

***Failed Blended Instruction as Remedial Assistance for Underachieving
English Language Learners***

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study is to understand why online remedial assistance blended with face-to-face assistance fails as remedial assistance from the perception of underachieving English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in higher education. This study is the post-phase of an implementation of blended instruction in an EFL class, which consisted of students who were underachieving in the new language. Although the implementation was designed to assist these students who were repeating the elementary level due to their failure at the exam, the implementation failed to assist five out of twelve students, and they could not pass the exam for the second time. This qualitative study aims to understand implementation from a personal perspective. For this purpose, the students were interviewed for their self-reflections on their experience with the implementation. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to find the reasons for the failures of online remedial assistance blended with face-to-face. The results of the analysis showed that the students did not benefit from the design for the following reasons: they were not seen as slow and weak language learners, the content was uncontextualized, they were not motivated to produce the new language in productive skills with the audience and the mode, there was the need for more extensive studies online, and the need for alternative assessment. The study cares importance for educators who want to prepare online remedial assistance by including the active involvement of underachieving language learners and empowering their voice in productive skills.

Keywords: Underachievers, English as Foreign Language, Blended Instruction, Online Remedial Assistance

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Introduction

Sparks and Ganschow (2001) broadly defined underachievers as students that are not able to learn a foreign language and have weak skills in listening, speaking, spelling, and thinking in English. In terms of differentiating between successful and unsuccessful learners, different explanations have been provided in the literature. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), when learners suffer from anxiety, low motivation, or lack of confidence, they lack space in their filters to learn a new language and thus cannot succeed in acquiring the language. The reason for this is that their affective filter is up, and there is no space for introducing the new language. However, when learners have positive attitudes and feel confident, they contain space for another language in their filters. On the other hand, according to the Attribution Hypothesis (Heider, 1958), while successful language learners attribute their success to ability and effort, unsuccessful language learners attribute it to luck or reasons that they cannot control. Lam (2004) emphasized that language learners who have positive relationships with the new language and the people from that language have a higher chance of learning it.

Another researcher, Dewaele (2013), identified a link between learners' success and inner characteristics. According to him, musical ability, memory skills, and verbal ability, along with some personal features, might lead to high self-efficacy, low anxiety, and higher levels of inner motivation and communication in the target language. Lastly, Cook (as cited in Dewaele, 2013) mentioned that some learners may have proficient conversational skills in a foreign language, while others may demonstrate achievement in a different aspect of the language, like grammar. From the studies mentioned above, it can be concluded that it is difficult to generalize the reasons for achievement or underachievement because there are various factors such as learner motivations, styles, personality traits, and belief.

In fact, the concept of underachievement has been criticized as being too subjective because learners may fail due to exams, curriculums, and teaching methodologies that ignore learners' needs. For example, when teachers teach in a way that addresses students with high auditory skills, there is a chance that students with low auditory ability will be labeled as low-achieving in the classroom, as proved in one of the earlier studies (Pimsleur et al., 1964). Similarly, Holt (2005) explained that when schools are often places in which attendance is obligatory, teaching is one-sided, success depends solely on test performance, and students learn out of obligation rather than interest, students have a lower chance of success. It can be concluded that the greatest obstacle to quality instruction is the tendency of educators and school administrators to ignore the contributions of their students (Schank & Jona, 1991).

Since learner failure causes concern among educators, there have been attempts to identify those who underachieve and to design special programs tailored to their individual needs. In this way, schools would not lose learners' energy, intellectuality, and productivity. To illustrate, one way to assist underachieving language learners is to offer online or blended remedial instruction. Blended instruction (BL) has been defined (Neumeier, 2005) as "a combination of face-to-face (FtF) and computer-assisted learning in a single teaching and learning environment. The most important aim of a blended learning design is to find the most effective combination of the two modes of learning for individual learning subjects, contexts, and objectives" (p. 164).

