

## **BLENDED LEARNING: A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH**

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**Abstract:** *Information and communication technologies are playing crucial roles in today's educational system. Unfortunately, this later had been disrupted by the appearance of the Coronavirus around the world. Besides, education at the higher level in Algeria has changed dramatically and has called for an urgent involvement of remote teaching and learning processes in order to support students and their learning. At that time, distance education took different measures and methods throughout pandemic Moodle as a significant online interactive platform used in Algerian universities. In this vein, today's learning becomes blended through both onsite and online attendances to fundamental lectures and transversal webinars. Accordingly, this research paper aims to investigate how does digital education support and enhance students' learning and how does the digital world help students to become more active, autonomous, and responsible about their own learning.*

**Keywords:** autonomy, blended learning, digital education, motivation, students

### **1. Introduction**

Due to the appearance of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic around the world, the educational system worldwide has been disrupted. As a response to this pandemic, most countries shifted to digital education to save the ongoing academic year and mitigate the transmission of the virus within educational settings. As the panic situation evolved in Algeria, the educational sector was compelled to adapt to virtual learning platforms, including Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, and Moodle. However, these virtual platforms caused serious challenges related to digital literacy for both students and educators.

In this context, education in Algeria, mainly at the higher level, urged educators to apply diverse distance teaching methods to save the academic year. Accordingly, many Algerian universities opted for remote education, where educators delivered lectures through webinars or Moodle platforms. They succeeded to accomplish all tasks and assignments online, even for the evaluation and assessment. By the end of the pandemic in Algeria, all universities implemented the blended approach through both teaching and learning processes, by keeping their online lectures with in-class ones. Hence, they found that this method helped their students to learn better.

This research paper aims to examine the effectiveness of blended learning within EFL learning environments. It plans, too, to scrutinize the role of students through today's digital education and to investigate the idea of autonomy among EFL students and their learning.

In order to reach these objectives, three research questions have been raised:

1. To what extent does the integration of blended learning affect EFL students' academic achievements?
2. How can students be more proactive through digital education to maximize their learning outcomes?
3. How can digital education affect students' learning autonomy and enhance their motivation?

### **2. Blended learning, a new approach at higher education**

In response to globalization and the development of Information and communication Technologies, higher education in Algeria has witnessed several innovative teaching and learning strategies. Among them, blended learning emerged as a new hybrid method combining both traditional face-to-face teaching delivered in classrooms and online teaching. It is a new

technique that arises from technology's influences on teaching and learning processes by using multiple ICT tools to develop students' academic achievements. (McGee & Reis, 2012)

Many scholars suggested diverse definitions for blended learning; Driscoll defined it as follows:

- To combine or mix modes of web-based technology (e.g., live virtual classroom, self-paced instruction, collaborative learning, streaming video, audio, and text) to accomplish an educational goal.
- To combine any form of instructional technology (e.g., videotape, CD-ROM, web-based training, film) with face-to-face instructor-led training.
- To mix or combine instructional technology with actual job tasks in order to create a harmonious effect of learning and working. (2003: 01)

Hence, blended learning can occur in classrooms when combining lectures with images or videos through data show that displays power point slides about the main topic, as it can occur when attending live conferences via different platforms in classrooms.

After the pandemic, this innovative pedagogical method became broadly used at Algerian universities, where students became like new practitioners through blended learning approaches and digital technology. In this regard, this method urges students and educators to improve their digital literacy through training sessions. Students received theoretical and practical lectures about the implementation of ICTs in education. The newly recruited teachers at the University receive a one-year training about using digital devices throughout the teaching process. The other instructors who need more competencies in using digital tools received voluntary training during the pandemic and the post-pandemic eras to engage successfully through online teaching.

For teaching English as a foreign language at Algerian universities, the curriculum includes fundamental modules which are taught onsite, including linguistics, sociolinguistics, neurolinguistics, phonetics, methodology, grammar, written expression, oral expression, psycho-pedagogy, literature, culture and civilization, and ICTs. In addition, transversal modules are taught online, including translation, cognitive psychology, French language, social and cultural sciences, and modern education.

Besides, the integration of blended learning within education can have several effects on the academic achievements of EFL students. It allows them to learn at their own pace by relying on themselves; they can get access to an unlimited set of information anywhere and anytime through online materials. Hence, these materials can increase their engagement and motivation mainly through gamified learning experiences such as applications like Duolingo or Babbel, which have specific characteristics that provide learners with points and levels. Hence, these challenges motivate learners to improve their language skills outside classrooms. Also, platforms can be used as gamified learning experiences through quizzes, leading students to earn badges according to their performances and advance to better levels. Students can solve puzzles, too, to learn EFL by practicing grammar and vocabulary. For educational purposes, gamification can provide learners with an enjoyable learning process and offer them immediate feedback about their answers. Hence, this method can lead to better learning outcomes.

