

Examining Language Teacher Readiness for Blended Learning among Cycle-one Public Schools in the UAE

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Abstract-

This qualitative study sought to explore cycle-one (primary-level) language teacher perceptions of blended learning in the UAE. Given the recent shift to online learning, in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, this exploratory research sought to ascertain pertinent information to assist decision-makers and educational leaders. Specifically, the researchers addressed what teachers perceived to be facilitators of and barriers to implementing effective blended learning instruction in public, cycle one schools in the UAE. They also sought their perspectives concerning effective strategies for blended language instructions and how they perceived these strategies influenced students' performance. Toward this end, the researchers utilized face-to-face, open-ended interviews with purposefully selected participants in a phenomenological approach; all data were analyzed via a thematic analysis that employed multiple stages of coding: open, axial, and selective. Findings suggest that teachers perceive parental engagement to be a facilitator in implementing blended learning. Participants also suggest that purposeful planning, instruction, and assessment should be explicitly designed for blended learning environments for more effective language learning. Finally, the teachers in this purposeful sample report that blended learning have influenced students' performance in multiple areas, including academic attainment, character development, and technical skills.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Parental Engagement, Instruction, Student Performance, UAE.

1. Introduction

Blended learning systems combine both face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction. Traditional face-to-face learning environments have been around for centuries. These learning environments started to grow in exponential ways as new technologies were developed that transformed these environments. Different media-method combinations were implemented that addressed diverse learner populations. At the present time, as Figure 1 shows, the two settings are beginning to converge. While it is impossible to predict the future, it is exceedingly plausible that the trend toward blended learning systems will increase (Bonk & Graham, 2005). Bonk and Graham (2005) found that people chose blended learning for three reasons. Firstly, learner performance improved by increasing the level of active learning and learner-centered strategies. Secondly, learners reported an increase in access and flexibility as they could choose where and when they wanted to learn; they reported feeling more accessible than in the conventional learning environment. Thirdly, there appeared to be an increase in cost-effectiveness as blended learning may allow for large, globally dispersed audiences to be reached in a short period with consistent, semi-personal content delivery.

Educators in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) generally employ a more traditional style of teaching. While the Ministry of Education (MOE) published a smart learning platform for teachers and students, many teachers did not effectively use it and chose not to activate the platform for students. This issue is most obvious in Cycle-one schools, where teachers think students are too young to utilize smart learning. Emerging research demonstrates that blended learning can improve student performance, and yet a commonly held belief among teachers is that student performance outcomes are stronger inside a physical classroom than through online learning. Various learning websites include different games and applications that teachers could use to make learning outcomes more efficiently.

Research concerning blended learning is widespread around the world. Most of this research focuses on the students' perspective. A recent study related to language blended learning in elementary school investigated the benefits of blended learning on the reading performance of elementary school students, from Kindergarten to Grade Five from low socioeconomic status (SES) background (Prescott, Bundschuh, Kazakoff, & Macaruso, 2018). The results showed that the online components of the blended learning outcomes were significant. The growth in reading performance from blended learning was higher than the standard reading assessments. The study also indicated that kindergarten students through Grade 2 showed more substantial improvements than students in later grades. Kazakoff, Macaruso, and Hook (2018) also studied the benefits of applying blended learning to improve the reading skills in English Learners (ELs) and non-English Learners (non-ELs) in elementary schools in the USA. The sample was 442 ELs and 442 non-ELs who ranged from preschool through grade five. They applied blended learning by using an online program called Core5 to improve students' reading skills behind their peers while maintaining attainment for on-level readers. This study demonstrated that blended

learning assisted in improving the reading skills in the sample while maintaining the performance for both ELs and non-ELs for kindergarten and through second through fifth grade in the first year.

Blended learning is essential given the current global circumstances in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. As distance learning in the UAE has been a largely successful endeavor, it may be vital to consider applying blended learning more regularly in classrooms across the country, as students have already received from practice and developed critical skills. Given the research discussed above, blended learning has yielded positive benefits for language instruction students. As such, incorporating blended instruction in language teaching in UAE Cycle-one schools may be an important next step. Many primary school teachers have concerns regarding the efficiency of blended learning for young learners. Integrating blended learning is highly challenging in the region because of students' parents' society, culture, and technological skills. Some children lack the requisite number of devices in one family, and teacher follow-up in blended learning remains a challenge.

