

Examining the Moderating Role of Learning Styles in the Relationship Between Blended Learning and Iraqi EFL Learners Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the moderating role of learning styles in the relationship between blended learning and intercultural communication competence of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Iraq. This study is a descriptive-survey of applied type and correlational in terms of the relationships between variables. The statistical population of this study is Iraqi learners participating in English language courses, of which a total of 255 were selected using purposive sampling and questionnaires were distributed among them. The data of this study were collected using standard questionnaires. Also, SmartPLS3 statistical software was used for statistical analysis. According to the results obtained, blended learning has an effect on learners' intercultural communication competence and learning styles also have a moderating role in the relationship between blended learning and intercultural communication competence of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Iraq.

Keywords: blended learning, learning styles, intercultural communicative competence, EFL

1. Introduction

Language and culture are inherently interconnected, and this interrelationship has been repeatedly emphasized in the field of language teaching. Language teaching in the present era focuses not only on teaching language skills but also on how to use language in ways that are socially and culturally appropriate; this is referred to as the intercultural dimension of language teaching [1]. Language learners always need to have the tools to communicate with others in diverse cultural contexts and participate in interactions, and ultimately be able to increase their intercultural communication competence. In fact, intercultural communication competence (ICC) is defined as the ability that allows an individual to successfully communicate appropriately in various intercultural situations and contexts. This ability has become a national and international requirement and an important ability for everyone in today's modern world [2]. In modern English language teaching methods, the practical use of language in real-life communicative environments has become the main goal because language learning is not just about focusing on grammatical rules or memorizing vocabulary and course content. In fact, it is the acquisition of communication competencies, especially intercultural communication competencies, which facilitate globalization and internationalization [3].

In recent years, digital advances and the emergence of web technology have provided countless opportunities to improve learners' communication skills and have revolutionized the field of learning and acquiring intercultural communicative competence of language learners (EFL). Online learning, which was used as an emergency measure during COVID-19, is now a way to modify traditional teaching methods and provides a wide range of opportunities for teachers and learners of second languages [4]. Blended learning has become a mainstream teaching method after COVID-19, which uses various online tools such as video conferencing, online forums, and course management systems. These

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platforms can help teachers deliver educational content effectively while also allowing them to use face-to-face methods [5].

Blended learning, which is rooted in information and communication technologies, integrates traditional and online teaching methods and seeks to reduce the limitations of traditional methods and increase the productivity of the Amoran language. The results of the study by Bao and Yunus show that language learners who are taught using blended methods have higher satisfaction in learning and completing their courses [6]. An important point about blended learning is that this educational approach is consistent with many different learning styles. In this regard, the learning style theory states that blended learning can meet the needs of learners who have different tendencies in learning and understanding educational subjects by providing an appropriate context of educational activities with different learning styles. Finally, it can be said that blended learning, along with the use of an appropriate learning style, can be a very good complement to teaching and improving the interactions of learners, even learners from different cultures, which will have a positive effect on increasing the intercultural communication competence of English language learners [3].

Finally, the material presented in the introduction of the study provides a good background for examining the relationship between blended learning, learning styles, and intercultural communication competence among Iraqi learners. Thus, our aim in this study is to examine the role of learning styles in the relationship between blended learning and intercultural communication competence of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners.

In recent years, with the widespread use of digital tools in education, blended learning (BL) has been widely used in foreign language teaching. The reason for this is that many advantages have been recognized in this teaching method, such as the ability to combine traditional and online teaching methods [7]. In this regard, Tubman has shown that blended learning has a positive effect on the level of interactions between language learners and improves their learning experience and increases their concentration [3]. Blended learning has caused students to not only memorize the material but also pay attention to the relevant concept, which can increase their enthusiasm for learning and further interaction. Chu et al. believe that online learning has the potential to become one of the important learning methods in the 21st century [8]. This educational approach, by combining traditional and online teaching methods and employing various techniques, including face-to-face interaction or the use of digital technology, can help teachers improve their reasoning and knowledge transfer skills, thus helping them develop students' teaching skills [9].

By examining the empirical background in recent years, it is possible to clearly understand the relationship between the blended learning approach and diverse learning styles. Blended learning allows learners to follow the learning path with greater accuracy and enthusiasm by combining traditional and online methods, and in addition, the use of their favorite learning style by the teacher doubles the level of enthusiasm for purposeful learning and satisfaction with the training course. In fact, by using multidimensional educational tools and activities appropriate to the learner's learning style, an environment can be provided that provides a suitable basis for meeting the needs of these individuals [10].