Flipped learning and microlearning are among the best learning strategies today. On one hand, flipped learning is a type of blended learning where students can get access to information at their homes and prepare them for the following sessions, including homework assignments or handouts. In a flipped classroom, students got engaged with instructional content before coming to class. They come to classrooms to practice activities, participate in discussions, and solve problems about specific topics. Hence, their teacher has to guide and support them. This method is usually used in literature and civilization modules which include wide historical backgrounds full of events, personalities, literary periods, etc. So, here, the teacher acts as a mediator between students and knowledge; he/she has just to guide, support and evaluate the students' competencies within specific tasks. This learning approach involves the competency-based approach in which the student becomes the center of his learning.

On the other hand, microlearning is a method of learning that delivers information about specific topics via digital media. This data can be shared in the form of short videos that include micro lessons that teach something concrete. It can be used, too, in the forms of a slide show, infographic or a factsheet; a short report that gives the most important information about a specific topic in a clear and an easy way. Hence, microlearning method becomes the solution to understand a topic in a five-minutes learning session. By using this method, the student can easily understand the main topic. Hence, even teachers may incorporate both approaches into their teaching strategies.

Further, Blended learning can enhance students' digital and language skills as it can improve their communication skills through online collaborative discussions and interactive conversations, including forums and online platforms where many participants can exchange ideas. Basically, today's modern digital world pushes students to use a variety of digital devices through their virtual learning. More than that, Algerian university educators use Moodle, an interactive e-learning pedagogical platform, to assess their students' digital tasks through quizzes, tests, activities, and assignments about the lectures delivered onsite.

Besides, this platform holds even different lectures about all modules taught online and onsite to make them accessible for all students who missed some sessions. Hence, this platform allows students to interact and communicate online with their teachers, to get access to different lectures displayed in the forms of texts, videos, or power points anytime and anywhere, and to collaborate with their peers to perform group work and projects as it offers teachers to assess and evaluate their students and offers them constructive feedback from their homes without moving outside. In the beginning, only a small percentage of teachers and students supported blended learning, but nowadays, this method is excessively used at Algerian universities.

### 3. Online assessment through holistic and analytical rubrics

There is a good strategy related to online assessment where teachers use rubrics with specific criteria to discern performances of different qualities among students of different levels. This system enables students to know how their works will be rated and empowers them to recognize areas of weakness through their works. Besides, it is a good strategy that helps students to pay more attention to their learning process. There are two types of rubrics: holistic and analytical. On one hand, the holistic rubric assesses the level of proficiency through various tasks, such as writing, reading, or presenting, based on the overall performance quality. The rubric is presented in a hierarchical structure with several levels across the side, and each level is accompanied by a set of descriptors. On the other hand, the analytical rubric exhibits the hierarchical arrangement of levels along the top axis, while the descriptors are displayed along the side axis. As a result, each level is assigned a range of possible point values.

**Table1. The holistic rubric used by the teacher to evaluate the students' writing skills**

Excellent 90 - 100	Ideas are well explained. The writing is highly coherent and there are no grammatical errors.
Good 80 – 89	Ideas are explained, the writing is coherent, and there are few grammatical errors.
Satisfactory 70 - 79	Ideas are partially explained, the writing is less coherent, and there are many grammatical errors.
Needs improvement 0 - 60	Ideas are not clearly explained, the writing is incoherent and there are several grammatical errors.

Source: <https://educationalresearchtechniques.com/2017/09/06/types-of-rubrics-for-writing/>

**Table 2. The analytical rubric used by the teacher to evaluate the students' writing skills**

	Excellent (9 - 10)	Good (7 - 8)	Satisfactory (5 - 6)	Needs improvement
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				(0 - 4)
Ideas explanation	Ideas are well explained	Ideas are explained	Ideas are partially explained	Little explanation of ideas
Coherency	The writing is highly coherent	The writing is coherent	Somewhat coherent writing	The writing lacks coherency
Grammar	Few errors	Some errors	Many errors	Several errors that hurt the understanding.

