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Iraqi EFL Learners' Perception of Face-to-Face Learning VS e-Learning VS. Blended Learning

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 crisis, the shift to remote instruction prompted students to engage in face-to-face, blended, and online learning modalities. This study aims to investigate students' learning perceptions and preferences among the styles above. Employing a quantitative research methodology, the study involved 50 participants from the College of Education for Girls. Results indicate a strong preference for traditional face-to-face learning, followed by blended Learning. Notably, the least favored approach was online Learning. This study aims to elucidate the perspectives of students navigating two distinct educational paradigms necessitated by the global pandemic juxtaposed against traditional face-to-face instruction. The objective is to delineate insights that can inform the development of pedagogical frameworks aligned with optimal teaching and learning practices. By discerning students' viewpoints and preferences, synthesizing guidelines from their feedback and educators' experiences, and formulating a tailored instructional model attuned to students' requirements, the endeavor seeks to enhance the efficacy of the teaching and learning process.

The paper ties to answer the following research questions:

1. Which model is most preferred by students between face-to-face learning, blended Learning, and Online Learning?
2. Which model is the best among the three models for learning the English language?

Keywords: Learners', Perception, Learning VS e-Learning VS. Blended

1. Introduction

Education serves as the cornerstone of a more inclusive and sustainable society, and it is acknowledged as a fundamental human right within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. The pivotal role of education in global development has been underscored by the Sustainable Development Goal emphasizing the need to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning." Assert that the implementation of effective, high-quality education policies, methodologies, and programs is crucial in advancing the universal objective of education for all. Learning, as defined by Rosenberg (2001) ^[2], is the mechanism through which individuals acquire new skills or knowledge to enhance their performance. Moreover, the evolving landscape of information dissemination to the Internet facilitates continuous updates, enabling individuals to engage in learning anytime and anywhere.

Following the series of COVID-19 lockdowns that prompted the closure of universities and higher education institutions, a swift transition to emergency online instruction was widely adopted (Van der Graaf *et al.*, 2021) ^[10]. While online Learning is not a novel concept in higher education, the abrupt shift from traditional face-to-face instruction posed a unique challenge for students. Universities swiftly pivoted to fully online pedagogical approaches for approximately three academic semesters (March 2020–September 2021) before returning to conventional in-person instruction.

Suryanti *et al.* (2020) ^[6] introduce the factors of age and geographical location in shaping the learning process, emphasizing the influence of technology accessibility and infrastructure availability. Notably, eighteen-year-olds exhibit decreased cognitive function in associative memory, affecting their learning capacity. Awal *et al.* (2021) ^[7] highlight the significant transformation of face-to-face learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, with a shift towards entirely online instructional delivery.

Scholarly research by Chandra and Fisher (2009) ^[8] delves into students' perceptions of blended Learning, revealing preferences for face-to-face interactions and the unique benefits it offers, such as direct access to instructors. Despite the proliferation of virtual classrooms equipped with diverse educational tools, the efficacy of online learning platforms in comparison to traditional face-to-face instruction, particularly in language classes, remains a subject of inquiry (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020) ^[9].

The continuity of higher education during disruptions, including pandemics, disasters, and conflicts, is imperative. The lessons gleaned from the COVID-19 crisis hold valuable insights for future educational planning. Understanding students' viewpoints and preferences is essential for the enhancement and sustainability of teaching and learning initiatives.

1.2. Definitions of Key Words or Terms

Face-to-Face Learning:

This type of classroom instruction relies on lecturers being there to impart knowledge. In face-to-face instruction, students participate in spontaneous verbal conversations in a physically immobile environment. Learning that relies on lecturers as knowledge providers is referred to as face-to-face instruction or conventional instruction. In reality, face-to-face instruction includes a range of additional learning strategies, all of which take place in a classroom, but it usually consists of lectures, presentations, and conversations (Awal *et al.*, 2021) ^[7].

E-learning or online Learning Learning

is a network phenomenon that makes it possible to share resources and knowledge quickly, improving education. E-learning is very effective when used in conjunction with training and information management. A learning architecture, which is the planning, arranging, and synthesis of all electronic and non-electronic learning components, is even more successful when paired with classroom instruction (Rosenberg, 2001) ^[2].

