

*Incorporating Blended Learning to Improve Reading in English Language
as a Foreign Language in Lesotho*

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Abstract

In Lesotho, a country characterized by a diverse population speaking various languages, where English serves as the official language for instruction, students often face challenges in reading English due to limited resources. Despite previous examination reports indicating that students' failures are not due to a lack of subject understanding but rather an inability to comprehend instructions, traditional reading approaches persist among teachers. This stands in contrast to the modern educational technology available in the 21st century. As a result, it is imperative for educators to adopt strategies that enable students to thrive in a global context. Blended learning, which combines traditional in-person teaching with online resources, offers a promising solution. This study explores the integration of blended learning in Lesotho to enhance English reading abilities, considering it's a second language for many. The research employed a quantitative quasi-experimental design involving two groups: a control group (n=30) using traditional English textbooks and an experimental group (n=30) using both these textbooks and blended learning. pre-and post-test scores were subjected to inferential statistical analysis using SPSS software. The findings indicated a positive impact of blended learning on reading proficiency. The implications for education are significant. They underline the necessity of creating a comprehensive blended learning curriculum, delivering training and assistance to teachers, and addressing technological infrastructure requirements. Consequently, the study authors propose that integrating blended learning into foreign language classes could enhance the learning experience, furnish students with skills crucial for success in the global arena, and ultimately elevate overall academic performance.

Keywords: Educational Technology, English as a Second Language, Blended Learning, Reading Comprehension, Lesotho

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1. Introduction

In the landlocked country of Lesotho, located in Southern Africa, English is the official language of instruction in schools. However, many students face difficulties when it comes to reading in English as a foreign language (EFL). These challenges may arise due to factors like inadequate exposure, lack of resources, and insufficient teacher training. As a result, there's a clear link between poor academic performance and limited success in various opportunities (Tlali, 2016). For instance, an examination conducted by the Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2016) revealed that learners struggle to understand the taught content due to significant reading difficulties. To improve students' reading skills, it became essential to revamp teaching methods and materials. Previously, conventional techniques such as the Grammar Translation Method (Lin, 2019) were employed to teach English language skills, encompassing reading, grammar, and vocabulary. However, the rise of educational technology has introduced innovative methods that can complement traditional teaching and enhance learning outcomes, particularly in reading.

Wu and Marek (2020) stress the potential of blended learning, a flexible approach that combines traditional classroom teaching with online learning, to enhance language skills. This approach enables students to access learning materials and activities at their own pace and convenience, while also facilitating interaction with teachers and peers (Huang and Li, 2020). In the context of Lesotho's EFL education, blended learning could be a valuable tool to enhance reading abilities and overall academic performance. Within this framework, teachers can utilize various online tools to support students' reading abilities. Li and Chen's study (2017) showcased that incorporating blended learning in an EFL classroom improved reading accuracy and speed among Chinese learners. Similarly, Kilickaya and Krajka's research (2019) demonstrated that blended learning significantly boosted reading comprehension and vocabulary development in Turkish learners. However, while this instructional approach is established in developed countries, it's relatively new in Lesotho. The effectiveness of blended learning in enhancing EFL reading skills in Lesotho has limited research. Thus, despite challenges related to limited internet access, available resources will be leveraged to implement this approach across the country.

Consequently, this research aims to investigate the impact of integrating blended learning to enhance English language reading proficiency among second language learners in Lesotho. Additionally, the study seeks to explore how factors like learners' age, gender, and attitudes influence their reading skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching English Language in Lesotho

Teaching English in Lesotho, a Southern African country that also has Sesotho as an official language, presents substantial problems. To effectively teach English to Lesotho children as a topic and a method of global communication, educators must design innovative strategies. English proficiency is important for education and professional prospects in Lesotho since it opens doors (Ekajume-Ilongo, 2015). According to research, exposing learners to a variety of instructional techniques and resources without constraints improves second language learning. As a result, a variety of factors influence English language instruction in Lesotho. Notably, interference from students' native language (L1) can both impede and facilitate learning difficult English concepts, necessitating rigorous L1 usage monitoring in class

(Matee, 2019). Effective language learning, according to Krashen (1998), happens when learners and teachers have low "affective filters," which is helped by resource availability and a suitable learning environment. Lesotho's status as a poor country, on the other hand, leads to obstacles such as limited resources and inadequate teacher preparation, perhaps making it difficult for children to excel in English (Ekujume-Ilongo, 2015; Moea, 2023). Despite these obstacles, opportunities for professional development in English teaching exist in Lesotho. Using the digital age, instructors can collaborate with international colleagues and implement innovative techniques for language training such as interactive activities and technology (ibid). An effective language teacher in Lesotho is defined by effort, commitment, and classroom creativity (Kini, 2016, p. 40). By demonstrating passion and a genuine love for teaching, English language education in Lesotho can progress and become more inclusive, regardless of cultural differences. Ultimately, this improvement can provide students with the tools they need to excel academically on a global scale.