Implementing blended learning now, however, could assist in building a generation of learners who are fully responsible for their learning and fully prepared for their future in an ever-increasing digitized world. Blended learning is considered a pre-stage for distance learning. Considering the recent shift to distance learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that educators and educational leaders work to prepare learners to utilize these tools to develop their digital competence. Currently, there is limited research examining teachers' readiness for blended learning at the primary school level, particularly in the region of the Arabian Gulf and the greater Middle East and North Africa. Therefore, this study seeks to close this gap in blended learning in primary schools in the UAE. This study also seeks to examine Cycle-one teachers' readiness for implementing blended learning to better improve teacher effectiveness in applying these tools to improve student growth, attainment, and performance. This paper includes a detailed literature review section, methodology section including instruments, data analysis, delimitation and limitations, results and discussion section including participants' criteria, three final themes, and the conclusion section.

2. Literature Review

A recent study related to language blended learning for college students by Banditvilai (2016) is about enhancing students' language skills through blended learning in Thailand. The aim here was to understand the effectiveness of a blended learning environment on improving the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To assess the effectiveness of using blended learning in the classroom, the following research tools were used: e-learning lessons, achievement tests, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This study indicated that blended learning improved language skills better than traditional face-to-face teaching and showed that students became more independent. The teacher's role had been transformed from a teacher to a facilitator, which enabled the students to be more responsible for their learning. Both studies show significant improvement in language skills by blended learning.

Klímová (2008) discussed the implementation of blended learning in foreign language teaching. She applied blended learning in an English academic writing course at the University of Hradec Králové, where the students meet the teacher once every two weeks to discuss their notes and assignments coupled with a deep, self-study online learning course. Students in the sample were given a course evaluation form, and they were all generally satisfied with the structure of the course and exercises that they could do at any time and receive timely feedback from the teacher online.

Further, Truitt and Ku (2018) conducted a case study to investigate the experiences of 31 third graders in a Station Rotation blended learning over one semester in the United States. During the actual station rotation, students were divided into three groups. One group worked only with the teacher, the second group of students worked individually or in groups, and the third group of students worked on the computers. The students turned through all the stations every day. The research method depended on student focus groups and student questionnaires. The study of both approaches resulted in similar themes that were classified into positive themes and negative themes. The positive themes include a variety of activities, technology, learning, fun, and getting help. Whereas challenging work and technology were recognized as negative themes of a station rotation blended learning model.

Harding, Kaczynski, and Wood (2012) discussed the evaluation of blended learning in a calculus course at the University of Pretoria. This study used qualitative methods, in which they interviewed two focus groups in this course without the presence of the course instructor. The primary advantage of blended learning in this course was the flexibility that the online component provided for the students. They found that students benefit from blended learning in terms of self-reliance, time management, responsibility, and self-discipline. Another study by Gecer and Dag (2012) discussed the blended learning experience in a Computer II Course at Kocaeli University. This study aimed to focus on students' views towards the second computing course planned and applied using blended learning methods. The research conducted semi-structured surveys that included open and close-ended

questions on 67 freshmen students. The survey indicated the most influential factor in the students' motivation was improved access to course content and learning materials, with 85.1% of participants responding favorably. The results indicated that the students found the online homework and projects both helpful and interesting. The participants also reported that the blended learning environment positively encouraged their active participation in the course. Both of these studies discussed blended learning in subjects other than the language in college, where blended learning positively affects the students' skills and personality.

Another study by Parks, Oliver and Carson (2016) evaluated how professional development influences teachers' practice in blended learning. The study involved two different surveys, i.e., Oliver's (2013) focus group survey, which evaluated Oliver's Framework for Blended Instruction, and the open-ended national survey by Parks (2015). Using a sample of 366 secondary school teachers working in the Southeastern United States, the study revealed that most of the teachers who identify themselves as blended tutors were in the preliminary stages of being a blended educator, indicating that blended learning is a socially desirable phenomenon which people misinterpret. Moreover, both formal and informal personalized professional development should be offered to tutors to identify and fulfil the particular needs and gaps required to acknowledge the expertise needed for efficient blended teaching.