Blended Learning Learning

It is a teaching approach that lies in the middle of both online and in-person instruction. It is a hybrid teaching approach that incorporates both in-person and online instruction.

2. Literature Review

Studying the viewpoints and preferences of students is essential because it will probably influence how they feel about the various delivery methods of higher education (online, hybrid, and face-to-face) in the post-pandemic period, so we will address studies related to the transition from face-to-face teaching to online learning. Studies about the shift from traditional in-person to online Learning during the COVID-19 epidemic have been more numerous since

March 2020.

Higher education's online course and program offerings are starting to play a major role in how post-secondary institutions deliver their curriculum; the OPSEU (Ontario Public Service Employees Union) 2014 Report states, "Over the past 10 years, use of online learning has expanded throughout the post-secondary system in Ontario. The CAATs (Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology) have increasingly started to develop online courses with incentives and direction from the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities" (MacKay, 2014, p. 19) ^[12].

The CAAT has praised the benefits of online Learning, especially the flexibility and convenience it provides, along with other educational associations. Anywhere, at any time, students can participate in online courses as long as they have a suitable electronic gadget and access to the Internet. Online education has impacted particular communities and provided chances for students to pursue higher instruction. These students include but are not limited to: 1. parents with responsibilities of childcare; 2. students who live away from the institution; 3. students who work full-time; 4. "urban students who find it easier to time-shift rather than space-shift" (Renes, 2015, p. 348) ^[13].

Diaz (2000) ^[14] state that more experienced students are better prepared for the independent, self-directed study that comes with online learning. Their main motivation for using it is to progress their careers. Note that Younger students benefit from the online format since it allows them to study from home. These millennial learners, having used technology from an early age, have greater ease navigating and applying technological tools.

In contrast to online Learning, current studies on students' preferences for different types of education reveal that they strongly favor in-person instruction (Iqbal *et al.*, 2022; Pongkendek *et al.*, 2021; Zapata-Cuervo *et al.*, 2021) ^[15, 16, 17] and blended learning (Finlay *et al.*, 2022) ^[18]. More precisely, a study conducted by Zapata-Cuervo *et al.* (2021) ^[17] with students from the USA, South Korea, and Colombia revealed that while students are highly engaged in online Learning, they believe it to be less rigorous and effective than in-person instruction.

(Iqbal *et al.*, 2022) ^[15] found that after the end of the pandemic, most Pakistani students would prefer not to opt for online classes in the future.

Similarly, Greek students expressed a preference for face-to-face instruction, saying that they believe it cannot be replaced by online Learning, particularly when it is linked to practical classes that require laboratory work/training (Zagkos *et al.*, 2022) ^[19].

States that Chinese students think that a blended model that combines both classroom and internet modalities is needed, while online classes did not meet their expectations with regard to engagement, so more than half of the sample did not take online courses as seriously as they took face-to-face ones.

(Finlay *et al.*, 2022) ^[18] discovered that Sport science students in the UK thought blended Learning learning was better than online/virtual Learning learning; also When comparing blended Learning learning to online Learning learning, students' opinions of academic assistance, organization and management, learning materials, learning communities, evaluation, and feedback were all higher in blended Learning learning.

Lastly, with reference to the educational models, there is a study by Johnson *et al.* (2000) ^[21]. Their results revealed that despite there being no difference in the learning assessment, their face-to-face students had more favorable opinions of the teacher and the entire course than their online counterparts. The student's capacity to carry on a conversation with the instructor and other students, as well as the chance to get numerous, varied examples and illustrations from the instructor—which were of low quality in the online setting—are highlighted as positive aspects of the F2FL model. Furthermore, the researchers highlight that, in contrast to the EL model, students in the F2FL model can get together more readily to discuss class assignments, resolve disagreements, and form social bonds.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants from the fourth stage, one, have experience with three models of Learning. The study sample consisted of only 50 female students; their ages were (21-29), and their participation was voluntary and ethical. Inform all participants of the nature of the study to express their preference for the type of education, as they have undergone all kinds of e-learning, face-to-face and blended.

3.2. Instruments

This study used quantitative research only

A questionnaire consisting of eight questions was used about

e-learning, face-to-face, and blended Learning, as well as which type of education style students prefer and which kind of education style is suitable for learning literature, learning language, and teaching phonetics material.