2.2 Traditional Teaching Methods

Reading is considered a fundamental key that paves a way for knowledge acquisition and comprehension in EFL. Traditional Teaching methods that have been employed in EFL classrooms for decades have proved to improve reading abilities. There are several traditional methods that teachers incorporate in their ELT. One of the most commonly used is Grammar Translation Method. Al- Shaboul (2016) propounds that, GTM is an effective method that emphasizes the translation of literary texts from the target language to the native language. It appears this method focuses mainly on vocabulary and grammar rules. This in turn not only helps learners comprehend texts but also analyze literary texts (Zarei and Zarei, 2018). On the other hand, Audio Lingual (ALM) is another traditional method that has been used to improve reading abilities in EFL. This method emphasizes the use of repetition and drills in a language class. Yaqubi and Tavakoli (2016) posit that ALM recognizes patterns in language and uses them to understand literary texts. Essentially, the Traditional Methods that have been used are believed to be effective in providing learners with a systematic approach to learning vocabulary and grammar rules. However, with a high demand for an epistemic turn, the effectiveness of these methods may vary depending on the context and needs of learners, especially in the 21st century, whereby learners are exposed to technology in their everyday lives.

2.3 Teaching English Language Using Technology

In today's global education landscape, teaching has become a thought-provoking experience due to the integration of educational technology across various fields. Particularly in the domain of English language teaching (ELT), ongoing debates centre around teaching methodologies and techniques. This paradigm shift has pushed modern educators to embrace emerging approaches that not only make language learning enjoyable and intriguing (Stanley, 2020), but also cater to diverse learners' multiple intelligences. Educational technology has become an integral part of ELT, motivating learners to achieve their language learning goals and adapt to contemporary trends. Educational technology, as Peachey (2021) suggests, positively influences learners' literacy skills, potentially reshaping the landscape of language education. Learning management systems and technological devices facilitate easy online access to learning materials and communication between learners. By incorporating digital tools like laptops, smartphones, computers, and tablets, teachers are encouraged to enrich their teaching practices (Stanley, 2020). These devices, connected to the internet, transform foreign language learning into an interactive and enjoyable experience.

Teachers embracing technology in classrooms have a positive impact on learners' motivation (Mayer, 2017), as seen in the case of gamification, where game-like activities and rewards foster engagement, leading to the subconscious acquisition of English language concepts. As Peachey (2021) states, "technology engages learners with the subject taught in the classroom" (p. 2). The use of technology in an English language classroom promotes a democratic learning environment, empowering learners to navigate digital tools freely, thus enhancing their language skills. A study by Rao (2019) in Saudi Arabia revealed that technology effectively motivates learners of all ages towards achieving their goals. This underscores the potential of educational technology to revolutionize English language instruction for students across age groups. Technological education opens avenues for learners to develop creativity, problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, communication, and other higher-order skills (Agyei, 2020). The accessibility and integration of technology in foreign language teaching generate interest in language learning, as it brings language concepts closer through technological devices. When utilized effectively, these authentic digital tools can lead to remarkable improvements in the learning environment.

2.4 Blended Learning

This is a strategic approach, that emerges as a means to enhance reading abilities. This method combines traditional teaching methods with online components (Krajc, 2019). Multiple studies highlight the positive impact of blended learning on English language skills, especially reading comprehension and vocabulary. Blended learning involves both online and face-to-face instruction in foreign language contexts, addressing teaching and learning challenges (Son et al., 2016). Research by Haggen and Duffmeyer (2016) indicates that blending technology with traditional methods significantly improves reading comprehension. This amalgamation of technology and conventional methods proves effective in catering to 21st-century learners while accommodating diverse needs. Moreover, Mistry and Mistry (2018) emphasize the role of teachers in moderating and facilitating technology in blended learning contexts, preventing misuse. Stutz and Hayers' study in 2016 demonstrated how blended learning enhanced literary skills in a class of learners with disabilities. This approach promotes inclusivity through diverse teaching methods, accommodating individual differences. However, certain studies suggest that blended learning can result in a digital divide among learners due to socioeconomic differences. Despite this consideration, blended learning has the potential to boost reading abilities (Son et al., 2016) by creating an engaging and personalized learning environment.