Source: <https://educationalresearchtechniques.com/2017/09/06/types-of-rubrics-for-writing/>

#### 4. The formative and summative assessment types used through both onsite and online education

Two types of assessments are used through blended learning, the formative and the summative, which help to evaluate students' learning. They provide insights about students' knowledge, skills and performances. On one hand, formative assessment takes place throughout the instructional process. It provides immediate feedback for students to correct themselves and to improve their levels. Besides, it helps the teacher to adjust his/her teaching strategies to better meet his/her students' needs. It can be done in diverse forms, including quizzes, classroom discussions and homework assignments.

On the other hand, summative assessment evaluates what students have learned at the end of a specific course or training, where students receive a certificate or a new grade for their overall performance. It mainly happened by the end of academic year or a semester. This type of assessment can be done through final exams and tests. Accordingly, both of these evaluation methods play crucial roles in the educational system, through evaluating students' learning and helping students to measure their progress and achievements. To sum up, the two types of assessment are used in both onsite teaching and online instruction to provide a comprehensive view of students' learning and progress.

#### 5. Innovative teaching methods through digital education

There are also some innovative methods that have been emerged through digital education, to enhance students' learning and improve their language skills. Among them:

- The MOOCs or Massive Open Online Courses: are models that deliver learning content by teachers. This content includes lectures with activities and it is free and accessible to any person who got interested to, whether being a student, a researcher, a teacher, or anyone. These models can provide interactive courses with user forums or social media discussions to support social interactions among students and teachers. Besides, these MOOCs can provide, too, immediate feedback to quizzes which push students to evaluate their learning and correct their errors quickly.
- There is, also, an online learning platform created by international universities that provides some online training with certificates by the end, including, Coursera.
- Some other free online comprehensive constructive learning platforms, such as Edunext and Edx, provide free training for students or anyone interested in through free registration but without certificates.
- In addition, there are other paid learning platforms that provide lectures about specific topics, like: Udemy, Skillshare, and MCourser.
- And there is another free online certified platform, Mindluster, which provides learners with many online courses and MOOCs.

Hence, these innovative teaching platforms aim to enhance students' and learners' engagement and retention of information in different learning styles. Accordingly, these platforms help students to become independent learners who rely on themselves to learn English as a foreign language and to take responsibility for their learning.

## **6. The shift from teacher-centered-approach to student-centered-approach**

Earlier, teachers were dedicating significant time to transfer information to students since students were focusing a lot on the role of the teacher as the only source of information with textbooks. In this vein, they used to determine their teaching outcomes by focusing on their students' needs. Nowadays, with the introduction of technological devices within education, students become like active agents able to get access to unlimited set of information displayed through several formats online. Here, the student becomes the center of his/her learning, able to improve his/her competencies. In this context, the teacher acts as a mediator who only supports, motivates, and evaluates his/her students' competencies within specific tasks.

The teacher has to create communication opportunities, motivate his/her students, and establish a welcoming environment where students can feel at ease and confident. He/she has to give them instructions and set activities about the main topic. Indeed, the teacher must consider the students' needs, identify their proficiency levels in the English language through both weak and strong points, and know more about their learning outcomes. He/she should, by the end, provide them with constructive feedback about their performances. Hence, according to these criteria, students are grouped. In this sense, students progress at their own rate and should concentrate on areas which lack competencies. Learning EFL depends, too, on motivation as an essential key to progress. Today, students from Algerian universities prefer collaborative learning, whether in pairs or groups; they rely on communication to develop their language skills. They create clubs, organize workshops, perform plays, write assignments, and book reports as a way to practice usually their English. They found that this method is fruitful and effective. Hence, these activities help the teacher to measure his/her students' achievements of the targeted outcomes.

### **6. a. The communicative approach**

In this context, the communicative approach to language learning is characterized by its emphasis on learning language through communication and interaction. According to the scholars Richards and Rogers: “communicative approach in language learning is an approach that is used in learning the second language or foreign language that emphasizes on the improvement of communicative ability » that is « the ability of applying the language principle in order to produce grammatical sentences and understand 'when, where, and to whom' the sentences are used” (Richards & Rogers, 1997)

Little Wood, thoroughly, stresses this idea by claiming: “communicative approach in the language learning pays attention to the language structural aspects and its functional aspects”. “Language structural aspects focus on language form grammatically, while language functional aspects relate to the functions of language form itself”. (Little, 1988) Hence, according to these scholars, the communicative approach involves the knowledge about grammatical rules as well as the language functions which include expression of thoughts and feelings, communication, interaction and conveyance of information.