Finally, Graham et al. (2019) address some of the previous research gaps by steadily developing and testing a model representing K–12 blended teaching competencies. The study focuses on the weaknesses while systematically discovering the expertise required to teach in a blended learning environment. Furthermore, the research establishes and tests an instrument to gauge the individual and school-wide preparedness for blended teaching. Moreover, the researchers sought to identify the capabilities and skills that appeared most relevant to blended teacher readiness. The researchers also developed a testing model to measure variables related to teacher's and school's readiness for blended learning. These measurement models focused on different factors, including (a) foundational knowledge, skills, and dispositions, (b) instructional planning, (c) instructional methods and strategies, (d) assessment and evaluation, and (e) management. The research surveyed 2290 in-service teachers in the eastern region of the United States. The data was obtained in two intervals. The study duration was almost two years to validate the K–12 blended teaching readiness.

3. Methodology

This research design was based on a qualitative method, which is often used for exploratory and scholarly inquiries. Qualitative approaches are well-known methods in educational research where the researcher seeks to elicit in-depth, descriptive information from the experts in their fields. Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data through qualitative approaches is different from traditional quantitative methods. This is because qualitative research employs purposeful sampling and obtains open-ended data, thereby allowing for innovation and creativity (Creswell, 2018). For this research, almost sixteen language teachers working in our different primary schools in Sharjah were approached for participation. Seven of these sixteen participated in the study, as this was when saturation was reached. The participants' criteria were based on the following criteria: gender, full-time employment, education level, length of in-field teaching experience, and nationality.

3.1 Instrumentation

The data collection procedures in this qualitative research involved face-to-face, open-ended interviews. The open-ended or unstructured interviews were chosen because this approach provided a more effective means by which participants would be more willing to share their ideas freely without feeling constrained. The researchers constructed an interview protocol comprised of essential topics of conversation. Given the unstructured nature of the interview, the interviewer allowed participants to guide some of the directionality of the interviews; the interviewer acted more as a facilitator of discussion. The duration of each interview ranged between 45 - 60 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded, after receiving consent from each participant, and then transcribed verbatim. The interviewer took copious, low-inference notes throughout each interview. Analytic memos were composed at the end of each interview; these analytic memos were used later, during data analysis. The interviewer used the interview protocol to guide the conversation with the purposefully selected individuals and actively listened to the interviewee while she responded to each question, sharing her insight and experience related to blended learning. The interviewer asked the interviewees the following 16 questions. The interviewer may ask follow-up questions regarding the remarks provided by the participant for clarification or additional explanation. Each interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

3.2 Data Analysis

As mentioned previously, all the qualitative data collected through unstructured interviews will be in Arabic. The participants would be freer to share their live experience and their ideas about applying blended learning for teaching languages in primary schools through the interviews. Once the raw data was transcribed verbatim, in Arabic, and checked for accuracy, the transcript was coded in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Coding is a universal process in qualitative research; it is a fundamental aspect of the analytical process and how researchers break down their data to make something new (Elliott, 2018). Open coding is an initial coding process in which one identifies terms, concepts, and ideas to address the research questions. This was done manually using Microsoft Excel. All researchers' notes and memos were used to assist in the coding process. After completing the open-coding process, the researcher organized the open codes by grouping together those codes with similarities into axial codes. As with open coding, the axial codes were first assigned in Arabic. These were then translated into English. The English translations were back-translated by two fluent experts in the field. Once agreement had been reached concerning the translated meaning of axial codes, the researcher continued coding in English. This process is essential for data collection in one language and later published in English (Regmi, Naidoo, & Pilkington, 2010). The final stage of coding is selective coding. In this stage, axial codes with similar attributes were grouped into selective codes to address the item under study. These selective codes served as the foundation from which the researcher composed a narrative describing the qualitative findings.

In qualitative studies, the researcher solicits data from individuals. As such, all participants in this study were respected and treated justly. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary; participants were fully informed before participation and free to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained at all times. No identifiable information was solicited, and all collected data was analyzed without identifiable markers. The researchers provided each participant with a pseudonym to protect their anonymity and safeguard their confidentiality (Vanclay, Baines, & Taylor, 2013).

3.3 Limitations and Delimitations

There are notable limitations to this study. The main limitation in qualitative research pertains to generalizability. This study was focused on a purposefully sampled population. As such, while these findings are credible and trustworthy, these findings cannot be generalized to individuals, sites, or places outside of those under study (Creswell, 2018). This study focused only on the perspective of language teachers in primary schools, so the findings may not necessarily be referential to the blended learning effect in other subjects. Further, blended learning was not used widely in public primary schools in the UAE before 2020. In August 2020, all UAE public schools began officially using blended learning for the first time in all subjects in response to the global pandemic, Covid-19.