The utilization of technology in education has become more widespread, prompting an exploration of its relationship with various factors such as age, attitude, and gender. To enhance English language teaching through educational technology, researchers have conducted numerous studies assessing how these factors affect the integration of technology in education. These investigations have yielded diverse outcomes, revealing both positive and negative impacts. Thus, a comprehensive review of the literature on these factors offers valuable insights into individuals' interactions with technology and the potential obstacles they might encounter (Ayanwale & Oladele, 2021; Nguyen, 2021).

Understanding the impact of age contributes to the development of inclusive and accessible educational platforms. According to Al-Fadhli's (2020) research, age has a substantial impact on the adoption of technology for educational reasons. When compared to their older counterparts, younger kids are more likely to use technology in schooling. Similarly, Wang et al. (2019) discovered that younger students have a more favorable view regarding the

importance of technology in education. Gender has also been extensively researched in connection to the use of technology in education. According to Ma (2021), males have more confidence and competency with technology, potentially increasing gender-based professional gaps. According to Alzahrani et al.'s (2019) research, male students frequently have a more favorable attitude toward technology use in education than their female counterparts. However, Al-Fadhli et al. (2020) contradict this finding, identifying no significant gender-based disparity in technology adoption. Consequently, these studies suggest that women are also competent in STEM fields. More importantly, given the evolving technological landscape, educators must consider learners' attitudes toward technology to foster inclusivity. Learners' attitudes significantly impact their technology utilization in education. Alzahrani et al. (2019); Ayanwale et al. (2023); Oladele et al. (2023) demonstrate that students with a positive technology attitude are more inclined to employ it for learning purposes. Correspondingly, Wang et al. (2019) reveal that students with positive technological attitudes exhibit higher engagement and academic achievement. In a study published in 2018, Akbarov et al. investigated students' attitudes toward blended learning in an EFL context. Results showed that most EFL students prefer blended learning over traditional methods of teaching English because it enhances motivation. Furthermore, Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) argue that blended learning for language learners directly impacts their reading abilities.

2.5 Underpinning Theory

Various theories of foreign language learning have undergone shifts in understanding how to enhance second language acquisition. These theories acknowledge debates and controversies surrounding English language instruction, particularly in terms of improving pedagogical practices. In the present study, two theories, Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (2014) and Van Dijk's Material Access and Resources Appropriation Theory (RAT) (2005), are elucidated. LCT offers a framework for exploring social practices, with a focus on four key codes: elite code, knowledge code, knower code, and relativist code. The interplay of these codes shapes how reading knowledge is generated, conveyed, and interpreted through blended learning (Kilickaya and Krajka, 2019). This entails integrating traditional teaching methods and technological education in blended learning, which is legitimized within the context of teaching and learning reading. This alignment resonates with learners' approaches to grasping vocabulary and comprehension concepts. Conversely, RAT underscores the roles learners assume in their reading-learning journey when exposed to digital tools. By employing RAT principles, educators can discern suitable technological devices for classroom use, promoting equity and inclusivity (Rouse, 2019). Lesotho's mainstream schools accommodate learners with diverse abilities within a single classroom. Consequently, teachers tailor their content delivery methods and learning resources to cater to individual learning styles. This underpins the selection and design of blended learning that harnesses these resources to enhance reading abilities. This approach minimizes conflicts in teaching methods by providing learners with a clear understanding of the reasons behind diverse reading instruction approaches. These two theories provide profound insights into the application of blended learning to foster reading abilities in a socio-cultural context. Moreover, they establish a personalized and democratic educational environment (Sushi, 2019) that capitalizes on the strengths of combining digital and traditional resources in teaching and learning a foreign language.

3. Methodology

The primary objective of this study was to enrich the reading abilities of ESL (English as a Second Language) learners through the integration of blended learning, employing a quasi-experimental design. Data collection encompassed the evaluation of pre-test and post-test scores obtained from ESL learners enrolled in three high schools situated in Maseru, Lesotho. The sample size consisted of 60 participants (30 in the control group: 13 boys and 17 girls, and 30 in the experimental group: 14 boys and 16 girls). These participants were purposefully selected based on their reading proficiency levels and the availability of Internet access and devices in their schools. Given the quasi-experimental nature of the study, the process of randomization proved to be challenging. It's also important to note that prior to participating, explicit consent was obtained from all participants. The research employed a factorial matrix design to visually illustrate the variation in the levels of the variables (refer to Table 1). The data collection process involved a treatment package implemented across three phases. Phase 1 encompassed administering a pre-test to both the control and experimental groups. In Phase 2, the intervention took place. The control group received traditional teaching methods, while the experimental group experienced blended learning. The final phase involved conducting a post-test for both groups to assess the effectiveness of the treatments. To minimize variance error and control for potential confounding factors, descriptive statistics, and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were applied using SPSS software version 26. These statistical techniques were utilized to analyze the eight hypotheses. Additionally, to ensure the reliability and validity of the instruments, a pilot study was conducted in nearby schools to assess if the instruments accurately measured their intended criteria. The credibility of the tests was further confirmed through information sharing and validation.