BL has proven its success in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). To begin with, blended studies in writing have demonstrated that blended instruction may enhance students'

writing performance and improve their attitudes toward writing itself. With BL, students use topic sentences, spelling, grammar, punctuation marks, and capitalization in a better way (Adas et al., 2013) and become less anxious (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010) get more interaction with their teachers and peers (Shih, 2010). In addition to writing skills, some studies have produced results on the effectiveness of blended instruction in an EFL-speaking context. With BL, students do better in public speaking, use body language appropriately (Shih, 2010), think critically (Yang et al., 2013), speak with more confidence (Abal, 2012), and have better pronunciation (Bueno-Alastuey & Pérez, 2014). These studies demonstrated that blended instruction may enhance these different subcomponents of speaking.

Scholars and educators can successfully design blends specifically for underachieving language learners and target them to improve their weak language skills. To illustrate, in one study (El-Bassuony, 2016), underachieving students successfully studied grammar online in conjunction with YouTube videos and quizzes. On the other hand, they could ask their teachers about the problems and collaborate with their classmates in face-to-face time. In another study (Wang, 2011), the students studied English using computer programs, collaborated with their classmates on tasks, read assigned articles embedded with explanative power points, and used language on the Web. Further related studies demonstrated that students could improve their vocabulary with daily videos uploaded during the pandemic (Pasicolan, 2021), and struggling readers could read better with a Padlet that included interaction and various assessment opportunities (Zainudin, 2019). In brief, considering the needs of students, educators could address different issues in language classes by organizing the syllabus, students' demographics, and program goals, as well as the environment, both online and blended.

Nevertheless, using technology in and out of the classroom remains problematic in some respects. To begin with, various frameworks and designs have been suggested for educators, administrators, and institutions to determine the most suitable combination of modes, roles of participants, and complexity of the blends according to individual needs and contexts (Banados, 2006; Picciano, 2009; Goertler, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to continue examining blended and online instruction designs to determine more efficient instructional methods for national or local use.

Furthermore, online and blended instruction might not have been normalized for the students, and it might still need some regulations to be considered "the tradition". There could be some students who were not ready to receive online instruction. To illustrate, in one study (Shimkovich et al., 2022), the students mentioned that although they have high experience with hybrid online and face-to-face learning, they missed getting immersed in the classroom and receiving direct observation and assessment from the teacher. In another study (Tayebinik, 2013), the students did not prefer sole online instruction because it could not give them a feeling of belonging and real communication with their peers. In another study (Al Zumor, 2013), it was recommended that online language learning experiences could be enhanced with technical support, computer labs, and educating both teachers and students about technology. One 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. One final study (Wang, 2011) revealed that teachers and underachievers were not on the same ground in terms of how they saw the use of computers. In short, blended instruction has not yet been proven to be a sufficient educational model since there is a need to continue investigating ways of promoting it and for closer consideration of blended instruction in underachieving language learning.

In fact, the use of technology in education could be exaggerated and may not deserve the popularity it has earned. Cogen (1992) observed a classroom of learners in which technology was introduced as an instructional method. He found that computer use in the classroom had entirely replaced the face-to-face lecture method of the instructor and had been dictated by a higher authority than the agency of the instructor. In this case, it is possible that the instructional method itself—which had not been designed in collaboration with either the teacher or learners—may have contributed to the underachieving of additional learners. Cogen (1992) suggested that technology use among underachieving learners should be accompanied by ongoing teacher-to-learner and learner-to-learner interactions involving questions and comments arising from dialog. Technology use in modern education can be compared to the use of pencils in 1564. At that time, there were no expectations that pencils would substitute for the act of teaching, fully prepare learners for the practical world, or enable them to achieve their full potential. Similarly, it is unrealistic to expect technology alone to shape students' critical thinking skills or to replace the necessity of face-to-face instruction. The belief that students can learn easier online than in face-to-face instruction is a myth (Gregori, 2015). Further myths mentioned not to be true are as follows (Kleiman, 2000):

- The school will increase academic access by having more computers.
- There are certain ways to achieve this with computers.
- The teacher could be ready to include computers in their instruction with some basic training.
- Students in poorer environments can achieve equally good results when they have access to computers.