Taken altogether, these findings provide critical insight into the lived experiences of primary school language teachers to ensure a smooth transition into more technological integration in learning. While these findings are credible and trustworthy, these findings cannot be generalized to contexts outside those under study. However, these findings provide meaningful insight into teacher perceptions concerning blended learning and, given the state of education globally, provide a much-needed, timely contribution to the literature.

4. Results and Discussion

Blended learning systems combine both face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction. This study aimed to investigate the readiness of primary school language teachers for blended learning. In this study, the researcher addressed the facilitators of applying blended learning in the UAE, the effective tools for blended learning, and applying blended learning.

4.1 Study participants

The participants of this study were seven language teachers from four different schools in Sharjah, UAE. The research included four English language teachers and three Arabic language teachers. Four participants have seven to ten years of experience, one has 11 to 15 years of experience, and two have more than 16 years of experience. All the participants have bachelor's degrees in their field. Five participants attended more than 15 professional development sessions regarding blended learning, and two participants attended between 10 to 14 sessions. The table below summarizes all participants' demographic data. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their anonymity.

Table 1: Demographic Data of Participants

Name	Subject	Experience	Grades	Academic degree
Maryam	English	11-15 years	Grade 2 and Grade 4	Bachelor's Degree
Fatima	English	7-10 years	Grade 3 and Grade 4	Bachelor's Degree
Aysha	English	16+	Grade 3 and Grade 4	Bachelor's Degree
Amna	English	7-10 years	Grade 1 and Grade 2	Bachelor's Degree
Noura	Arabic	7-10 years	Grade 1 and Grade 2	Bachelor's Degree

Shamma	Arabic	16+	Grade1 and Grade 2	Bachelor's Degree
Mahra	Arabic	7-10 years	Grade 3and Grade 4	Bachelor's Degree

4.2 Theme 1: Parental engagement acts as a facilitator in implementing Blended Learning, whereas a lack of parental engagement serves as a barrier to effective implementation.

During the blended learning phase, parents' roles are essential in their children's academic lives, especially in cycle-one. Cycle-one language learning during the blended learning phase requires more effort from the parents, continuous follow-up, and clear communication with language teachers. Continuous parents' follow-up with their children's online platforms and online classes will positively reflect their performance and language skills.

As Ms. Aysha said, "They feel more responsible. For example, every mother sees her child's true level when she attends classes with him and observes areas of improvement. For example, his reading skills may not be as strong. A mother begins developing her child's skills based on what she sees her child struggling with during lessons. Also, she sees aspects of distinction in her child and develops her [or him]. Frankly, parents' cooperation in distance learning is more than previously in school. "Ms. Amina suggested that "almost 85% of the parents were constructive with us."

On the other hand, some parents do not follow up with their children and do not check the teacher's feedback on assessments. Ms. Aysha agreed and said, "Parents must always see and review the notes, not just attach dictations. They must see the teacher's notes after correcting them". However, some parents face difficulties following up with their children during the blended learning phase, especially if they work full-time and/or have more than one child. In this context, Ms. Mahrastated, "We cannot say that parents are not cooperating with us. During this difficult period, parents cannot follow more than one child, especially if the parent has more than two children; some challenges are beyond their control".

Parents communication with their children's teachers is essential for sending the study plans and the required assessment using the assigned modes of communication. Cycle-one students are still learning how to be responsible for their learning and cannot know how to complete every task or find all the relevant information. This is especially true in blended language learning, where there are many skills that parents need to improve, such as reading, writing, and spelling. Continuous communication with the teachers will help facilitate this. The majority of parents communicate with the teachers, follow up with the study plans, and always review their skills with their teacher. Ms. Aysha stated, "Honestly, I have cycle-one parents who are very cooperative and interested in the level of achievement of their children." They are eager to follow up. They always communicate with me on WhatsApp and Telegram; inquire and like to highlight the tasks of their children." Ms. Shamma has had a similar experience: "In distance learning, I mean, I have a group on Telegram, and in addition, I send them a message at the beginning of the week that includes the tasks required of them during the week." Meaning I send a table with two columns. The first column is called I focus with my teacher, and the second column I review with my mother. So here the mother knows what skills to focus on reviewing with her child after school".