Table 1. Factorial matrix design

Age	Blended learning			
	Gender		Attitude	
	Male	Female	Positive	Negative
10-12	✓	✓	✓	✓
13-15	✓	✓	✓	✓

4. Results and Discussion

To test the hypotheses in the current study, the Analysis of Covariance was carried out with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software Version 26. The analysis was run at a confidence level of 95% and a significant level of 0.05. Most importantly, the post-test was treated as the dependent variable, the pre-test as the covariate, and the moderating variables (age, gender, and attitude) as fixed factors. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2. ANCOVA Summary of the difference in the achievement of two groups

Source	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Sq.
Corrected Model	4579.28	16.00	286.20	16.06	0.00	0.86
Intercept	3640.93	1.00	3640.93	204.30	0.00	0.83
Pretest	22.15	1.00	22.15	1.24	0.27	0.03
Treatment	3528.04	1.00	3528.04	197.97	0.00	0.82
Age	2.82	1.00	2.82	0.16	0.69	0.00
Gender	9.68	1.00	9.68	0.54	0.47	0.01

Attitude	29.09	1.00	29.09	1.63	0.21	0.04
Treatment * Age	0.33	1.00	0.33	0.02	0.89	0.00
Treatment * Gender	27.23	1.00	27.23	1.53	0.22	0.03
Treatment * Attitude	60.53	1.00	60.53	3.40	0.07	0.07
Treatment * Age * Gender * Attitude	11.57	1.00	11.57	0.65	0.42	0.01
Error	766.32	43.00	17.82			
Total	21092.00	60.00				
Corrected Total	5345.60	59.00				

R Squared = .857 (Adjusted R Squared = .803)

Dependent Variable: Post-Test

Ho1: There is no significant main effect of treatment on learners' reading ability.

Table 2 provides persuasive evidence suggesting a significant primary impact of the blended learning treatment on students' reading performance. Statistical analysis ($F(1,43) = 197.97, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.82$). The treatment's large partial eta square value (0.82) emphasizes the significance of its effect on the dependent variable. As a result, the hypothesis that treatments had no substantial main influence on learners' reading ability was rejected. This result demonstrates that the interventions did, in fact, result in a significant improvement in pupils' reading abilities. To support this finding, the computed marginal means show that students in the experimental group had the highest mean score ($M = 24.53$) compared to those in the control group ($M = 7.87$). This result confirms that the blended learning therapy was significantly more effective than the traditional teaching technique in improving students' English reading ability. The significant difference in mean scores between the experimental and control groups highlights the significant benefit of blended learning in developing students' reading abilities. This discovery pushes for a change toward more contemporary teaching approaches that use technology to create engaging and effective learning settings. In support, research by Haggen and Duffmeyer (2016); Son et al. (2016) indicates that blending technology with traditional methods significantly improves reading in the English Language as a foreign language.

Ho2: There is no significant main effect of age on learners' reading ability.

Table 2 shows that there is no significant effect of age on students' reading ability in English ($F(1,43) = 0.16, P < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.04$). As a result, the null hypothesis is accepted. The presence of a significant partial eta square value (0.04) suggests that blended learning has the potential to control the effect of age on learners' reading abilities. Because blended learning helped balance all the variances in the learning process, all learners read the same. This might be attributed to its personalized approaches (Graham, 2013; Liu and Li, 2021), which enabled learners of all ages to obtain tailored support and practice. However, Wang et al. (2019) discovered that younger students have a more favorable view regarding the importance of technology in education. However, in this investigation, the mean scores of both young learners and older learners have no difference.

Ho3: There is no significant main effect of gender on learners' reading ability.

According to Table 2, there is no significant effect of gender on students' English reading ability ($F(1,43) = 0.54; P < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.03$). This result reveals that gender has no effect on

learners' reading ability. As a result, the null hypothesis is accepted, and the effect size (0.03) is very small. According to Yuxin Ma (2021), males have more confidence and competency with technology, potentially increasing gender-based professional gaps. Al-Fadhli et al. (2020), on the other hand, find no substantial gender disparities in technology adoption. This was demonstrated in this study since the introduction of blended learning in reading greatly improved the skills of both males and girls.