In summary, blended learning can enhance language learning and elicit positive attitudes from students. However, blended instruction may not always be useful and may meet resistance from some learners. It is especially important to address underachieving language learners because imposing an unsuitable method of blending instruction for their needs may increase their already existing burden of struggling learners. Few studies (Mercan, 2009; Bozgün et al., 2022; Ernil, 2024) have addressed the underachieving group, especially in the context of English language learning in Turkey (Aggun, 2018; Gökçe, 2021; Akçayoğlu & Özer, 2021). Additional studies are required to understand the experience of underachieving language learners with technology assistance and the reasons for the failure of remedial assistance. In light of the aforementioned information, the research question of this study is as follows:

- Why does online remedial assistance fail to benefit underachieving English learners?

Methodology

Research Setting

The research setting is an EFL classroom in a preparatory English program at the Department of Foreign Languages in a public university located in southeast Turkey. The foreign language department administers an entry exam to all students, the scores of which determine students' placement in modules such as A1 Elementary, A2 Upper Elementary, or B1 Intermediate (based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Each module of study lasts for eight weeks, during which time students must demonstrate their proficiency level by earning a passing grade of at least sixty points. These grades are based on a combination of student evaluation (participation grade), quizzes, portfolios, and

exit exams (writing, speaking, and multiple-choice). If learners fail, they must repeat that level by using the same learning materials and curriculum.

A blended design was applied in one of the repeating A1 modules. The aim is to address these learners and extend their learning opportunities. The students in that classroom could not get the minimum grade to start the A2 module, so they had to repeat the A1 module with the same teaching materials and methodology. With the aim of offering remedial assistance, an online portion of face-to-face teaching time was added. However, blended instruction still did not work for five students, and they did not receive the minimum grade required to start the A2 module for the second time. The current study deals with the reasons for the failure of the online remedial assistance for these five students.

Participants

All five male participants were prospective engineering students who had to learn English to become freshmen the following year. However, they were still at the elementary level, despite 16 weeks of instruction. The average age of the participants ranged from 18 to 22 years. Four learners possessed Turkish nationality, with the exception of one who was Syrian. Finally, all participants consented to participate in this study.

Collecting Data and Analysis

The current qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to collect data on the students' experiences following a failed implementation. The interviews began with structured questions such as:

- What has been your experience with online remedial help?
- "What kind of changes would benefit your experience more? Would you like to make any changes?"
- If you were the designer, how would you modify the implementation in a way that would suit you personally?
- Did blended instruction cause you to experience some difficulties, or did it have unnecessary features that made your writing and speaking skills challenging? If so, would you explain them by providing examples and details from your learning experiences?
- Please note some suggestions to overcome these difficulties, if you have any.

These questions revealed the reasons for their answers and additional details related to their experiences with blended instruction. Each interview session lasted at least 20 minutes and was conducted in the office of the researcher. Throughout each interview, the participants' responses were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The data analysis was content-based. The results shed light on the reasons for the failure of the implementation for these particular underachievers and possible solutions for improving it.

The Failed Online Remedial Assistance Blended With Face-to-Face

The blended instruction was implemented throughout this study, combining face-to-face with online instruction. The design was layered according to three levels, each containing differences in content and duration, as described below. The design details are presented in the following section.

Primary Design Mode

The same content of the formal syllabus was paralleled and delivered online to enhance language learning in the class and to promote the grades of the students in the exit exam. The core and static designs were prepared according to Neumeier's framework (2005):

- The leading mode is face-to-face in class.
- Distribution of modes: 100% face-to-face in class and 100% online.
- Sequencing of modes: Parallel: Similar content is repeated both face-to-face and online.
- Level of integration: Face-to-face classes are obligatory and online classes are optional.
- Introduction of the content: face-to-face classes and online teaching methods: present, practice, and produce
- Involvement of learning subjects: the students-computer or Students-teacher
- Location: face-to-face in class, online is anywhere

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 ways. The purpose of recombining the main blended instruction parameters on a weekly basis was to offer learners alternative learning contexts in which they could succeed:

- 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 instructor met on Zoom's mobile application to practice speaking before the final speaking exam.

Extended Design Component

Learners were motivated to reflect on what they wanted to communicate in English to the world outside of the classroom and pursue their interests. Some of examples have been given below:

- Learners share stories from their online experiences during a week in class.
- Learner share useful online websites, videos, or applications in the WhatsApp group.
- Learners analyze pieces of language they have come across while surfing online in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation.
- Learners are sent links by the researcher in accordance with their interests.