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was handed to the English language instructors and some experts in the English department, asking them to suggest any necessary modifications or changes. The questionnaire is used to get the student's perceptions about learning models.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The following protocols are followed in the conduct of the study:

1. The study's target population consists of fourth-year Iraqi EFL students at Kufa University's College of Education for Girls.
2. The study's sample is made up of 50 randomly selected students from the English Department.
3. Select an appropriate tool and have ELT-specialized supervisors review its validity and make any necessary comments, changes, or recommendations.
4. Applying appropriate statistical methods to the results in order to interpret them and draw conclusions.

4. Data Analysis

1) Face-to-face Learning versus blended Learning.

Students' preferred methods of Learning—face-to-face and blended—are compared in the following poll.

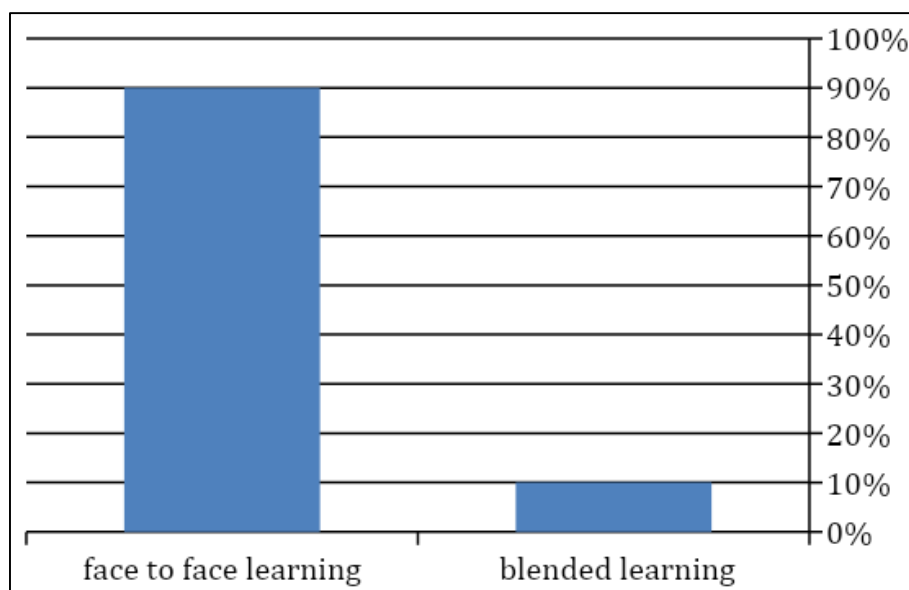


Fig 1: Face to Face vs Blended Learning

According to the poll results, 90% of students choose in-person instruction over blended learning, while only 10% prefer hybrid learning. Comparing this study with other research on face-to-face learning by Iqbal *et al.* (2022) ^[15], Pongkendek *et al.* (2021) ^[16], and Zapata-Cuervo *et al.* (2021) ^[17], the results are the same.

2) Online versus face-to-face learning

The purpose of the poll was to compare the two learning styles that students preferred: online learning and in-person learning. These are the survey's findings:

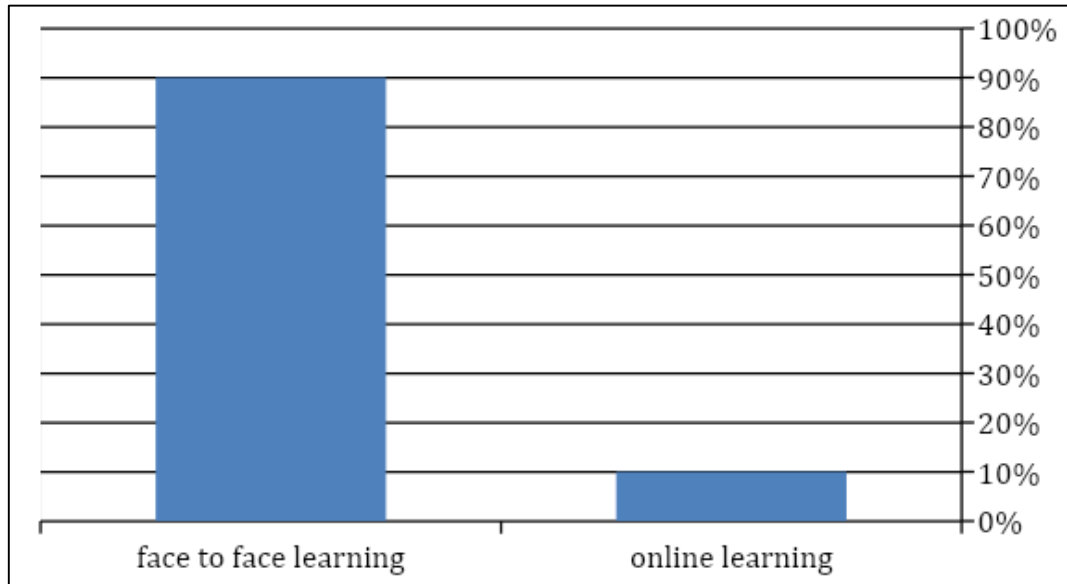


Fig 2: Face to Face vs Online Learning

According to the survey's findings, 90% of students choose in-person instruction over online instruction. According to research by Iqbal *et al.* (2022) ^[15], the majority of Pakistani students would prefer not to take online courses going forward when the pandemic ends. This study's findings are consistent with those of Iqbal's research.

3) Online versus blended Learning Learning

The following survey compares the learning styles that students prefer between online and blended learning. Given that there currently needs to be an alternative to online education due to the pandemic, this poll was carried out. The survey's findings indicate:

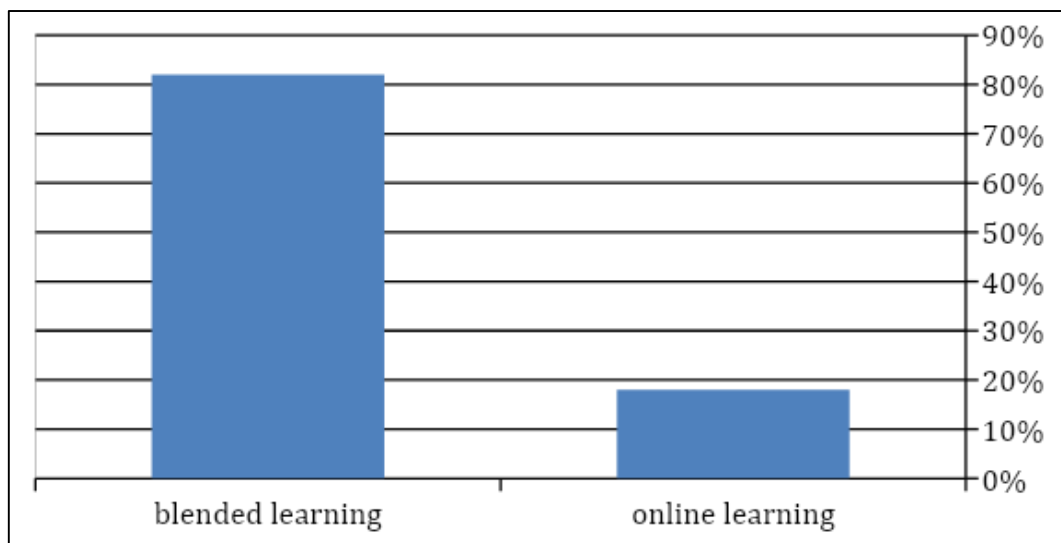


Fig 3: Blended Learning vs Online Learning

According to the graph, 82% of students favor mixed Learning, with the remaining 18% opting for online instruction. According to Chinese students believe that a mixed model is necessary. However, their expectations for engagement in online classes still need to be fulfilled. The findings of this investigation are identical to those of Li's research.

4) Online versus mixed learning versus face-to-face learning

Students' opinions regarding how they would like to learn were gathered through a survey. Online Learning, Blended Learning, and in-person Learning were the three forms of Learning that were compared. The following graphic displays the study findings.