However, there is a small percentage where parents do not communicate with teachers regarding their children's plans and the required assessment or do not follow up with their status and improvements or weaknesses. As Ms. Amina said, "Parents, no one can see the Telegram. Imagine how many subscribers I have, for example, 57 parents who see the daily messages. Parents do not know what this task is about, so they attach something else. I mean, we send weekly messages and daily messages, and after that there is no follow-up on the Telegram."

The parents' role in blended learning is significant as technical support for their children in the home where cycle-one students do not always possess the requisite background knowledge required to effectively use electronic devices. For example, students face difficulties in entering the online activities sent by teachers during a live session. Also, teachers assign assessments with a deadline on the online portal, where they should be submitted within a time limit. As a result, parents must monitor their children's portals to ensure that all assessments are completed. According to Ms. Mahra's experience in distance learning, most parents are open to this site where they open for their children and teach them how to use the devices in such cases. As Ms. Maryam said, "In practical learning, students are in the classroom with the teacher. They understand the lesson without depending on their parents. It is possible in space, the student will solve his duties, it is possible on the bus, and he will solve the assignment. However, in hybrid learning, we must need parents, especially in the first stage, we must have the parents' cooperation. Where sometimes a technical problem may occur with him, it is true that the student is accustomed to Microsoft teams and gets used to the chat. However, he may face a problem that is known to him because it is the first link, no matter what he has experience with the platforms, but he may face an issue that he has not encountered before. We always need parents. "

Also, some working parents do not have enough time to check on their children during classes, so after school, they do all the activities with their children if they face any difficulties during the class's online session. On the

other hand, some parents do not possess much experience using these devices and applications, so they face difficulties in teaching their children. However, they could use the help of the teacher to explain that to them. As Ms. Noura assures that by saying, "There is an explicitly positive response and interaction by parents. If they encounter any problems during distance learning, they seek to find a solution for them. For example, if there are programs they do not know, they try to ask and communicate about them even after the official working hours. A positive response and fruitful cooperation, frankness."

When the UAE announced distance learning due to COVID-19, some parents prepared a suitable studying environment for their children, including providing them with proper devices and networks. The Ministry of Education offered laptops to many students who could not afford to get one. Nevertheless, there is a small percentage where some parents who have more than two children face difficulties getting more than one device or encounter challenges with a weak network. As a result, their children use mobile phones, making it difficult for them to interact with the teachers' online activities. As Ms. Shamma said, "Distance learning requires a computer. Some students have an iPad, or they have phones. Those who use the phone show me a picture of the boy but without his name. Connectivity questions cannot be solved with an iPad or a mobile phone." "For the student, it depends on the device on which he is opened," Ms. Maryam added, "I mean, is he connected with the teacher from a mobile, iPad, or computer, because he wanted to differentiate, for example, at the beginning of distance learning." "The student asks where to chat, and his location changes by changing the device to the user."

However, there are harmful practices by parents during COVID-19 distance learning. Ms. Mahra, for example, assures that parents solve their children's assessments and activities by saying, "Parents give their son answers to activities and test bites." "For example, I taught students for two years in the past, and I know their actual level, but I see that this is not the student's level during distance learning. Also, sometimes during the tests, I ask them to open the camera, but they refuse, under the pretext that the camera is out of order." In addition, Ms. Amina said, "For example, I asked parents at this time to record their children a video for their reading, so the guardian does not record the video from the first time and downloads it, but he repeats the video more than once and then attaches it. This makes it difficult to determine the actual student level".

Parents' role is essential during blended learning. The continuous follow up with the children, clear communication with the teachers, and a good studying environment for their children are facilitators in applying blended learning. Parents could give technical support for their cycle-one children. However, the lack of following up with the children, lack of communication, absence of devices and networking in the studying environment are barriers to applying blended learning. The harmful practices of parents in helping their children are not acceptable and could lead to misevaluation of their children.

4.3 Theme Two: Purposeful planning, instruction, and assessment explicitly designed for blended learning results in more effective language learning.