Results

Following implementation, semi-structured interview results were analyzed in order to understand learners' experiences and reasons for the failure of the implementation from the students' point of view.

Unseen as a Slow Language Learner: The students stated that the syllabus was hectic and overwhelming. On the other hand, they were slow and did not have the ability to learn languages. The online portion only added to their frustration with a huge amount of material and the request by the teacher to finish a certain task in a certain amount of time. They wanted to be seen and recognized as slow learners.

“I hate it when I do not understand certain content with the rest of the class. The teacher moves on, yet my head is still on the previous topic.”

Overload of Content: The fact that the online portion was prepared in a parallel manner was problematic for some students. That made a lot of resources to be covered. However, they could not regulate their studies in a way to both understand the content in face-to-face and finish related content online. Although at the beginning the online portion was eye-catching, later none of the students looked at them.

“There were too many things to do both face-to-face and online. I know they were all useful to me. Yet I could not finish all of them. I do not know... They were just too much for me. I felt guilty for not studying them. I am not hardworking.”

Irrelevant Content: The learners mentioned that they were bored with speaking or writing skills. They did not want to speak or write for the mere purpose of doing so. Another problem was that they could not find what to write or speak most of the time. They could not even produce most of the content, even in their mother tongue. When the learners were encouraged to list topics in which they were very interested in their mother tongue, they mentioned some of the topics from daily life as follows:

“I never miss Oscar Film Festivals on the TV. Every year I watched it and enjoyed the awarding shows. In addition, I read reviews about the show the following day online and searched for other winners, actors, or actresses. I think that show is spectacular. I know a lot about the names of the films, actor, and I always feel proud of myself to know every detail of Oscar Show.”

“After long studying for the university entrance exam, I realized I should change my style to fit in the campus, so I watched online tutorial videos related to makeup or style. When you (the instructor) told me that I would also search for resources in English, I gave it a try and found much better videos related to color match. I have been watching them for one week in English, and I realized that I am also learning some basic words.”

“I am a fan of soccer. When there is a derby, I should watch it, not matter what. I know every footballer and soccer club around the world. I do not understand matches in English, so I prefer watching them in Turkish, but last week I found an interview with my favorite footballer. He spoke good English with a very poor accent, but I could understand a few things.”

“I am away from my family and miss my home. I always check Facebook to see what they are doing. I also believe my hometown is much better than the city I study. I love my city very much. If there is something about my hometown on the news, I would focus on it.”

The Uninterested Audience: The students preferred an audience that would help them write or speak better. The classmates were a source of dissatisfaction for most students. They believed a repeat class would not benefit or contribute to their English because they also had weak English skills. They preferred a different and new audience for communication.

“I do not like my classmates. I guess they don't like me either. I wish it was an online class with all strangers. Then I will speak more English. “

Not Producing in Productive Skills: The learner complained about the methodology of teaching productive skills both online and face-to-face. The general routine of the instruction was introduction of the topic, conducting activities related to the topic, and receiving feedback from the instructor. This type of instruction did not match their expectations in terms of writing and speaking skills. They spent half of their time in class or online trying to study grammar, vocabulary, or task achievement.

“We do reading and grammar in writing class.”

Need for a More Extensive Component: The students mentioned that they enjoyed the extended component of the design more than the primary component. They enjoyed participating in online activities that were not part of the main course book and were not related to exams or homework. They taught that they felt they could achieve it or were not stressed.

“I found a friend online from Spain. We exchanged information about Turkey and Spain. I think we will become best friends.”

Not Having the Right Mode for Expression: Different students had different preferences for expressing or producing in English. While one student found online expression was easier than face-to-face expression, the other student found writing in class with the observation of the teacher was easier. In addition, some learners preferred to reflect on themselves in a way in a way similar to what they liked in their mother tongue. To illustrate, if students are shy about speaking face-to-face, they are also speaking in class.

