynchronous online instruction.

Synchronous Interaction: Four learners explained that synchronous online instruction felt “alive” in that it ensured immediate, interactive, and interesting learning. In fact, some online tools such as Zoom, Skype, and videoconferences are similar to face-to-face interaction. This type of instruction could prepare them for spontaneous interactions in question-and-answer sessions following the instruction.

One disadvantage mentioned was when it was designed in a way that required too much preparation, it was overwhelming for the students alongside their face-to-face instruction and class-related responsibilities.

Asynchronous Interaction: This type of interaction was beneficial for eight students in the sense that learners could engage in online activities whenever they chose. They could even skip some sections of online assignments. One problem was that when it was mandatory and included dense content as well as a long session duration, learners stated that *“I cannot stand nonstop online activities.”*

DISCUSSION

Elementary students who were repeating their course of study after failing an exam were included in the qualitative study. For twelve weeks of the study, the students employed BL as remedial help. "What are the perspectives of the low-achieving EFL learners regarding blended learning (BL) as remedial assistance? was the research topic. To address this subject, semi-structured interviews, monthly class discussions, and weekly reflection sheets were used. Under the relevant parameters, the students' justifications, remarks, examples, and specifics about their experiences were documented.

The study examined the strengths and weaknesses of face-to-face and online instruction and concluded the advantages of BL surpass its drawbacks for low-achieving students. To begin with, traditional instruction provided a sense of safety and ensured students got what they needed from each lesson. Students believed that a physical space with a familiar way of instruction was essential for effective learning, providing a quiet, comfortable, and known environment away from distractions. They also valued strong networks formed through school experiences, which increased their involvement in EFL. These results align with the findings of another scholar (Zhu et al., 2021), who discovered that maintaining connections with peers and receiving feedback from teachers inspired learners and improved the quality of their work. The students may require one-on-one communication



and attention from their teachers, as well as collaboration with their peers in the classroom (Shimkovich et al., 2022). However, they also reported the long, tedious lessons, and homework assignments as less enjoyable than expected, leading to increased anxiety and boredom. In summary, despite its limitations, face-to-face mode allowed them to differentiate themselves from other elements of their environment that were detrimental to EFL.

Online instruction offers a rich way of delivery through various formats for the needs of diverse students (Ming et al., 2016; Gulnaz et al., 2020). It enables students to engage with the world and acquire authentic language use. However, it may prove overwhelming for students with an A1 level, particularly those who lack self-discipline, procrastinate, struggle with complex content, or find long computer screen periods boring. Furthermore, while synchronous online instruction provides immediate, interactive, and captivating learning experiences, it can be overwhelming due to the need for too much time, energy, and preparation. Asynchronous interaction provides flexibility in engaging in online activities, but it may lead to a loss of patience and interest when mandatory online instruction includes dense content and long sessions. Online may also be inefficient for these students who need to prepare for exams in a shorter time. Overall, students' success in online instruction depends on their ability to adapt to their busy schedules and unique learning environments.

It can be concluded that some learners may select specific options to conceal their personal weaknesses through self-regulation or to escape the burden of overwhelming content. For instance, some learners advocated for traditional face-to-face instruction with a one-to-one teacher to alleviate the burden of online learning, while others advocated for solitary online study to circumvent peer pressure during in-person language practice. In the same way, obligatory choices promote self-regulation and connection, and lastly preventing going off track. Similarly, while some findings in the current study suggest flexibility with the parameters, further analysis suggests that an attendance policy, a structured syllabus, and teacher support should contextualize and limit them. Lastly, a few students preferred in-class introduction of information over flipped instruction, attributing this preference to a deficiency in self-regulation. This contrasted with other studies that suggest online introduction of content, followed by practice in class (Kong, 2014; O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015; El-Bassuony, 2016), and that found learners can determine when and how to utilize the available resources effectively (Ja'ashan, 2015; Mulyadi et al., 2020). These contractions may be due to studies using normal-achieving students, which may not apply to low-achieving students. They require their own fieldwork in BL to avoid negative consequences.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DESIGNING BL

In light of the previously mentioned information, the following features are proposed for designing BL as remedial assistance for low-achieving students.