For more effective language blended learning, planning blended learning lessons with helpful resources could act as a facilitator in applying blended learning. However, sometimes, planning can consume time, which may be solved by collaborating with other teachers and sharing lesson materials. Blended language learning could apply effective learning strategies and applications to enhance students' learning outcomes.

Planning for blended learning instruction takes time, according to some responses from the teachers. Ms. Amina said, "I divide it by two days, but I notice that it takes time quickly." Ms. Aysha agreed, "Experience taught me how to manage planning in less time." Ms. Noura also shared that "Planning with regard to hybrid education has become like time management for planning because it is easier to use through interactive programs, but in realistic education, it was manual use, manual works and worksheets, manual games, but this is until the timing in planning is less meaning than realistic education."

On the other hand, some teachers mentioned that planning blended learning lessons consumes considerable time to take care of cycle-one students' skills and how they would accept the new information. Also, they spend time finding suitable activities that support the lesson outcomes. Ms. Mahra said, "Yes, planning takes more time because now I teach children. I mean, we focus on how I simplify the idea, how to communicate the idea to the child easily." Ms. Fatima also said, "Honestly, blended learning is more difficult than learning in school, which means that it takes more time to plan activities and prepare the presentation. In [traditional] learning, my preparation used to take two hours; now it could be four hours and some time." Ms. Maryam added, "It takes a long time. You don't want to show students anything; I want the students to benefit. For example, the fourth grade is at a level where you want to advance them, whereas the second grade is a beginner, so the presentation must be interesting so that he does not get bored in class."

The planning should focus on all lessons' aspects from the start to the activities to the final evaluation. The teacher should find the appropriate activity and application to support the lesson's outcomes. As Ms. Shamma

suggests, "In distance learning, the student is not really in front of you, so you must think about how to present the information in a way that appeals to the student and understands it. You should also think about the activities that are appropriate for the class and the images and videos that should be displayed." Further, Ms. Amina points out that planning should consider differentiation of students' readiness levels: "Planning is very structured and broad focuses on differentiation, which means that in planning I have to prepare something for multiple levels."

Some learning strategies could be applied during language blended learning, which could enhance the progress of the students' learning outcomes. First, group work is a beneficial strategy for children to learn languages, and it encourages the students to be more active during the group arguments. All language teachers in cycle-one apply for group work. Ms. Shamma uses student groups in her class, "I divide Grade one into four groups, and each child knows his group. During the class, I sent four links so that each group had a link. Also, sometimes I assign them some tasks. For example, the first group reads the paragraph, and the second group presents the assignment. To motivate students, I give each group a score based on their responses." Ms. Noura encourages that group work should be applied at least three times a week, "Cooperative learning helps students understand more broadly because they will take the information from more than one student. This will help the student understand the information most appropriately and clearly for him. I think it should be applied at least three times a week." Ms. Fatima also mentioned that group work encourages students, "I have two students that I noticed are entirely inactive in classroom learning. However, in cooperative learning, when I entered the group's private online room, they were very interactive and preferred cooperative learning more than classroom learning." In addition, Graham et al., (2019) mentioned in a study about the importance of collaborative work: "In blended environments, students can more easily collaborate and station rotation models take a more balanced approach to the learner-content, learner-learner, and learner-instructor interactions. Collaboration is also critical in blended environments implementing problem- and project-based learning. As a result, blended teaching competencies should place a higher emphasis on facilitating learner-learner collaboration as compared to competencies for online teachers."

The second learning strategy is differentiation. The language teacher should differentiate the activities and the assignments based on the students' levels so they may more readily solve all their questions and improve their skills. For example, Ms. Noura shared how she differentiates, "I use differentiation due to the different levels in the class, so I make a table that contains three different colors according to levels, each color focuses on some skills that must be strengthened in the students, so every student should go to the color assigned to him to solve the activities. One of the programs that helps with the most identification and differentiation is the NEARPOD." Ms. Fatima explained how she makes the questions based on the students' level, "An example of individual differences: a question was placed to determine the locations of the letters in the word. For the weak level they put a circle on the letter in its various locations. The middle level connects the letter to the appropriate place for it. For the higher level, they should write the missing letter." This is important, as Truitt & Ku (2018) discuss "differentiation of instruction made possible by the digital, online component of a blended learning approach may allow students who are behind to *catch up to their peers*."