“People did not worry about seeming tidy with their English, and people with their pseudonym wrote in the way they wished.” I wrote more about them. The teacher in the school gets obsessed with even one wrong letter. That is so crazy. “

The Need for Alternative Assessment: A few students mentioned that exams could be the reason for their English failure. The primary reason is that being forced to produce in a foreign language was a challenge for them because they were anxious about the examination and did not have the ability to express themselves even in their mother tongue. Another thing for them was that the exams only covered the primary component, and the things they did extensively were not assessed.

“There are so many things on the internet. I want to spend time on them. But they are not in the exams.”

Discussion and Implication

From the results, it can be concluded that the students did not participate in both face-to-face and online instruction, were not satisfied with their experience, and did not benefit from the remedial blended instruction. To begin with, the students believed that they did not have the aptitude to learn a foreign language. Hence, they wanted to be recognized as slow, weak, or poor learners, and we approached them that way. They mentioned that face-to-face instruction with online instruction had high speed, overloaded material and activities,

inefficient methodology, and limited assessment that contributed to their underachievement. From these findings, it can be concluded that underachieving language learners require more than an organized blend of face-to-face and online that was determined in advance for them. These students require intellectual, contextualized, and dynamic instruction. Designing a blend as remedial assistance for underachieving students requires a professional team working on the syllabus, content, and technology. When students feel they are obligated to learn rather than are interested in learning, the instruction itself tends to result in underachieving students (Holt, 2005). The results of this study demonstrate that transferring traditional instruction online or digitalizing face-to-face instruction does not guarantee success.

On the other hand, relevant literature has demonstrated that teachers and organizations do not know how to approach or intervene with these learners (Merga et al., 2021; Le, Allen, & Johnson, 2022). To illustrate, underachievers could be recognized at the beginning of the instruction, and tools, scales, or tests can be applied (Bozgün et al., 2022) to understand who these underachievers are and what their learning styles or preferences are for learning a language. When educators spare more time to understand underachieving language learners from the beginning, they will not lose time and energy or put an unnecessary burden on students. Not involving students in the instruction process is the biggest obstacle to quality instruction (Schank & Jona, 1991).

Another reason for the failure of the online remedial assistance was the methodology, namely, presentation, practice, and production (PPP). The students had to spend most of their time trying to understand the content presentation, which was increasing in complexity. Consequently, it left them with little time and motivation to produce the language. These results are not in the same vein as those of a study that benefitted from PPP in blended instruction (Hu & Hsu, 2020). On the other hand, all the students praised the extended design of the blend and expressed their satisfaction with it. This aspect encouraged students to follow their interests online and interact with the world of the internet. The next time online remedial assistance was prepared, more attention and space could be given to the extended component compared to the formal static component. The reason is that when students think of learning a language as a fun and interesting experience, they take part, comprehend the content more, and consequently achieve more (Gökçe, 2021). On the contrary, when anxiety occurs, students' achievement decreases, and the idea of dropping out of school arises (Erani, 2024).

Despite participating in the extended design, the students were not satisfied with that part, which contributed to their underachievement. In fact, assessment was one of the main reasons for their failure in general. To give one example, while one student expressed their lack of talent by expressing their opinions both in their mother tongue and in a foreign language in a short period of time, another student mentioned their reluctance to speak English in front of a teacher in the examinations. In that case, the vast opportunities the online world offers should be included in the assessment. As an example, some portion of the assessment could be spared for extended design in which students could express themselves in the way they want, like participating in an online group or leaving a comment under a video.

Conclusion

An implementation with the intention of offering online assistance blended with face-to-face support to underachieving EFL learners failed to assist five students. The current study aimed

to understand implementation from the point of view of students who failed the examination for the second time. The semi-structured interviews showed that the students wanted to be recognized as slow language learners and accordingly prepared programs. In addition, they need an audience, mode, and content to motivate them to produce the language. Lastly, they want to be assessed for extension studies in which they have their own interests. The findings of this study are important for educators who want to closely monitor underachieving language learners and prepare blends that directly suit them without placing further burdens on their language learning processes.

This study has a few limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. To begin with, the number of participants was limited to five male students, which is a small number for generalizing the findings. The second limitation concerns the data collection method. There was only one way to collect data: the structured interview. The final limitation was related to bias that the author could have introduced in the study because she was also the instructor of the class. Further studies will use triangulation methods and larger numbers of participants.

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