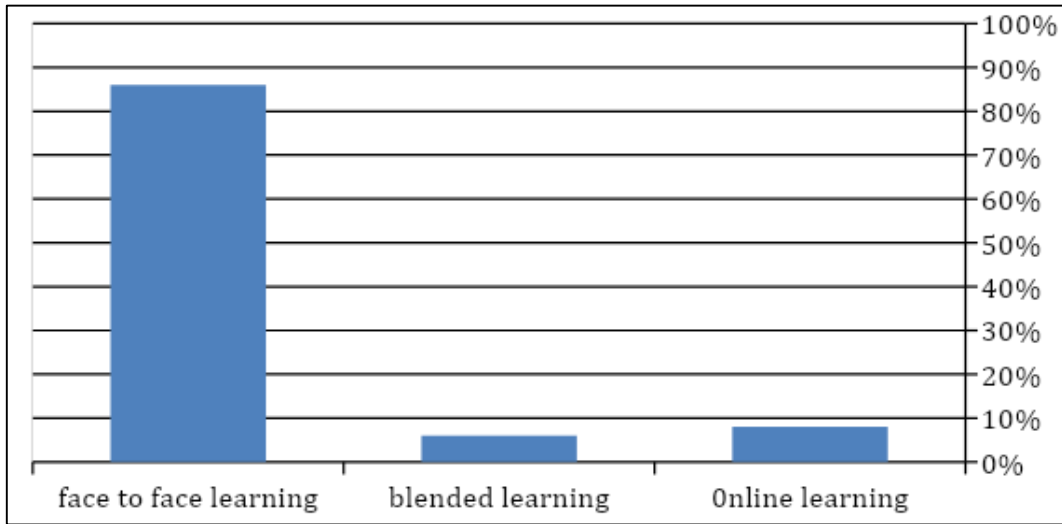


Fig 4: Face to Face vs Blended Learning vs Online Learning

The graph shows that 86% of students choose in-person instruction, 6% prefer blended Learning, and 8% prefer online instruction. According to research by Zagkos *et al.* (2022) ^[19], Greek students indicated that they preferred in-person instruction and felt that online Learning could not replace it, especially when it was combined with hands-on classes that required laboratory work or training. This study's

findings are consistent with those of Zagkos' research.

5) Online versus blended learning versus face-to-face learning

The purpose of this poll was to determine which model of language learning—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—students preferred.

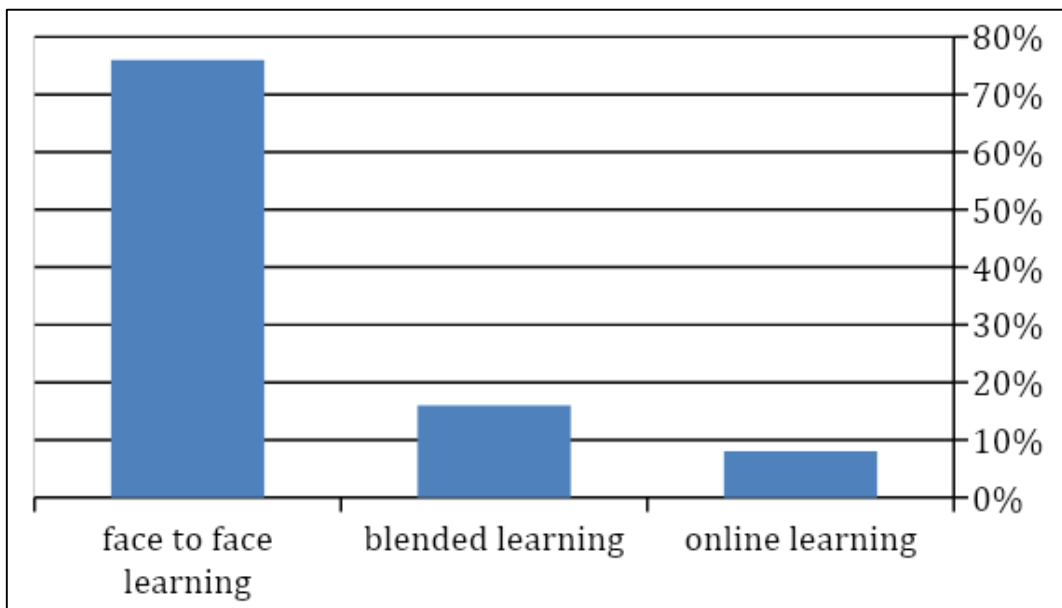


Fig 5: Face to Face vs Blended Learning vs Online Learning

According to the graph, 76% of students prefer in-person instruction, 14% prefer blended Learning, and 10% choose online instruction. The findings of this study are consistent with recent studies on students' preferences for different types of education, which indicate that they substantially favor in-person instruction (Iqbal *et al.*, 2022) ^[15] and mixed Learning

(Finlay *et al.*, 2022) ^[18] over online instruction.