The final strategy is class management in the BL, where the teacher effectively manages the students' engagement and works to minimize distractions during class time. For this purpose, the teachers should state the class rules in the beginning of each class and award the committed students as Ms. Amina said, "At the beginning of each lesson, I show the list of rules to students, such as mute your microphones and hand sign. Regarding dictation, it also has rules, which are opening the camera when completing dictation; the student must do OK sign; and students who want to repeat the dictation opens the microphone." Ms. Shamma discussed how she feels positive reinforcement "is essential to motivate students. Sometimes I send certificates of appreciation to the distinguished students, the title of the most distinguished student of the week as Class Leader and medals through the LMS. Students whose reading has improved will receive a small gift."

The main resources for language blended learning for cycle-one are visual and audio stories where students can read and then listen to the correct pronunciation of the words. They could also enrich their vocabulary by learning new words. As Ms. Noura said, "The platforms for grade one have audio-visual stories, so the students are attracted when illustrating the story. It has an option is repeated behind me, which helps the student strengthen his language, such as the one in the Nahla and Nahil platform. It also contains some interactive questions for the children about the story. I attach many links and channels in the online learning platforms that motivate students to read new stories and enrich their vocabulary." Blended language learning of a second language as the English language depends on listening as Ms. Aysha points out: "Teaching a new language such as English for cycle-one, they should listen too much for native speakers to enhance their speaking skills. I give my students some channels on YouTube and some links to listen to and read stories."

The continuous assessment depends on the students' progress during the classes. Most teachers could not count on online activities or online assessment in class or in the platform because the students depend on the help of their parents or elder siblings. Hence, the teachers depend on the oral assessment during the class where the students open their camera and microphone without closing them. Ms. Shamma said, "When I give students the attached games and links through online learning platforms, in my opinion the links do not determine the student's level because the student accomplishes solving the links with the help of his/her family. Students'

grades are high. Most of the students get 15/15 on the test, and this does not represent their actual ability. My assessment to determine the student's level is the oral test at the start of each online session and the test contains word analysis and word spelling. The student must open the camera and microphone before starting the test and do not close them during the exam period." Ms. Maryam added, "The assessment varies from one subject to another. For English, the four skills are assessed: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It is difficult to assess the four skills in the class, but if the student opens the camera, it is easier for me to evaluate the student. During the test period, some of my students turn off the microphone so that the student here can get help from someone. Tasks and homework are sent on Telegram and WhatsApp, and also during class, students are informed of daily and weekly tasks because some of them have family problems or parents busy due to too much work and they don't have enough time to monitor students' homework."

Formative assessment is the most critical assessment tool for the teachers. However, teachers in this sample suggest it would be better to do these in school via hardcopy; a softcopy could be used via computer, but only with the camera on and microphone on to ensure that it is actually the student who is solving the exam. Ms. Mahra expressed her concerns, "The only solution to find out the real level of the student is to take the exams in school because if it is done through SWIFTASSESS, then they will get help from the parents. Some students had low marks on the tests in direct learning, but in distance learning they got full marks on the tests, and this is not their real level." Ms. Fatima shared her perspectives and preference, "for the exams, it is better to be in school for all levels to determine the real student's level. Tests for grade-one through grade-four are paper-based because it is difficult for them to use the computer. Regarding tests for grades five through twelve, it is preferable to do the tests on a computer because they are able to use the computer. The exams in the school are more reliable than the exams in the SWIFTASSESS because the student is dependent on themselves without getting help from anyone." Ms. Aysha concurs with a similar view, "If the student turns on the camera during the exam, then I am sure that the student relied on himself, and he reads the questions and answered them without anyone's help."

For more effective blended language learning, the lessons' planning should cover all the class aspects, including the starting, games, activities, and presentation materials. Planning for instruction may be easier in blended learning for some teachers, whereas it is time-consuming and difficult for others. The teachers' cooperation could make the planning process more manageable by dividing the tasks between them and sharing the materials they develop. Blended learning classes should make use of effective learning strategies and practical applications to support the learning attainment of all students. This theme also discussed the assessment tools for the language blended learning with some rules and conditions to lead to more realistic results of students' level.