Involvement of the students: EFL educators should design blends which incorporate their learners (Öncü, & Bichelmeyer, 2021). The reason for that is each student has different learning experiences with BL. While one learner mentioned that he could not stand staring at a computer screen for a long time, another learner complained that face-to-face instruction occupied too much of his time so that he did not have his own extracurricular time or space for pursuing his online study. Furthermore, some learners may choose certain options to disguise their weaknesses, for example, preferring that face-to-face instruction be obligatory in order to relieve themselves of the responsibility of online learning or preferring to study online in isolation in order to avoid social pressure among their classmates. For this reason, designs should not be static or linear. One option would be to leave a small portion of the blend to be determined at a later time with students or when the opportunity arises.

Multilayered and dynamic blends: Another implication is to design multilayered and dynamic blends. The results showed that the exact percentage of each mode did not matter to students. It can be concluded that educators employing BL should not focus in advance on certain percentages of the modes or the combination of the parameters. In a sense, educators should try to mimic the already



existent proportion of face-to-face and online interactions that are part of the learners' routine lives. To illustrate, when learners may awaken in the morning, they immediately reach for their mobile phones in order to connect with their families on Skype, as they are separated from their families while attending the university. Next, they might organize a meeting with friends via a WhatsApp group since they often feel like socializing. During the meeting, they might check the latest news regarding their favorite football team. Likewise, small- and short-term blended designs based on small projects should mirror the lives of the target learners to some extent. Introducing content, practicing it, and receiving feedback could mirror the normal routines of the learners in mixed ways. For example, the combination of the modes could connect a) a face-to-face context with other face-to-face contexts, b) online modes with face-to-face modes, or c) an online context with another online one.

Starting with traditional and moving towards online: The reflections of the participants showed that the majority praised traditional face-to-face instruction, followed by an obligatory attendance policy and a teacher delivering the content in class. Fewer students preferred the inclusion of flipped instruction in their writing or speaking lessons. These results contradicted those of some other studies which proposed that content be introduced online and practiced or further discussed in class (Kong, 2014; O'Flaherty and Phillips, 2015). On the other hand, there were some students that linked online with preparation for their future or with connecting with the world. As a solution, BL designs should begin with traditional face-to-face mode. Later on, the blends might transition from face-to-face instruction to online instruction, from an available language context to an international context, and from core structured instruction to less structured instruction.

Include more support: BL might be seen as an easy way (Ashraf et al., 2021) or a cost-effective method of instruction. However, the results of that study showed that low-achieving students might cease to learn when they encounter a technological problem, be reluctant to speak with their unwilling classmates, or be overwhelmed with the large quantity of asynchronous online. Hence, they may need linguistic, technological, or affective support while studying. Preparing a blend, educators should be aware of the responsibility of addressing low-achieving students who are already struggling to learn a language. To conclude, BL that supports students should be prepared by educators.

CONCLUSION

The research aimed to understand the opinions of low-achieving students on the parameters used in BL designed as remedial assistance in productive skills. Students emphasized the benefits of face-to-face instruction with obligatory aspects as offering a physical space, familiar and usual teaching methods, the close attention of an instructor, keeping focused "in the heart of instruction," and providing stronger networks. Additionally, they reported complicated feelings in that context, such as feeling anxious, bored, and ashamed to be an underachiever with other unmotivated classmates. Similarly, the students appreciated some of the features of online learning, such as its rich delivery method (Uygur, 2022), its ability to regulate speed, and its ability to connect with the world and international job opportunities. Moreover, while the synchronous aspect of online learning offers immediate, interactive learning, it demands a significant amount of time, energy, and preparation. On the other hand, asynchronous interaction enables learners to participate in online activities at their convenience. In brief, the students tend to select aspects of the parameters that provide one-to-one support for their language learning struggles and their inability to create an environment conducive to English learning, even though they acknowledge the benefits of innovative technology and methods.

This study had limitations, including a small participant count and an equal gender ratio. Additionally, logistical constraints were present, as the study was conducted within a formal preparatory English program, which limits the researcher's ability to design unique content for "alternative" instruction for low-achieving EFL learners. Further research related to alternative instruction with BL should be conducted.



Ethical Statement: The authors confirm that ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Committee of Çağ University, as outlined in the ethical permission document dated 02/01/2019.

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