6) Online versus mixed learning versus face-to-face learning

The purpose of this survey was to determine which model students preferred for learning English courses (such as grammar, phonetics and phonology, linguistics, etc.).

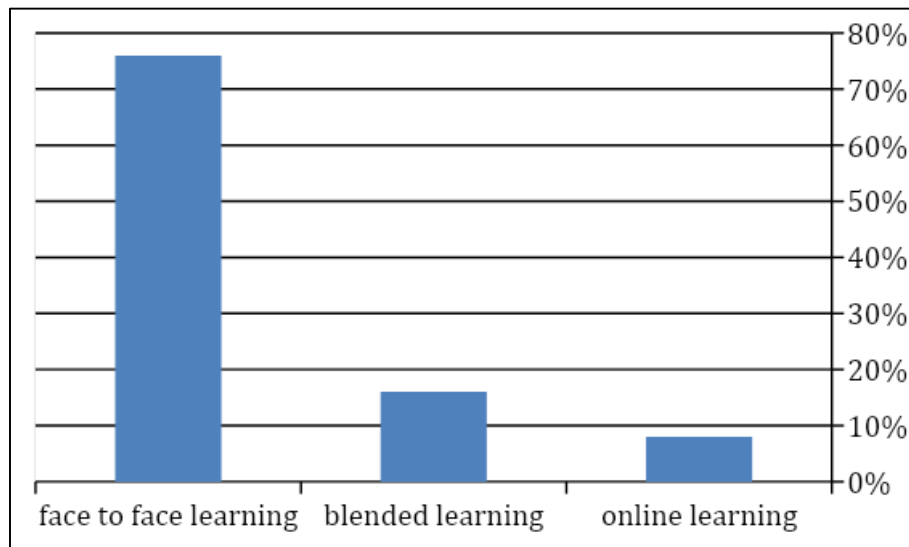


Fig 6: Face to Face vs Blended Learning vs Online Learning

According to the graph, 76% of students prefer in-person instruction, 16% prefer blended Learning, and 8% choose online instruction.

7) Face-to-face Learning versus blending versus online learning

The purpose of this poll was to determine which model students prefer in learning English literature—poetry, novels, plays, etc.

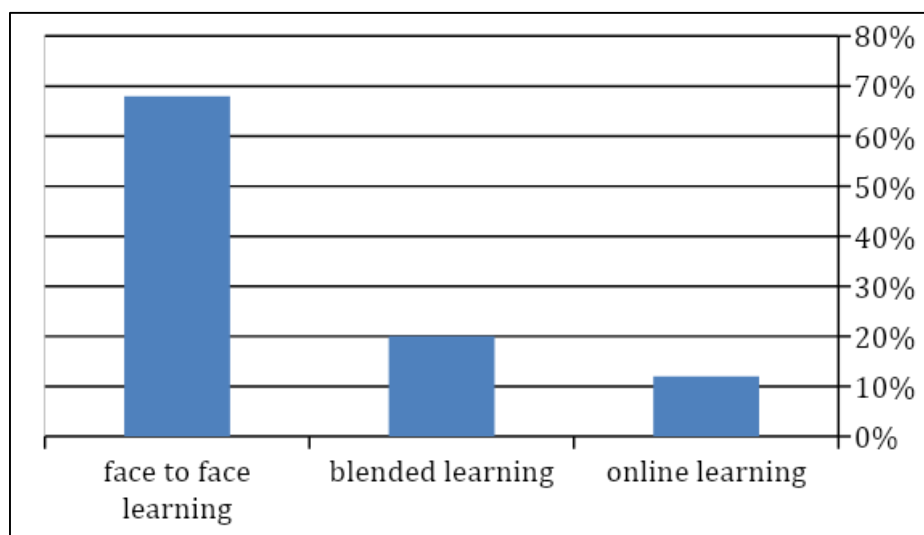


Fig 7: Face to Face vs Blended Learning vs Online Learning

From the graph, it can be seen that 68% of students choose learning to be done face to face, 20% of students choose blended Learning, and 12% of students prefer online Learning.