4.4 Theme Three: Blended Learning affects student performance in terms of academic attainment, character development, and technical skills

Blended learning may affect students' academic attainment, character development, and technical skills. Teachers in this sample suggest that blended learning has significantly improved students' character and skills. Academic performance increases during distance learning because parents have become more aware of their children's skills and weaknesses as they are studying at home. Ms. Amina explains, "In blended learning, parents realize the student's weaknesses, work with them, and try to develop and strengthen them during the holidays. An example of a student I have in grade one, her mother focused on her weaknesses during the summer vacation, and at the beginning of grade 2, I was shocked by the development of her reading level. However, students' academic performance during distance learning is not their actual level as the students may use the help of their parents and elder siblings in solving their assignments and exams. As Ms. Maryam said, "The attainment is very high. A student can obtain the full score, but sometimes they encounter technical problems, so the grade is affected. Parental influence is very important. They should make the student confident of their answer, and not help him in reading the question, because in the future the student must bear the responsibility for himself. In my opinion, the tests in SWIFTASSESS do not determine the student's level because the student takes the exam with the help of his family. In addition, I taught the students for six months directly and I noticed their real level, but in distance learning their level changed and increased dramatically and this is due to the intervention of parents in the students' tasks and exams. Ms. Noura said, "The best way to evaluate the student is direct learning, so that there is direct communication between the teacher and the student, which helps the teacher determine the student's level."

Blended learning positively affects the students' character development and personality, where they become more self-confident, self-dependent, better behaved, and more adept at problem-solving. As Ms. Amina described, "I noticed a remarkable development in the student's personality. Some students were characterized by shyness in the past, but now in blended learning, the students have become bold." Ms. Aysha said, "Among the most prominent qualities that result from blended learning to develop the student's personality are self-confidence, self-reliance, and the spirit of competition. Students are more shy about indirect learning, while in blended learning, they become [more competitive] in participating, responding quickly and more bravely..." Ms. Mahra agreed, "Students have become in blended learning well behaved in speaking and sharing the talking time due to the list of rules that we share at the beginning of each lesson." However, Ms. Shamma thought it might also have adverse effects, as students may be learning how to cheat and lie. "Parents should make students have

good morals, such as honesty and integrity, so they do not cheat. Because during distance learning, some students may be learning how to cheat and lie to their teachers."

Distance learning improved the technical skills of the students. The students' digital skills have been improved as they interact more with devices and technology issues during the online classes. Also, the reading and writing skills of the students have enhanced where the students read more on the online platforms. Ms. Aysha follows that by taping the students' reading videos, "Every week I do a competition among students to improve reading and writing skills, and I noticed through the attached videos on the LMS that the students' skills are developing and improving significantly." Ms. Maryam also finds her students are acquiring meaningful digital skills: "Student [have] gained through distance learning some qualities, including self-confidence and digital skills." Finally, distance learning may also provide a means to improve higher-order thinking skills, like creativity, among students. Ms. Amina shares her perspective, "The sites helped us to apply higher creativity-taking skills, especially for the grades on, especially for grades one and ample, using Nearpod, I can give them a sentence that students can express by drawing."

Blended learning likely has both positive and negative effects on students' performance. In some cases, the student's level increases dramatically because of the help they get from their parents. In other cases, students develop pertinent and meaningful 21st-century skills like confidence, self-reliance, collaboration, communication, and digital skills. Blended learning provides several opportunities for student growth in a variety of ways. It is up to schools to establish behavioral norms to ensure more effective implementation of blended learning across all grade levels.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to look into teachers' readiness for blended learning in cycle one public schools in the UAE. The study focused on the teacher's perspective about the facilitators, barriers, and available tools for blended learning in language instruction. This research investigated the effectiveness of blended learning on students' skills and outcomes. Obtaining data through open-ended, unstructured interviews of seven teachers, the research revealed that parents play a significant role in fostering blended learning among children by acting both as a facilitator and a barrier. The former role is demonstrated by following up with the children, communicating with teachers, and offering a feasible learning atmosphere to children, whereas the latter is illustrated by not performing the activities mentioned earlier. Moreover, the research also indicated that specifically designed **Article History**: Received: 10 January 2021; Revised: 12 February 2021; Accepted: 27 March 2021; Published online: 28 April 2021 assessments for blended learning lead to more efficient language learning among children than standardized assessments. Along the same lines, the study also discovered that blended learning influences students' academic performance, character development, and technical expertise by enhancing their self-confidence and motivation.

The findings of this study could prove valuable for the Ministry of Education as it may play a significant role in facilitating the application.

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