In this way, by using the appropriate learning style in a blended learning environment, a suitable platform can be created for teachers and learners in which the learner's motivation for education increases and causes learners to step beyond the shell of traditional education and communicate with many people inside and outside the country by using online tools. This platform has created a suitable opportunity for visual and auditory interaction between people from diverse cultures, which causes learners to use the language practically, improve their intercultural communication competence, and realize the sense of effectiveness of the English language in everyday life, which results in increased motivation for learning, cooperation, and self-efficacy in learners [6].

In a globalized society with a large number of multicultural perspectives, it seems essential to develop communicative and intercultural competences and apply them in the learning process through a process of deep understanding, research and evaluation of assumptions. In the present era, intercultural communication competence and intercultural skills have become vital and essential aspects for learning and effective communication. Numerous studies have been conducted on the methods of developing intercultural communication skills in professional educational settings and for language development [11]. The importance of intercultural communication competence is well recognized worldwide, many studies have focused on understanding the structure of intercultural

communication competence and how to develop intercultural communication competence in the context of a foreign language [2], [12] [13]. However, few studies have fully examined the relationship between blended learning and ICC. In this regard, it can be said that blended learning can provide opportunities for language learners to interact with other people from different cultures through online interactions, so that learners become familiar with the way of thinking, values, and communication patterns through online activities, group discussions, and exchanges with classmates and sometimes people from other cultures. Such experiences can help language learners become more sensitive to cultural differences, express their own perspectives, and learn many skills such as flexibility in interactions [3].

2. Research Method

In this study, we examined Iraqi learners who participated in English language courses and selected 255 of them using a purposive sampling method and distributed the Tang and Chow Blended Learning Readiness Questionnaire, Fantini's (2006) Intercultural Communication Competency Questionnaire, and Fleming and Mills' Learning Styles Questionnaire among them. The validity and reliability of the questionnaires were also examined and confirmed in the study. The data that was collected was analyzed using the structural equation modeling method and PLS3 software.

3. Result

The data were analyzed in two parts. First, the central and dispersion indices were examined in the descriptive statistics section. The estimated mean of blended learning ($m=4.02$) showed that this index is acceptable for learners and indicates the effectiveness of this learning method for Iraqi language learners. In addition, the average learning style score based on the questionnaire results was 3.76, and the intercultural communication competency scores also showed an average of 3.62, indicating the desired level of intercultural communication between learners from different cultures.

In the second stage, the research model was evaluated and the following pre-tests were conducted. Internal consistency reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR), which showed strong internal consistency with values above 0.70. Convergent validity was also examined through the average variance extracted (AVE), in which all constructs exceeded the value of 0.50, indicating confirmation of convergent validity. Divergent validity was also confirmed using the Fornell-Larker criterion. These tests demonstrated and ensured the distinction of each construct from other constructs, so it can be said that there is no overlap between the measured constructs.

Table 1. Results of Validity and Reliability Analysis of the Variables

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Online learning	0.758	0.799	0.509
Instructor-student interaction	0.767	0.804	0.526
Flexibility	0.799	0.808	0.564
Use of technology	0.760	0.797	0.595
Learner self-regulation	0.751	0.767	0.538
BL	0.880	0.898	0.515
Attitudes	0.744	0.832	0.504
Knowledge	0.769	0.846	0.530
Skills	0.785	0.796	0.541
Critical Awareness Cultural	0.740	0.744	0.532
CLL	0.899	0.914	0.558
Reading/Writing	0.772	0.790	0.533
Visual	0.766	0.755	0.540
Auditory	0.852	0.783	0.530
Kinesthetic	0.717	0.733	0.514
LS	0.844	0.873	0.579

The results of the model fit indices in Table 2 indicate that the coefficient of determination (R^2) has taken an acceptable value, the model quality index (Q^2) was also reported to be more than 0.35, which indicates the quality of the model fit. The goodness of fit index (GOF) is also within the range that indicates the goodness of the fitted model.

In general, the set of statistical indices in Table 2 confirms the validity of the proposed structural model and shows that the model is sufficient for path analysis and hypothesis testing.