8) The most preferred learning media

Students were receiving online instruction during the

pandemic period using a variety of platforms, including YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, and others. Following their return to in-person instruction, the students were asked to complete this survey in order to gather their thoughts and preferences regarding the most significant educational programs.

Table 1: The most significant educational programs

Programs	Frequency	Total Average
WhatsApp	0	0%
youtube	11	22%
free video conference	11	22%
telegram	8	16%
zoom cloud	8	16%
google classroom	12	24%

According to this research, Google Classroom is the most popular learning tool used by students (24%), followed by YouTube (22%), Free Video Conference (22%), Telegram (16%), and Zoom Cloud (16%). No one picks WhatsApp. This indicates that Google Classroom is the most popular learning tool that students utilize.

5. Discussion

This study explored university students' opinions and preferences regarding face-to-face, online, and blended learning methods after undergoing e-learning in the first phase and blended Learning in the second phase due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Face-to-face education in the third and fourth stages and their perceptions were studied at that time. The face-to-face teaching approach was applied. Through the results of this study, although not generalizable, we can understand students' opinions about different learning models, and this is expected to help universities reconsider their educational policies. The questions were a comparison between the three learning styles and which style the students preferred more, such as "Do students prefer face-to-face learning, blended learning, or electronic learning?" The percentage of those who preferred the face-to-face learning style was high, as this style ranked highest in all questions. It was shown that the majority prefer face-to-face Learning. The blended learning style comes in second place, except for the fourth question, which ranked third. The reason for the high percentage of those who prefer face-to-face teaching is its advantages; it is a well-known teaching method that has been improved over many years in terms of both structure and style. There are several advantages to face-to-face instruction that are absent from online learning (Xu and Jaggars, 2016) [22].

The first—and possibly most significant—point is that classroom education is incredibly dynamic. In a traditional classroom setting, students receive instruction in person in real time and are encouraged to ask creative questions. It also makes more flexible curriculum distribution and prompt instructor response possible (Salcedo, 2010) [23]. In-person training does not depend on networked systems. Students enrolled in online courses must have unrestricted access to the Internet. Online students might not be able to communicate, turn in assignments, or access study materials if there are technical issues. As a result, the student may become frustrated, perform worse, and lose interest in studying. Kirkup and Jones (1996) [24] state that in order for students to synthesize and evaluate their own Learning, they need to have conversations with both their teachers and fellow students. Blended education came in second place after face-to-face education; it has many advantages, such as increasing the efficiency of instruction, providing better accessibility and simplicity of use, and increasing economic efficiency.

(Graham, 2006) [25]. The blended group's achievement is noticeably greater Than that of students who studied in person (El-Deghaidy and Nouby, 2008) [26]. Despite its advantages, blended Learning has many disadvantages, such as technical problems. Since we rely heavily on technology, technical issues may interfere with our ability to learn (Hashemi and Kew, 2020) [27]. Matters pertaining to computers, tablets, cell phones, and learning software might arise for both instructors and students.

(Afzal *et al.*, 2023) [28] state that There is a discrepancy in the

availability of technology required for distance education, which is known as the "digital divide." Some students need access to the computers, tablets, or cell phones that are required for virtual Learning. Students may become unequal as a result, with those needing access being at a disadvantage. (Afzal *et al.*, 2023) [28] state that Online Learning requires a high level of self-discipline. Online Learning, a key component of blended Learning, necessitates a high level of self-discipline, particularly for students accustomed to structured classrooms or those struggling with procrastination, to effectively manage their time.

These negatives are what placed blended learning learning in second place, as the percentage of students who preferred the blended learning style was less than the percentage of those who preferred the face-to-face learning style. As for the e-learning style, it comes in third place, except for the fourth question, which ranks second because the percentage of those who prefer e-learning is very small due to its disadvantages. Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) [29] state that Some forms of e-learning involve students being remote and reflecting, which prevents them from interacting with one another. Due to the lack of in-person interactions with teachers or instructions, e-learning is less effective than traditional forms of education. Since exams for e-learning methods are typically conducted online, there is less chance that illegal behaviors like cheating and plagiarism will be prohibited (Arkorful and Abaidoo, 2015) [29]. One such drawback that online learners encounter is the difficulty of staying motivated in an online course. Students with lower success rates than their peers lacked independence and self-motivation (Sarkar, 2012) [30].