Besides, the American sociolinguist Dell Hymes acknowledged that the concept of the communicative approach includes the knowledge of grammatical rules and the ability to use language effectively in diverse social contexts. This involves understanding the cultural norms, appropriateness, and pragmatics of language use and the structural aspects of a language (Hymes, 1972). At its core, the communicative approach aims to teach students to be proficient communicators in practical situations by considering communication's linguistic, social and cultural aspects.

He added that communicative competence is “the most general term for the speaking and hearing capabilities of a person - competence is understood to be dependent on two things: knowledge and (ability for) use”. (Hymes, 1972: 16) In the same context, Savignon pointed out that foreign language communicative competence reveals “the ability to function dynamically in a truly communicative setting adapting to all of the informational elements in the context be

they linguistic or non-verbal". (1972: 08-09) Communicative competence is, thus, related to the learners' performances in specific social situations. Essentially, it describes the knowledge and the abilities required for effective communication. Thus, the communicative approach aligns to develop communicative competence in learners. The communicative approach, accordingly, emphasizes on the importance of both language knowledge and the ability to use language effectively in real communication contexts. It recognizes that language learning is not just about learning grammar and vocabulary but also about developing language skills to communicate and interact in meaningful situations. In general, the communicative approach aims to develop communicative competence in learners by providing them with opportunities for significant language use and interaction.

The communicative approach to language teaching focuses on developing learners' communication skills, such as speaking and listening, rather than just language systems, including grammar and vocabulary. It encourages learner-centered learning, which makes learners actively participate in communication, whether in pairs or groups, by using authentic materials to facilitate interactions and make the learning experience more practical. This approach, therefore, aims to prepare students for real-life communication situations.

### **6.b. The competence-based approach**

The communicative approach is strongly related to a competence-based approach, which makes students integrate easily in different situations. This approach emphasizes on language use. It aims to equip learners with language skills and competencies to function effectively in real-world situations. In this sense, Luisa and Canado demonstrate that the "the ultimate aim of the competency-based model is thus to form flexible and adaptable professionals who can apply competencies to the varied, unforeseeable, and complex situations they will encounter throughout their personal, social and professional lives [...] and who can thus become active and useful citizens in our democratic society". (2013: 03) Consequently, in the long term, these learners will be able to decide confidently and think critically, manage different jobs and solve different problems.

In the same context, Nkwetisama and Cameroon sum up the important characteristics of competence-based approach in the following points:

The competencies are stated in specific and measurable behavioral terms.

The contents are based on the learners' goals, i.e. outcomes or competencies.

The learners continue learning until mastery is demonstrated.

The approach makes use of an unlimited variety of instructional techniques and group work.

It centers on what the learner needs to learn, which is the application of basic skills in life skill language context such as listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The approach makes extensive use of texts, media, and real-life materials adapted to targeted competencies.

It provides learners with immediate feedback on assessment performance.

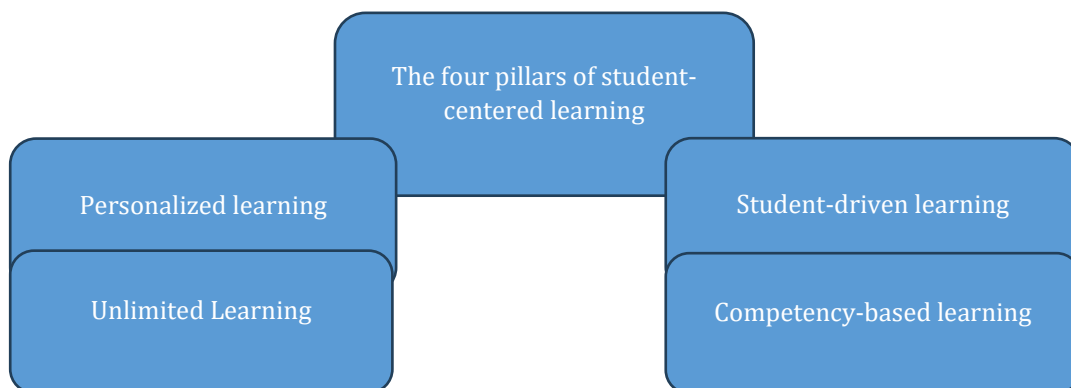
The instruction or teaching is paced to the needs of the learners.

It gets learners to demonstrate mastery of the specific competency statements or objectives Mapping of the same competency objectives or statements. (2013: 530)

Hence, the competence-based approach emphasizes practical skills and measurable outcomes, ensuring that students acquire knowledge and apply it effectively.