Table 2. Results of Goodness-of-Fit Assessment of the Model

	R Square	Q ²	GOF
Online learning	0.581	0.38	0.633
Instructor-student interaction	0.676	0.41	
Flexibility	0.622	0.36	
Use of technology	0.616	0.39	
Learner self-regulation	0.670	0.41	
BL	-----	0.40	
Attitudes	-----	0.35	
Knowledge	0.831	0.36	
Skills	0.719	0.38	
Critical Cultural Awareness	0.741	0.35	
CLL	0.666	0.36	
Reading/Writing	-----	0.36	
Visual	0.525	0.37	
Auditory	0.798	0.40	
Kinesthetic	0.554	0.40	
LS	-----	0.39	

In continuation of the structural model analysis, the results of path analysis showed that blended learning (BL) improves intercultural communication competence (CLL) by increasing intercultural interactions. Also, the use of different and diverse learning styles (LS) has a moderating role in the relationship between blended learning and intercultural communication competence and improves this relationship.

Table 3. Results of research hypotheses

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
BL -> CLL	0.640	0.640	0.071	8.977	0.000
BL*LS -> CLL	0.252	0.256	0.119	2.108	0.019
LS -> CLL	0.305	0.315	0.095	3.221	0.001

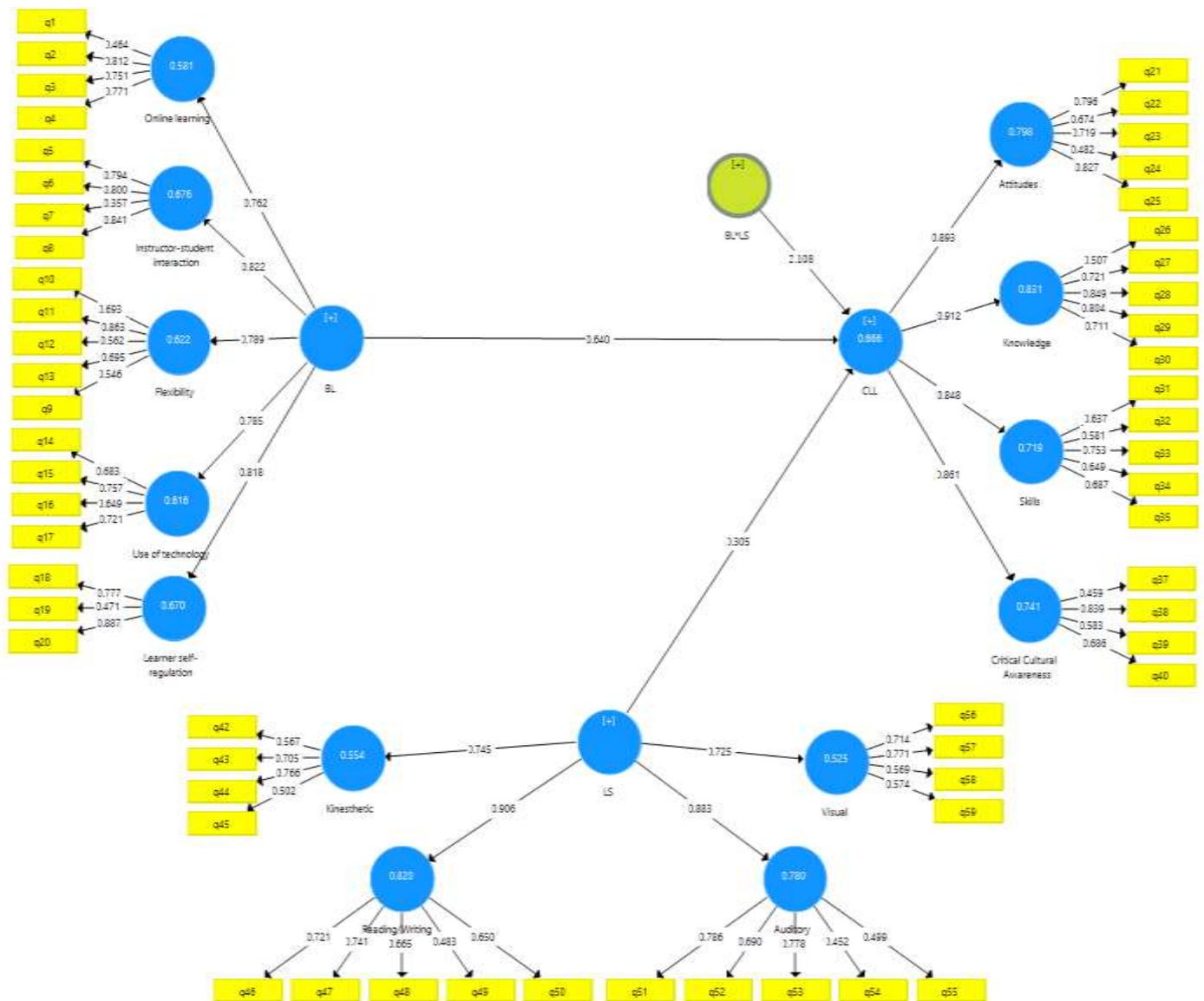


Figure 2. Significance Model of the Study (t-Value Statistics)

Technological advances in recent years have brought about significant advances in the field of blended learning, and these advances have also responded to a wide range of students' educational needs [14]. Blended learning is one of these innovative approaches that has led to the decline of traditional educational methods, which were often carried out face-to-face and in the classroom, and methods similar to the online education approach are being used more. This change in the educational paradigm has led to the integration of traditional and digital learning environments and has provided a comprehensive and engaging experience for the learner. In fact, in this educational method, students can access a wide range of educational methods such as online discussions, simulations, and multimedia interactions by utilizing digital capabilities and information and communication technology [15].

Blended learning, as mentioned, is an innovative method that enables online visual interaction for people across borders and provides immediate and effective feedback for language learners and their teachers. In fact, learners studying in online learning environments can easily take advantage of the practical benefits of language learning, communicate with other people in different countries and cultures, interact, use the knowledge of the other party, learn more, and improve their intercultural

communication competence. The benefits mentioned in this study and the results obtained are evidence that blended learning optimizes educational outcomes by improving the level of intercultural interactions of learners and should be seriously included in traditional classrooms in Iraq and its high potential to improve learners' progress is used.