Ho4: There is no significant main effect of attitude on learners' reading ability.

The statistical analysis in Table 2 above reveals that the incorporation of blended learning in reading influenced the learners' attitudes. Thus, ($F(1,43) = 1.63$; $P < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$). The presence of a significant partial eta square value (0.04) implies that blended learning has the capacity to manage the effect of attitude on learners' reading abilities. According to Alzahrani et al.'s (2019) research, students who have a good attitude toward technology are more likely to use it for learning objectives. However, in this study, learners' attitudes regarding reading in English as a foreign language were controlled and had no effect on the learners' reading abilities. As a result, the null hypothesis has been accepted.

Ho5: There is no significant interaction effect of treatment and age on learners' reading ability.

The statistical analysis in Table 2 above reveals that the incorporation of blended learning in reading has shown no effect of age on the treatment. Thus, ($F(1,43) = 0.02$; $P < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$). The presence of a significant partial eta square value (0.00) implies that blended learning has the capacity to manage the effect of age on learners' reading abilities. Zhang and Zhu (2018) claimed that younger learners perform better than older learners. To dispute this Akbarov et al. (2018) argued that learners of all ages perform very well, and their English proficiency is improved with blended learning.

Ho6: There is no significant interaction effect of treatment and gender on learners' reading ability.

The statistical analysis in Table 2 above reveals that the incorporation of blended learning in reading has shown no effect of gender on the treatment. Thus, ($F(1,43) = 1.53$, $P < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$). The presence of a significant partial eta square value (0.03) implies that blended learning has the capacity to manage the effect of gender on learners' reading abilities because it is very low. According to Ma (2021), males have more confidence and competency with technology, potentially increasing gender-based professional gaps. However, after comparing two groups with both males and females, the results have indicated that blended learning has resulted in a statistically significant positive effect on reading ability, despite the gender of learners.

Ho7: There is no significant interaction effect of treatment and attitude on learners' reading ability.

The statistical analysis in Table 2 above reveals that the incorporation of blended learning in reading has shown no effect on attitude to the treatment. Thus, ($F(1,43) = 3.43$, $P < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$). The presence of a significant partial eta square value (0.07) implies that blended learning has the capacity to manage the effect of attitude on learners' reading abilities because it is very low. Akbarov et al (2018) investigated students' attitudes toward blended learning in

an EFL context. Results showed that most EFL students prefer blended learning over traditional methods of teaching English because it enhances motivation. This was evident in this study because the attitudes of learners became positive, and their reading proficiency improved.

Ho8: There is no significant interaction effect of treatment, age, gender, and attitude on learners' reading ability.

The findings in Table 2 indicate that the results of the statistical test ($F, (1, 43) = 0.65; P > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$) do not provide sufficient evidence to reject the hypothesis. The effect size, which is small (0.015), suggests that variables such as age, gender, attitude, and therapy do not significantly influence learners' reading abilities. This aligns with the study conducted by Akbarov and Gonen (2018), where they found that most EFL students prefer blended learning due to its ability to enhance motivation to learn. Similarly, the research by Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) highlighted that the implementation of blended learning has a direct positive impact on language learners' reading skills. These outcomes collectively suggest that blended learning can counteract the potential effects of factors like age, gender, and attitude on learners' reading abilities.

5. Conclusions and Limitations

The study's findings imply that using online resources and technology efficiently improves learners' reading competency, regardless of their age, gender, or attitudes. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need for specialized and individualized feedback for learners, as this input may have a greater impact on reading improvement than criteria such as age, gender, and attitude. In essence, the findings show that blended learning is a valuable tool for instructors looking to improve students' reading abilities, regardless of their demographics. As a result, the findings of this study provide a significant contribution to the existing body of literature by advocating for the use of blended learning as an instructional technique to improve reading for all learners. Also, it's important to acknowledge a limitation of this study, namely the quasi-experimental design which, due to its non-randomized nature, might introduce potential biases that could impact the validity and generalizability of the results.

6. Implications and Recommendations

The findings of the study highlight the favorable influence of incorporating technology into the teaching and learning process on learners' reading ability. To build an immersive and engaging atmosphere for students, it suggests a harmonious balance of traditional teaching approaches with technology-driven tools. Furthermore, schools are urged to invest in digital resources and provide extensive teacher training to prepare educators for the implementation of blended learning strategies. According to the study, this technique has the potential to greatly improve teaching quality and contribute to improved learning outcomes.

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