However, the e-learning style occupies second place in the fourth question when comparing education styles, and blended comes in third place, while the face-to-face education style remains at the forefront. Despite the disadvantages of e-learning, it has significant advantages.

According to Lundberg *et al.* (2008) [31], online courses offer more flexible study hours—a student with a job, for instance, might join a virtual class—the student might decide to enroll in an online course or a fully online degree program.

6. Conclusion

In the conducted study at the University of Kufa, College of Education, the primary objective was to discern students' preferences regarding educational modalities. The findings elucidated a prevalent inclination towards face-to-face instruction, attributed to its perceived superiority in conveying theoretical and scientific subjects effectively. Face-to-face education was favored for its direct and immediate teacher-student communication, fostering a conducive and impactful learning environment. This mode of education is lauded for its pedagogical strategies aimed at ensuring clear information dissemination, structured lesson organization, and scheduled lecture delivery, catering to a diverse spectrum of learners and fostering healthy academic competition.

Conversely, blended Learning secured the second position in student preferences due to its hybrid nature, combining in-person instruction with technological aids for content distribution and reference access. Despite its advantages in providing a balanced approach to teaching and blending traditional classroom methods with digital resources, blended Learning is impeded by technological literacy prerequisites among students. Challenges arise from individual disparities

in technology proficiency and access, hindering the widespread adoption of blended learning practices. The reliance on costly technological tools, necessitating ongoing maintenance and technical proficiency for effective utilization, acts as a hindrance to its widespread implementation.

On the other hand, e-learning garnered a notably lower preference among students, primarily attributed to its inherent limitations and challenges. Technical complexities emerged as a primary hurdle, impeding seamless learning experiences and hindering effective teacher-student interactions. Despite the potential advantages of online Learning, such as flexibility and accessibility, the prevalence of technical issues and the lack of robust teacher-student engagement pose significant obstacles to the efficacy and acceptance of this mode of education. This underscores students' prevailing belief in the effectiveness and efficiency of traditional pedagogical approaches over contemporary e-learning methodologies.

7. Recommendations

In future research endeavors concerning learning styles, scholars are encouraged to establish robust criteria for the precise measurement and evaluation of learning styles across diverse contextual settings. This meticulous approach aims to illuminate the full spectrum of benefits and challenges associated with varying learning styles, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the educational environment and optimizing learner satisfaction. Moreover, the integration of qualitative research methodologies involving active participation from both participants and educators holds promise for generating in-depth insights into the nuanced assessment of learning styles, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of pedagogical practices and learner needs.

In delving further into the exploration of learning styles and methodologies, researchers are advised to incorporate a multifaceted approach that encompasses both quantitative and qualitative methods. By combining data-driven analyses with in-depth qualitative insights, a more holistic understanding of individual learning preferences and challenges can be achieved. This approach enables researchers to capture the intricacies of how learners engage with different educational modalities and adapt their strategies accordingly.

Furthermore, future studies should focus on developing standardized assessment tools that accurately capture the nuanced aspects of learning styles across diverse populations and educational contexts. Tailoring these tools to specific cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds can enhance the validity and reliability of assessments, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive evaluation of learning preferences and effectiveness.

Appendices

1. When you are asked to choose between two learning models, which one do you prefer, face-to-face Learning or blended Learning?
2. If you are welcome to choose between 2 learning models, which learning model do you prefer, face-to-face Learning or Online Learning?
3. If you are welcome to choose between 2 learning models, which Learning do you prefer, blended Learning or Online Learning?

4. If you are welcome to choose between 3 learning models, which Learning do you prefer, face-to-face Learning, blended Learning, or Online Learning?
5. based on your experience with three models, Which model do you think is best for learning English language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), face-to-face, blended Learning, or Online Learning?
6. based on your experience with three models, Which model do you think is best for learning English courses(like Linguistics, phonetics and phonology, grammar, etc.) face-to-face, blended Learning, or Online Learning?
7. based on your experience with three models, Which model do you think is best for learning English literature (like poetry, novels, drama, etc.) face to face, blended Learning, or Online Learning?
8. If you are welcome to choose online Learning using what media do you like the most?
 - a. Whatsapp
 - b. Youtube
 - c. Free video conference
 - d. Telegram
 - e. Zoom cloud
 - f. Google Classroom

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