The results of our research are in line with many studies [5] [8]. These studies have pointed out the effectiveness of blended learning and learning styles in English language learners. Bao and Yunus also stated that blended learning environments can create a high level of satisfaction after completing the training course due to the results they have in optimizing the level of education [6]. One of the effective factors in creating satisfaction in individuals is that blended learning is mainly in line with the learning styles preferred by learners. Thus, when blended learning is used alongside the appropriate learning style, the rate of information absorption and processing among learners increases and as a result, education becomes more optimal. Teachers also confirm this issue. In their opinion, special attention should be paid to the interests and preferences of students in teaching. In fact, adopting traditional teaching methods without flexibility only leads to vocabulary retention without effectiveness and acceptable results. Therefore, teachers should motivate their students to learn by incorporating the appropriate learning style along with the blended learning approach, and give them the opportunity to use new learning tools so that they can free themselves from the constraints of traditional education and achieve deep and practical knowledge. Knowledge that can practically help them use their learning effectively in different spatial and temporal situations.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that blended learning is an effective pedagogical strategy to foster the development of intercultural communicative competence among Iraqi EFL learners, particularly when learning styles play a salient moderating role in promoting this association. The results show that the integration of online with face to face learning allows for flexibility and gives learners exposure to diverse cultural settings, and supports meaningful interaction and thus has a positive impact on learners' intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills and critical cultural awareness. Additionally, the findings reinforce that the contribution of blended learning on intercultural communicative competence can be further enhanced if teaching styles (visual, auditory, reading/writing and kinesthetic) intend to meet the various needs of the learners because the learning style tendentially produces the highest impact on blended learning when instruction style aligns with learners' preferred mode of learning. The implications of these findings in EFL situations, particularly those in which the educational environment is multicultural and globalized, emphasize the necessity of learner-centered, and flexible instructional designs. Pedagogical implications from this study indicate that EFL practitioners and curriculum developers in Iraq should adopt blended learning approaches in a systematic manner while being mindful of different learning style preferences, in order to implement more inclusive, motivational and culturally aware language teaching. It can help increase levels of engagement, intercultural awareness, and communicative ability in a way that often reaches far beyond the four corners of a classroom. Suggestions for future studies are to develop this model further with longitudinal and experimental designs, consider other moderators like motivation and digital literacy, and investigate blended practices at other educational levels and cultural contexts in order to further validate and generalize these findings.

5. References

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