Both concepts, the competence-based approach and the communicative approach, prioritize the students' active involvement, engagement and the development of their practical language skills. According to the different views of scholars, today's learning becomes mostly centered on learners who are actively involved and motivated and act as responsible agents in their education. Accordingly, the two approaches align with the students-centered approach to foster an interactive learning environment that empowers students and makes them successful and autonomous.

**Figure 1. The four pillars of student-centered learning**



Source : <https://www.ultimatemultimediatraining.net/student-centered-learning/>

### **7. The impact of digital education on fostering students' autonomy and enhancing their motivation**

Autonomy refers to: "a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times" (Benson, 2001: 47). According to this quotation, the learner's autonomy is not a stable state but a capacity that evolves over time. Henceforth, students will develop their autonomy through the guidance and encouragement of their teachers to be active, creative, independent, and responsible for their learning. Hence, teachers are incredibly important for their learners' autonomy. Secondly, students' autonomy may be developed through peers-collaborative learning, improving their communication skills and engaging them easily into learning experiences.

Digital education may significantly impact students' learning autonomy by promoting students' independence and self-directed learning. There are several ways which boost their motivation.

- ❖ **Personalized learning:** digital education allows students to learn independently through accessing different resources such as watching videos, writing reports about specific topics, and reading e-books. Of course, they can manage time about their learning and they may focus on only areas that need extra improvement; hence, they feel autonomous about their learning.
- ❖ **Immediate feedback:** many online platforms offer learners with immediate feedback about their performances through quizzes or assignments. Hence, this method helps students to check their progress. Accordingly, they feel autonomous about their self-assessing.
- ❖ **Collaborative learning opportunities:** online platforms can facilitate collaborative learning through discussion provided in forums and group projects.
- ❖ **Determining goals:** digital education can support students to assess their progress and to determine their learning outcomes. Besides, the ability to see their achievements can enhance their motivation.
- ❖ **Flexibility and Accessibility:** distance education makes learning accessible to a large audience anywhere and anytime. They feel autonomous to engage easily through their learning process.
- ❖ **Real world application:** distance education can provide a link between onsite learning to real world contexts through virtual experiences and case studies. This association improves students' motivation by revealing the practical relationship of what they are learning.

To sum up, it is a question of motivation and willingness which push students to thrive through digital education in order to foster their learning autonomy and independence.

### **8. The teachers' roles to promote the learning autonomy**

In order to promote students' autonomy, teachers should perform different vital roles as organizers, facilitators, and counselors.

- ❖ As an organizer, the teacher should pick out appropriate activities to their students' levels that best meet their needs and demands. In addition, he/she has to build a positive classroom culture that promotes students' respect for each other, collaboration, and love of learning. Moreover, he has to make the content of lectures more interactive to attract students' attention in virtual classes.
- ❖ As a facilitator, the teacher has to help students to facilitate their learning and to create a conducive learning setting both in traditional classrooms and through webinars. Besides, the teacher has to enhance students' motivation as a way to overcome the psychological obstacles that they may face them as anxiety and the lack of confidence.
- ❖ As a counselor, the teacher shows students how to choose the best learning strategies in order to achieve efficient learning. He/ she has to provide guidance for their learning and to offer them support and feedback about their learning for improvement.

Teachers play a crucial role in enhancing students' learning to become autonomous learners, able to think critically about specific tasks and to find solutions for these tasks. Also, they become able to assess themselves and their learning. Hence, they will become successful and independent citizens.

### **9. Conclusion**

During the pandemic, Algeria's educational system seemed unready for the sudden shift towards online teaching. With the evolution of the pandemic, several alternative teaching methods have emerged through distance education to save the situation. In this respect, remote teaching helped students access their lectures at any time and gradually brought about effective results for students, regardless some problems that others had faced. After the pandemic, blended learning has been integrated into education. Thus, it succeeded in enhancing the teaching and learning processes by giving students opportunities to participate in real-time discussions and access several online courses assigned by educators. More than that, using ICT tools provides a connected teaching that links teachers to their students and to professional content, resources, and a system that helps them to improve their instruction and digital skills. In this respect, teachers can organize projects or arrange tests and activities for their students. They can monitor their progress and address areas needing extra explanation or practice. With the usual training on online academic platforms, students become more engaged and motivated and, simultaneously, independent, autonomous, and responsible for their learning. In this context, they become eligible to take decisions, think creatively, and solve problems they may face through their learning. Therefore, both traditional and modern online instruction fulfill the needs of students. The only thing that students should consider is being well-motivated and confident about their learning to achieve better outcomes.

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